

Youth Responses to Death and How to Help

Adjusting to the death of someone can be a difficult task for anyone. Children and youth may have an increased level of difficulty, due to the lack of coping strategies, and lack of experience in this task. There is an array of behaviors that we can expect to see in a young person attempting to manage their reactions to death.

Youth behaviors that are typical in the context of processing a death

- **Talk**. The youth may talk about the deceased a lot, or avoid all conversations about the deceased. Some youth may initially act like everything is fine, or that it has not happened.
- **Questions**. The youth may ask numerous questions about death, the deceased, or means of dying, or not ask any questions at all.
- **Repetition**. The youth may want to hear the story of the loss over and over, or avoid hearing anything about the loss. The youth may need to repeatedly tell what they know about the death, or the deceased.
- **Attention**. The youth may talk a lot to gain attention, or say silly things. The youth may use excessive joking or clowning around to seek this attention.
- **Sensory experiences**. The youth may report seeing the deceased, hearing the deceased, feeling as if the deceased has contacted them, or having dreams about the deceased.
- **Sleep**. The youth may sleep a lot, or have difficulties sleeping. The youth may feel tired or “worn out” despite adequate sleep.
- **Appetite**. The youth may change eating patterns and eat more, or less. This may be mild, or extensive enough to lead to weight change.
- **Illness**. The youth may report increased illnesses, including symptoms that have no medical reason.
- **Activity**. Youth may become restless and overactive, or become less active and listless. Youth may have difficulty initiating activity, or remaining interested for any period of time in an activity.
- **Mood**. The youth may become irritable, highly reactive to small situations, overly sensitive, need high levels of adult contact, or emotionally needy or even regress emotionally.
- **Isolation**. The youth may temporarily withdraw emotionally and physically and not engage with others.
- **Behavior**. The youth may change typical behavior patterns, or engage in non-compliance or other mild challenging behaviors.

Youth emotions that are typical in the context of processing a death

- **Sadness**. Expect sadness, tears, and crying at unexpected times.
- **Anger**. The youth may be angry at the person for dying, angry at others for not helping them live, or angry at themselves for not helping. This anger may also be undirected – they simply are upset at the death of the person and do not know how to manage their feelings.
- **Guilt**. The youth may feel personally responsible for the death of the person, due to their behavior, or doing something that they feel in retrospect would have saved the person’s life.
- **Fear**. The youth may experience fear of death or illness, or experience fears of situations that are not connected with the death. The youth may fear that they could also succumb to thoughts of suicide, due to this person that they knew dying by suicide.
- **Anxiety**. The youth may become anxious about situations, due to perceptions that the situation can lead to harm or death of self or others.

- **Disbelief.** The youth may initially respond by denying the fact that the person has died. They may avoid conversations or reminders of the deceased, to avoid the pain of remembering the deceased.
- **Numbness.** The youth may have no perceptible reaction to the death, or be overwhelmed emotionally by the death, so a lack of ability to feel emotions sets in.
- **Loneliness.** The youth may feel lonely due to the absence of the deceased. They may feel a special responsibility to protect the memory of the life of the deceased and believe that they alone can do this.

Concerning Behavior that a youth may exhibit

While we will want to be compassionate towards any youth dealing with a death, there are some behaviors that show that the youth is having a more difficult time dealing with the death, and may need additional help.

- **Wishing to be with the deceased.** This may simply be a product of sadness or loneliness, but it may be a clue that the youth is experiencing thoughts of suicide.
- **Excessive fears.** Some fears are often present, but when the youth is fearful to an extreme level, this is a sign that they need additional support.
- **Risk-taking behavior.** When the youth uses high risk behavior to manage internal emotions, this is a sign that they need additional support. This includes physical risks, as well as drug/alcohol use, or sexual behavior.
- **Self-injurious behavior.** This is a sign that the youth does not have adequate means to handle the emotions this death has created in the youth.
- **Suicidal ideation /attempts.** Regardless of the perceived seriousness, take all statements about suicide seriously.
- **Physical aggression or extreme challenging behavior.** This is a sign that the youth does not know how to manage their feelings in a safe and appropriate way, and need help to learn skills in how to do so safely.
- **Any extreme intensity or duration of "typical" reactions.** This is a sign that the youth is having a difficult time moving on.
- **Personality changes.** The youth may begin to assume characteristics and mannerisms of the deceased, or exhibit other significant changes in personality.
- **Violent play.** The youth may engage in violent play that was not typical prior to the death, or experience a significant increase in violent play.
- **Extreme withdrawal.** While the youth may temporarily withdraw as an expected reaction, extended withdrawal, or a disconnect from all supports shows the need for additional support.

How can adults help a youth to deal with death?

- **Take care of yourself.** Identify how you have been impacted by this death and how you are responding to the loss. Allow yourself to experience the emotions associated with this loss and seek help to work through this if needed.
- **Role model healthy coping strategies.** Allow yourself to show the youth that you are saddened, and talk about how you are working through the emotions you are experiencing.
- **Help the youth understand death.** Talk about death if the topic comes up. Do not try to hide the event, or use euphemisms to talk about it (this creates an unrealistic perception of death in youth.) The youth may not have had prior experiences with death, and needs to understand the permanency of death. Give facts that are accurate regarding the specific death that the youth has experienced, and provide this information in a way that is appropriate for their developmental level.

Gently correct misinformation or false perceptions about death in general or the specific death the youth has experienced.

- **Be patient.** The youth may need to talk repeatedly about death in general, or about this specific death as they learn how to manage this life experience.
- **Provide structure and consistency.** The youth needs to know that life will go on, and maintaining a normal routine is part of it. This does not mean, however, to avoid memorial activities.
- **Provide information.** Help the youth understand in advance what to expect regarding funerals, memorial services, burials, cremations, or other events associated with death. Provide this information in a developmentally appropriate way.
- **Allow time.** The youth may need some time to completely move past this experience.
- **Be alert.** Monitor for unusual or unusually intense reactions to death. Be prepared to connect the youth to additional supports.
- **Facilitate access to calming aides.** People use various means to calm. Some may need access to different environments, sensory devices, comfort animals, etc. beyond the use of a caring adult with whom to talk.