



Support after a Sudden Death

## AFTER A SUDDEN DEATH:

# Understanding and Supporting My Young Person

### For Parents and Caregivers

The sudden, unexpected death of someone your young person knows, even if they didn't know them well, is likely to be distressing for them. They're probably seeing other people around them upset and grieving too. They may find this time emotionally challenging and possibly even overwhelming at times. This information sheet provides helpful insights and tips to help you provide them with support.

## What to expect

**Every young person's reactions will be different.** Many things can influence their response, like their age and development stage, their personality, how well they knew the person, their culture, their beliefs, what else is happening in their lives, past experiences, and the kind of support they have.

**Grief is a normal process that helps people adjust after a difficult loss. It is usually an up and down experience.** For example, young people can find themselves suddenly being hit by a wave of emotion at unexpected times. While grief can be intense for some, it may not be for others. Some might feel numb at first and then have reactions later. Some can even appear unaffected but be very upset inside. Everyone does grief in their own way and this is normal.

**Your young person may also experience some traumatic stress** if they've directly witnessed or indirectly been traumatised (frightened) by any aspect of the death or its aftermath. It is a normal reaction to what they have seen or heard.

**Grief and traumatic stress after a sudden death can have a significant effect** on a young person's emotions, thoughts, behaviour, and physical health. Reactions will vary.

- ▶ **Emotional reactions may include:** shock, disbelief, deep distress, sadness, increased worry and anxiety, frustration, anger, guilt, blaming, feeling rejected/abandoned, embarrassment, shame, a low mood or very up and down, helplessness, overwhelmed, bewilderment.
- ▶ **Other common reactions may include:** asking why, searching for reasons and meaning, asking big life questions, preoccupied by what has happened, can't concentrate on things, difficulty sleeping or sleeping more, appetite changes, physical complaints such as headaches, nausea or stomach aches, changes in behaviour, disruptive at school and/or home, more risk taking, social withdrawal, less interest in school work, school avoidance, and possibly increased suicidal thinking for vulnerable students.
- ▶ **Those experiencing traumatic stress may also experience:** numbness and a lack of reaction, replaying difficult memories on loop, unsettling flashbacks, wanting to keep talking about what happened or refusing to, avoiding bad memory triggers, increased anxiety, panic attacks, always being on alert for something else bad that might happen, easily scared or startled, or more distrusting.

**Some teens will want to talk about their thoughts, feelings, and reactions – and others won't.** Some may want to completely hide their distress. Your young person needs your understanding and support to deal with this loss in their own way.

**Reactions will gradually ease over time but can last longer than most people expect.** For a few, reactions can continue without easing, or they might even worsen. This lets you know that your young person probably needs some extra support to cope with what has happened. (See next page for further support options.)

**It's normal for a young person to remember a difficult loss as they get older and move through different stages of their development.** They might find memories come back and that they experience further grief reactions and have new questions, even years later. Each time they'll find your love and support reassuring.

They may forget what you said, but  
they will never forget how you made them feel.

Maya Angelou

## Ways to support them

It helps young people to feel safe, loved and supported when they know their parents or caregivers genuinely care about them, and about what's happened.

- **It is important to acknowledge their loss and be ready to talk about it when they are.** Try not to minimise their loss, even if they didn't know the person well. Let them know you love them and want to support them through this sad time.
- **If they do want to talk, listen carefully.** Listen more than you talk. They might have some challenging questions. If they don't want to talk, let them know that's okay. Remind them you're there if they'd like to talk another time. Encourage them to think about others they could talk to, or perhaps suggest someone.
- **Your own words and attitudes will have an influence.** Your young person may hear gossip or misinformation about the death, or the person. It is important to talk to them about this and the harm it can do, especially on social media.
- **If your teen is using social media, urge them to be respectful in their comments** and never to hurt or shame others with comments about the death.
- **Give them opportunities to share positive memories about the person.** Avoid focusing a lot on how the person died.
- **Reassure them their reactions are normal,** Talk about grief – what it is, and that it's different for everyone. Chat about the sorts of reactions people can have. ( See page one.) Let them know they won't always feel like this and it will ease over time.
- **Talk together about helpful ways to manage strong feelings, difficult thoughts and stress.** Explain why some choices wouldn't be helpful or safe for them, such as drinking, drugs or actions that might hurt others.
- **Young people can sometimes feel guilt after a death.** Not being able to say goodbye can mean there are words left unsaid or things left unsorted. Sometimes young people may feel that if they'd had done this or that, the death wouldn't have happened. Listen and be understanding. Reassure them.
- **Care for their everyday needs well.** Support them to keep up routines as continuing normal activities helps.
- **Let them know having a laugh and enjoying things are still okay.** They help release stress and tension.
- **Understand if they want to spend more time with their friends for support.** They'll often talk things through with friends, which helps them deal with thoughts and feelings they have. It can also help them feel less isolated and alone.

- **Check in with them regularly.** Spend some time with them. How are they doing? Let them know asking for support is okay.
- **Got concerns?** Deal with issues honestly when they come up. Don't let them build up. Reach out for extra help for your young person when it's needed.
- **Support them in the months and years ahead.** They probably won't forget this loss and its importance to them as they move forward, especially at anniversary times or special days.

## Getting them some extra help

- Contact your school's pastoral care staff to talk about your concerns. Ask them about support options.
- Encourage your young person to talk with a counsellor, school chaplain, youth worker or other support worker.
- Encourage them visit a local doctor or school nurse, to check on their wellbeing. Go with them, or offer to drive them there, or perhaps suggest they go with a friend who can support them.
- For free advice and support for them, or yourself, free call **1737** ( available 24/7 ) or Youthline **0800 376 633**, text **234**.
- If you ever think your young person, or someone they know, is at risk of immediate personal harm, call **111**.

## Important to know if the death is a suspected suicide

If a young person has been directly or indirectly affected by a suspected suicide death it can sometimes be difficult for them to manage their strong thoughts and feelings. Your ongoing care and support are very important. Look out for changes in their mood or behaviour. Find help for them if it's needed. ( See above )

- For more information to support your young person after a suspected suicide death.
  - ▶ **Search** 'suicide' in Victim Support Website's Resource Centre for Supporting your Child or Young Person after Suicide at <https://victimsupport.org.nz/resource-centre>
  - ▶ **Free** suicide bereavement counselling see [www.aoketera.org.nz](http://www.aoketera.org.nz)
  - ▶ **Search** for the resource *Connecting Through Kōrero: Talking About Suicide with Taiohi /Young People at* [www.mentalhealth.org.nz](http://www.mentalhealth.org.nz)