

# Supporting your child: Responding to the sudden loss of a friend

## Young people respond to loss of a friend or fellow student in a range of ways, and a wide range of reactions is possible

How a young person responds to a Sudden loss will be influenced by their age, developmental stage, personality, relationship with the deceased person and what is happening in their life.

Common, normal grief reactions include:

- Shock, disbelief, confusion or numbness
- Guilt or blame
- Sadness, feelings of betrayal or abandonment
- Anxiety, fears, or nightmares
- Preoccupation with thoughts of the person who has died; trying to make sense of the death and understand why it happened
- Withdrawal from others
- Irritability, anger or aggression
- Difficulty concentrating
- Changes to sleep patterns, appetite, energy and enjoyment of activities.

Young people need to find safe ways of expressing their feelings, whatever their age. Parental understanding, reassurance and attention are very important at this time. Be guided by the young person's need to talk, and make it clear to them that you will be available whenever they need you.

## Young people who have experienced other stressful situations in their lives may find it harder to cope

Experiencing stressful situations, including the separation/divorce of parents, the death of a relative/pet and moving house/school, can affect how someone copes with new stresses.

They may become upset and need to express their feelings about these other concerns, even if they had appeared to be coping. If a young

person is already using the services of a psychologist or psychiatrist, inform them of the sudden loss.

## Some reactions can happen weeks, months or a year after an event

If you are concerned about your child's reaction and behaviour (such as changes in their socialising or school work) it is important to speak to the school Principal or student counsellor or a GP. This may result in a referral to a counsellor for a mental health and/or risk assessment.

## What young people need to know

The school will have provided students with information about the incident but they may want to know exactly what happened. Details about the way a sudden loss occurred will not be given to students, as this information is potentially harmful to their wellbeing. As parents, it is important to steer discussion towards the positive "help-seeking" actions that young people can take when they are struggling. This includes talking to a trusted adult, such as a parent, counsellor, teacher, relative or friend.

## "Tell an adult if you are worried about a friend"

'Ask for help' is an important message to share with young people in any discussion about Sudden loss. Young people sometimes share their feelings about death with friends – in conversations, letters, emails, text messages and on the internet. If they suspect a friend may be about to hurt themselves, they should tell an adult immediately.

## Respond to community concern with respect

Sudden loss can have a profound emotional effect not only on family and friends, but on the whole community. When you speak with other members of the community:

- Respect the bereaved/affected family
- Encourage help-seeking actions in young people.

## Be aware of social media activity

Following a sudden loss, young people are likely to turn to social media for a variety of purposes. These include sending news out about a death (both accurate and rumoured), posting online messages (both appropriate and inappropriate), calling for impromptu gatherings and creating virtual memorials.

It's important to talk with your young person about social media activity and how it might be impacting on them (e.g seeing upsetting messages). Talk to them about how to manage this and negotiate boundaries around their use of social media if necessary.

If you are concerned about messages you see or hear about on social media sites, let someone know. This could be the young person's parents, local authorities, emergency services or the school Headmaster or counsellor.

## Where can parents and young people get more information and help?

- **headspace** centres provide support, information and advice to young people aged 12 to 25 – [headspace.org.au](http://headspace.org.au)
- **eheadspace** provides online counselling and telephone support to young people aged 12 to 25 – [ehespace.org.au](http://ehespace.org.au) 1800 650 890
- **Kids Helpline** is a 24-hour telephone and online counselling service for young people aged 5 to 25 – [kidshepline.com.au](http://kidshepline.com.au) 1800 55 1800
- **Lifeline** is a 24-hour telephone counselling service – [lifeline.org.au](http://lifeline.org.au) 13 11 14
- **Suicide Call Back Service** 1300 659 467 [www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au](http://www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au)
- **Your GP**
- **A psychologist or counsellor**