

Riverside Trauma Center

Supporting Your Teen after the Tragic Death of a Friend

1. Offer condolences to your teen for the death of his/her friend and ask if there are ways you can help them through this difficult crisis. Offer to accompany them to the wake or funeral if they would like to attend.
2. Monitor your own anxiety level. If your primary concern is whether or not your own child is at risk, your child will be more annoyed since he/ she is probably feeling more angry or sad about what has just happened.
3. Support your teen's school administrators and faculty who have also experienced a profound loss. Sudden tragic deaths always result in so many unanswered questions and can often lead to blaming school personnel and policies. You will be modeling for your child as well as supporting an environment that is very important to them. You will also be conveying to them you have confidence in the school's ability to keep them safe.
4. Do ask the school for facts they are allowed to release about the death and what the school plans are for responding to this crisis. Also ask about the local resources school officials have identified to support students, faculty, and the larger community.
5. Encourage your child to stay in school in the aftermath of a crisis. Students will be far safer in the routine of the school day. Most schools will have flexible scheduling, reduced work loads, and provide a safe place for those students who need permission to grieve. Students should be discouraged from congregating at friends' house during the school day when there is no parental supervision.
6. Educate yourself about the signs and symptoms of all adolescent risk issues, especially depression and substance abuse. Every parent hopes they never need this kind of information but it will also give you some relief to learn more about adolescent developmental issues and problems.
7. Monitor your child's reactions to this unexpected death. Feelings are only one way to measure how someone is doing. Behavior changes such as decreased appetite, social withdrawal, sleeping problems and physical sensations such as lack of energy, stomach pains, etc are also important clues. Teens who are so overwhelmed with intense sadness, fear, or anger are at risk for engaging in high risk behavior: drinking, using drugs, driving too fast, etc.
8. Encourage all family members to identify coping strategies they have used in past crises – exercise, reading novels, spending time with friends.
9. When the opportunity presents itself for an in-depth conversation with your teen about their friend's death make sure your child understands that many adolescent deaths are preventable and that resources exist for them in the school as well as in the community. Make sure you familiarize yourself with those resources. Make sure they know to tell a trusted adult if they have concerns about other friends or classmates who may be at risk.
10. Help your teen identify a responsible adult in his/her school and a responsible adult in the community they could turn to if they had an overwhelming problem or if they had a friend they were worried about.

-Jim McCauley, LICSW