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Helping Adolescents Cope with Grief

Because they are often unexpected and traumatic, adolescent deaths profoundly impact communities. With the increase in school shootings and youth violence, there is a growing need for communities to develop and implement a response plan when traumatic deaths occur. Yet, often times school personnel, such as teachers, counselors, and nurses are rarely reported by survivors as being supportive. Below are ways in which schools, community professionals, and youth leaders can ease the trauma during future crises.

Develop a community-based response plan

Community-based response plans can minimize the negative effects and enhance the opportunities for positive growth that result from crises. Typically, school personnel, community leaders, media contacts, and family representatives work together to create a plan. Most plans involve preparation, team building, training, and long-term follow-up so that members of the community-response team understand their specific responsibilities during a crisis.

Reassure adolescents that grief is a unique experience

Adolescents often believe that their grief is unique and incomprehensible to anyone else. Some may find themselves reacting in a new or unusual way, which frightens them, causing them to think that their reactions are abnormal. Others may limit their expressions of grief to brief outbursts because they are very concerned about how they are perceived by others and they worry about losing emotional control. Caring

adults can reassure adolescents that grief is a unique experience for everyone and that what they are going through is normal.

Encourage relationship transformation

Encourage survivors to maintain an attachment to the deceased. Some of the ways that adolescents preserve the bond between the deceased and themselves include visiting the cemetery, believing in a spiritual realm, praying or talking with the deceased, keeping possessions that the deceased valued, and/or placing items representing things the deceased valued (pictures, notes, sports equipment, favorite hat, class ring, etc.) in the casket. Adults can affirm the value of these behaviors and help adolescents place their relationship with the deceased in a new perspective.

Facilitate communication

Adults may suggest creative ways to facilitate communication about the loss, memorializing the deceased, encouraging expression of grief, and achieving a sense of closure for the adolescents. Suggestions include creating a memory book, cards, or collages; collecting letters or assignments written by or to the teen; displaying a memorial plaque; or planting a memorial tree or garden in the teen's name. At school, teachers can help classmates make decisions about what to do with the empty chair in the classroom. Involvement in activities such as these provides healing for the adolescents, as well as the family.

While most memorial activities are truly beneficial, care should be taken to avoid overdramatization

or glorification, especially in the case of suicide. Appropriate activities in this situation include raising funds to support a worthy cause, contributing to a suicide prevention program, or donating to a mental health project.

Provide appropriate support

Not surprisingly, most adolescents do not want to discuss their feelings of grief with school personnel. They do, however, appreciate being put in contact with an understanding peer. Adolescents rely on peers for emotional support (e.g., being there, listening, reminiscing, etc.) and for clues in how to respond to each other.

In order to support the bereaved, adults can talk with the bereaved student's peers and stress the fact that their friend needs their help and that he or she would likely appreciate them asking what it is like to lose someone close. Adults can also let peers know that retelling the story often helps the bereaved to begin to make sense out of what has happened to them. Because such conversations are often painful for the bereaved, one should only initiate them if they are able to deal with the teenager's reaction.

It is also important for adults to be familiar with the deceased's background. Then, they can help teach proper funeral home and family visitation etiquette as well as culturally appropriate practices. "It is helpful to the family and to the students if a few school personnel are present at family visitations and funerals. Teenagers often attend these services without parental support and may need the support of a familiar adult" (Matthews, 1999, p. 100). Adolescents also appreciate tangible support from adults such as flowers, cards, food, transportation, funeral home visits, etc.

Do no harm

Researchers have learned that the bereaved are offended and hurt by some support attempts. Behaviors that are considered unhelpful include saying "I know how you feel," encouraging a speedy recovery, giving advice, minimizing the loss/forcing cheerfulness, and intentionally avoiding the use of the deceased's name. Failing to acknowledge that the death has occurred can also be offensive and hurtful.

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