

Ten Essential Ways to Help Students Cope with the Loss of a Friend

1. Give students time for their feelings to surface. Then, even though it may be painful, listen and don't argue with their feelings.
2. Encourage them to express their grief by sharing their feelings—talking to others; writing a poem, diary, or story; drawing; writing music. Sharing their feelings will help their minds slowly begin to defrost and adjust to their loss.
3. Reassure them that there is no one right way to respond to death. Grief takes many different forms. Each person's pain is unique. Encourage them to express grief in the way that feels most real to them.
4. Reassure them that with the passage of time, the leaden ache in their hearts will gradually lighten. While it is normal for their grief to resurface at times, because grief comes in waves, the magnitude and frequency of the waves will diminish over time.
5. Encourage them to find a healthy, caring, loving way to distract themselves when things start to feel unbearably heavy.
6. Adapt expectations. Grief may hinder their ability to concentrate and complete their schoolwork.
7. Encourage them to reach out to other people. Explain that they can remain loyal to their friend and still reach out to others. Their friend will always remain in their hearts and minds. In fact, needing friends is a tribute to the friend who died because that friend taught them the importance and meaning of friendship.
8. Guide them to constructive ways to release their anger so they do not turn it onto themselves or others. Working out, making something, volunteering, forming a Students Against Destructive Decisions chapter, or starting a seat belt campaign are among the numerous possibilities for channeling their anger into positive outlets.
9. Redirect them to positive sources of power such as doing something kind or thoughtful for someone else. Any activity that can help them effect positive changes—taking up a cause special to their friend, planting a tree, making a collage for their friend's parents, writing, painting, establishing a memorial, volunteering—can steer them away from destructive feelings of powerlessness.
10. Give them permission to go on with their lives. Teens need us to tell them that they have a right, as well as a responsibility to enjoy and get meaning out of life even though their friend is gone.