



Supporting students who have a family member with an advanced serious illness or has died

As an LTC mentor, you may have a student who is living with the anxiety of a family member's life-limiting illness or is grieving from the death of a family member or friend. You will have the opportunity to be a support person for your student, providing empathy as they face the serious illness, and perhaps death, of a family member.

1. LISTEN

One of the most helpful and healing things to do for your student is to listen to their story without judging, interpreting, evaluating or offering advice. Listening, even briefly, to anything they're willing to share sends the message that you are a safe and supportive person. Do not push them to "open up".

2. ACKNOWLEDGE

Say something to the student that acknowledges you know about their family member's illness, or death. Be authentic. Although "I'm sorry" is a common response, children and teens tell us they don't like to hear "I'm sorry." Better to say "I'm thinking of you" or "You've been on my mind." Or, "I heard about your dad and I am here and I am checking in to see if there's anything I can do to be helpful and I will check in with you in the next weeks when we see each other"

3. UNDERSTAND

You can't take away the feelings of pain, fear, loneliness, or being different that students experience when a family member has been diagnosed with a terminal illness or having someone close die. Your role is not to get rid of the feelings, but to create a safe environment where they can be shared.

Grief is as unique as we are, but many students will give themselves a hard time for what they are thinking and feeling. If they share an aspect of their grief with you, provide reassurance that there is no right or wrong way to grieve (as long as they are not hurting themselves or others) and that all of their feelings that thoughts are valid.



4. PROVIDE CONSISTENCY

Everything in a student's life can feel unpredictable and confusing. So, the structure, routine and consistency of the school environment can provide a child or teen dealing with a family member's illness or death with a sense of stability. At the same time, be mindful that the students may be having a bad day when they see you or another day when you are not there. Suggest to your student (if old enough) that they can approach their teacher to let them know that they are having a particularly difficult day or you can consider approaching their teacher and let them know you to expect that of their student and to talk to them about that.

5. HELP

Help the student make a plan for completing schoolwork or what to do if they can't. Stress and anxiety can manifest in students as well as difficulties with concentration, memory, low energy and fatigue.

6. SAFETY

Provide a safe place for students to go when feeling overwhelmed, stressed or anxious. Some students biggest fear is becoming emotional in front of classmates. Have the student designate a counselor, teacher or other support staff person who is willing to be available, to listen to and talk with the student on days other than when you visit.

7. PROVIDE RESOURCES

Most students have a mix of some easy days and other days that are challenging and difficult to get through. A child or teen that is profoundly affected may experience drastic changes, which can include: prolonged depression or anxiety, risk-taking behaviors or suicidal thoughts. If you observe changes such as these, it is important to consult the school counselor and the coordinator of LTC.