

Supporting Grieving Youth

When youth are grieving you can expect to see a wide range of emotions and behaviours as they try to cope with their loss. All youth are in the midst of great change: they are in the process of separating from their families and forming their own identity, they are experiencing physical changes, and their brains continue to be “under construction.” It can be challenging for parents of grieving youth to determine what is normal grief and when they should be concerned.

Youth may look like adults but they are not yet fully equipped with the skills to deal with a catastrophic event like the death of a parent, sibling, or friend.

Many youth who have come to Lighthouse have taught us what they need from the adults in their lives and what is helpful to them.

We recognize that our communities are very diverse, and grief will look different among different cultures and within different families from the way it is experienced to the way it is expressed. There is no right or wrong way to grieve. Taking a culturally humble approach and allowing youth to teach you about how you can best help and support them gives them choices and allows you to learn how you can offer support that is meaningful.

- Be open and honest. Whatever the circumstances surrounding the death, it is important to be truthful no matter how difficult these conversations may be. Youth who have been given misinformation report feeling betrayed. Being honest helps to maintain trust.
- Involve youth in planning and participating in mourning rituals such as funerals, memorials, and other gatherings to honour the person who died. One way that youth begin to cope with a death is by creating legacy.
- Grief is a lifelong process. We do not “get over” grief but can eventually learn to accept and find a place for it as part of our lives. Holidays and important events can be particularly challenging. Teens need our patience and understanding that they will revisit their grief during milestones and significant life transitions.
- Peers are important. As youth begin to separate from their families, they rely most on friends for support and acceptance. Time with friends away from home can also give them much needed distraction from grief. They may also use social media as a way to connect and receive support from peers. On the other hand, many of them feel isolated from their peers following a death, as they suddenly feel different and may find it hard to relate at a time when it is so important to fit in. Continuing extra-curricular activities provides connection to peers, an outlet for feelings and another temporary distraction from the loss.
- Youth need adults to support them, not direct them. Although peers are important, youth who are grieving also need support from the adults in their lives and routines – even if they don’t admit it! They need to tell us what they are feeling and experiencing, and they need us to listen attentively without judging, advising, or directing.
- Talk about the person who died. Youth tell us that they have fewer and fewer opportunities to talk about the person who died as time passes. Offering to talk about the person helps them to retain memories that will live on.
- Be aware of the impact of additional losses. Other losses, also known as secondary losses, can compound grief. These include loss of friends, lifestyle, school, and community. Additional losses can retrigger the first death loss. Teens need reassurance that grief triggers are normal.
- Parents need support too. Youth still look to their parents as role models for their own behaviour, and can be very sensitive to how their parent is feeling. Worrying that a parent is not coping can affect their functioning. The best way for a parent to support a grieving youth, is to take care of themselves physically, mentally, and emotionally. Parents who allow themselves to feel and express their grief, model this for their children.
- Some common signs of a grieving youth include: trouble sleeping or eating, headaches and stomach aches, emotional withdrawal, difficulty focusing or concentrating, increased anxiety, changes in behaviour or peer group, lack of interest or ability to focus in school, lack of interest in friends or extra-curricular activities, decline in grades, or intense focus and overachieving.
- Professional help should be sought if any of the above symptoms impact on daily functioning over an extended period of time, or if the youth is using alcohol or drugs to numb the pain of their loss, engaging in reckless activities, or if they’re self-harming or expressing suicidal thoughts.

If there is a grieving youth in your life and you would like to discuss how you can help provide support, or you require referral information for them and their family, phone consultations are available at Lighthouse:

905-337-2333