

Dear Parent,

An unexpected death of a young, gifted person is particularly difficult, especially when one is close to the person who has died. Whether one has a direct or indirect relationship with survivors, all can benefit from an understanding of the grieving process.

Grief is a normal reaction to loss. Grieving individuals usually undergo a process that may have some common stages or characteristics; however, people vary in their expression of grief and its duration. They may feel disbelief, anger, hopelessness, sadness, and/or guilt at various times while grieving.

Sometimes individuals who are grieving will experience symptoms similar to those of depression such as sadness, crying spells, poor appetite and difficulty sleeping. They also may lose interest in friends, hobbies, studies, and activities that previously provided satisfaction. They may have a spiritual crisis and a dismal or nonexistent view of the future. A current loss can trigger unresolved feelings associated with a past loss, which might complicate movement through the grief process.

The following is a guide to help respond to those who are grieving. It is written for parents, but applies to anyone affected by the recent tragedy. The information and suggestions in this guide must be tempered by the complexity of relationships and history that affect the grief process. So proceed gently.

What can I do to help my student?

Be aware of your feelings and thoughts. Even if you feel helpless and afraid for the well-being of your son or daughter, it is important to be a calm source of support. This will help your son / daughter feel safer and more secure.

Talk of grieving when your son or daughter is ready. Bring up the topic about how they are handling their loss-emotionally, physically, mentally, and socially. Mostly listen. Holding and supporting them may be the best choice. Look for cues that suggest they are ready to end the discussion. Usually proceed at their pace.

Expect emotions. Expect that your son or daughter will experience many different emotions and feelings that will fluctuate over time. Even if they are doing well at first, he or she may become sad weeks or months following the loss. Let him or her know that it is okay to feel sad, angry, indifferent, etc. A reassuring parent validates their son's or daughter's feelings. You might say, "It is okay for you to have those feelings."

Share your feelings. Your son or daughter may be more likely to share his or her feelings when you share your own thoughts and feelings. Sharing your feelings and personal stories may help to normalize their experience and reactions.

Encourage your son or daughter to continue with his or her goals and plans. It is quite normal to want to protect and shelter your student when he or she is hurting, but it is important for your student to get back to his or her normal school routines. Gentle encouragement is better than nagging.

Encourage recreation. Physical exercise, activities with friends, and weekend trips may help provide hope that life can again become pleasurable.

Encourage peer relationships. As evidenced at the University, friends are invaluable sources of comfort and understanding. Peers view life from the same generational perspective.

Be patient. The grieving process may take a year or more. Keep in mind the saying, "Don't push the river, help guide it."

Stay in touch. Even though your son or daughter may appear to regain joy, he or she still needs your support, attention, love, and hugs.

When might counseling be needed?

Counseling can help facilitate the process of grieving by providing support and education, normalizing reactions, and helping work through feelings associated with loss. Counseling might focus on helping the student to explore the impact of the particular loss, to understand and deal with emotional reactions resulting from the loss, and to begin to say goodbye to their friend while holding onto the essence of what they gained from the relationship. As students move through the grief process, the pain and loss eventually become less intense, and they are able to move forward in their lives. Counseling may also be helpful to the student in negotiating other life demands.

Listed below are some possible warning signs that indicate students who may benefit from assistance.

- An expressed need for help
- Thoughts or statements of death or suicide
- Prolonged sadness or depressed mood
- Change in sleep or eating patterns (too much or too little)
- Feelings of guilt, hopelessness, worthlessness
- Alcohol or drug abuse
- A change in appearance (e.g., poor hygiene)
- A drop in GPA or academic performance from the previous semester, especially for students who generally perform above average
- Increased irritability or agitation
- Consistently inappropriate, illogical, or unrelated questions
- Distracted or preoccupied thought processes
- Withdrawal from social interactions with peers, family, and significant others, frequent class absences, and expressions of loneliness
- Fearful responses, such as avoidance or apprehension about being alone
- Occurrence of a recent loss or other crisis

The appearance of any of the above warning signs may indicate that a student is in distress. If any of these signs are observed, especially on a repeated basis within a short period of time (two to three weeks), it is important to talk with your son or daughter and refer him/her to the Counseling Center for assistance.

TCU Counseling Center
Brown-Lupton Health Center—west entrance
(817) 257-7863
www.counseling.tcu.edu

What do I do if my student is reluctant to seek help?

While it is important to care about the emotional well being of students, we cannot make their decisions for them, and counseling is always a personal choice. Nevertheless, you can assist a student who is ambivalent about seeking professional help in a number of ways.

- Normalize the process of pursuing counseling.
- Reassure the student that counseling services are appropriate for anyone needing assistance in coping with and resolving emotional and/or interpersonal concerns.
- Let the student know that no problem is too big or too small for counseling.
- Inform the student that he or she can make an appointment to speak to a counselor once without making a commitment to ongoing counseling.
- Remind the student that any information shared during counseling sessions is kept strictly confidential and will not be disclosed to anyone without her/his written permission.
- Acknowledge, validate, and discuss the student's real fears and concerns about seeking help. Some students may feel that counseling is an admission of weakness or failure; we tell students that it takes considerable

courage and integrity to face oneself, acknowledge one's troubles or difficulties, and admit the desire or need for assistance.

- Suggest that the student visit our web site as a way to become familiar with the services.