

SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE THROUGH A BEREAVEMENT DURING COVID-19

The loss of a loved one is always a difficult and confusing time for a young person. When it happens during a pandemic that has severely impacted travel and the ability for people to come together and grieve as they would under normal circumstances, it can cause even more distress.

While there are no easy answers to this situation, it can be helpful to know more about how grief can affect young people, options to consider when they can't be physically present at a funeral, and where they can find support.

WHAT THEY MIGHT BE FEELING

Grief affects young people in a variety of ways – not just emotionally. As with all of us, grief is a completely normal, natural reaction to loss.

Below are just some of the typical ways you might find they react at this time.

- **Physical** – Tearful, tight-chested, headaches or pains, no energy
- **Mental** – Distracted, forgetful, slow reactions
- **Emotional** – Anxious, numb, guilty, negative thoughts and dreams
- **Spiritual** – Questioning why?, looking for meaning
- **Behavioural** – Unsettled, withdrawn, changes in eating and sleeping habits

In the COVID environment, with its limitations around travel and gatherings, it is also completely understandable that they may be feeling:

- *Helpless or powerless at being so far away*
- *Vulnerable, lonely, isolated from family and friends*
- *Desperately wanting more information*

Give them permission to grieve and adjust to what has happened. Be patient with them, and reassure them.

WARNING SIGNS TO LOOK OUT FOR

Young people are particularly vulnerable to becoming overwhelmed by grief. This can sometimes lead to dangerous thoughts and behaviors.

It is important to be vigilant and seek help if the young person displays concerning signs such as:

- Withdrawing to be alone for significant periods of time
- Reckless driving and other risk-taking behavior
- Moving beyond sadness and into depression
- A pattern of aggressive or antisocial behavior
- Blaming themselves for the death
- Admitting to having suicidal thoughts

If you are worried, always seek help and advice.

HELPING THEM THROUGH

Listen, be honest, and be there

Be willing to listen to the young person, and talk about whatever they need to. Be open and honest about what is happening. Acknowledge the emotions they may be feeling. Comfort them with words and hugs. It can often be helpful for parents and other adults to share their own feelings regarding the loss.

Help them connect them with friends, family & whānau however it is possible

While they may not be able to physically be together with friends or family due to travel restrictions and Alert Level rules, they can still communicate using phones and digital communication. Encourage them to keep up these connections, and stay positively engaged with the people who care about them.

Look after them – and help them look after themselves.

Encourage them to keep up routines. Eat healthy food. Drink enough water. Consider doing some exercise. If they find keeping busy helps, set some useful tasks for them to do.

Understand that their grief will not go away in a week or so. It is not unusual for grief to resurface well after the death, often at unexpected times.

THINGS TO CONSIDER

If they or someone else can't attend the funeral service in person, there are many other options available to commemorate their loved one.

- Many funeral homes and churches now offer a live stream video service for those who can't be present
- It is often possible to record a video message to be played at the funeral, or write a message or poem that can be read out by someone at the service
- You could suggest they plant a flower or a tree in memory of the person, light a candle, or put together a scrapbook or memory box of their happy times together
- Encourage them to think of their own rituals that may be meaningful for their memorial of the passing of their loved one.

SUPPORT SERVICES AND RESOURCES

Kids Health – Grief Resources

www.kidshealth.org.nz/bereavement-reactions-children-young-people-age-group

Victim Support

www.victimsupport.org.nz

Grief Centre

www.griefcentre.org.nz

Samaritans

www.samaritans.org.nz

1737 – Support from Trained Counsellors

Call or text 1737 any time

Youthline

www.youthline.co.nz

Lifeline

www.lifeline.org.nz

COVID-19 Alert Levels

www.covid19.govt.nz

COVID-19
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