

Supporting your Child or Youth through Traumatic Loss and Grief

This guide is designed to help parents and caregivers know how to best support their child or youth through a traumatic loss.

Allow difficult feelings

- When a traumatic event has happened that is affecting your child or youth, encourage them to discuss their feelings in a safe environment and let them know that it is okay to have big feelings. Listen to them and explain that you understand why they are feeling this way. If your child or youth does not want to talk, make sure they know that you are there for them when they are ready.
- Validate their emotions by saying things such as “I understand this is scary for you”, and “it’s okay to talk about these feelings”. Do your best not to minimize their feelings by saying things such as “don’t worry” or “you’ll be fine”. Do let them know that it won’t feel this way forever and that painful feelings will fade over time (don’t forget to remind yourself of this as well).
- Children and youth of all ages often respond well to touch from a trusted adult (hugs, pats on the back, etc.). Remain present even when your child or youth are not ready to discuss what happened. Be aware that outbursts might happen as children and youth work through difficult feelings; do your best not to punish these outbursts by withdrawing warmth or attention.

Answer questions honestly and give an amount of information that fits the child’s age and ability

- When questions come up around the event, answer them honestly and in a manner that suits your child’s age. Be direct in your answers; do not try to “sugar-coat” death by saying things such as “they went away” or “we lost them” as young children, in particular, may think that the person will eventually come back.
- Where suicide is the cause of death, when children ask what happened, be truthful. It may help to explain that people die from many causes (e.g. cancer, heart attacks, accidents, etc.) and suicide is one of these causes. You may wish to explain that the person’s brain/mind was sick. For young children, keeping it simple is best by saying something like “the illness in their brain made them hurt their own body”. For older children, it is okay to explain that mental health difficulties can lead individuals to have very sticky thoughts that make them unable to come up with other ways to deal with their difficulties. Ensure that children and youth are aware that most people with mental health difficulties do not die by suicide.

Maintain structure and routines and prioritize self-care

- When a traumatic event occurs it is easy to get distracted from regular routines. Try to stick to routines in regard to sleeping, eating and recreation. Encourage your child or youth to continue to engage in activities that bring them joy.
- Model healthy behaviour to the best of your ability, which includes prioritizing your own self-care routines (e.g. exercise, healthy eating, talking with trusted friends, journaling, meditation, yoga, etc.). Taking care of yourself helps to ensure that you are able to take care of your child or youth.
- Pay attention to which coping strategies and routines are effective in reducing your child or youth’s distress and encourage them to continue using those strategies.

Keep adult conversations private and monitor media exposure

- Be aware of what details you are discussing when your children are around; there are many details of traumatic events that children and youth do not need to know. Do not discuss your fears about your child or youth, or about the event in general in front of your children. When discussing suicide, speak about it in a matter-of-fact way, but avoid graphic details.
- When a traumatic event occurs in the community, there will be coverage on the news as well as discussion on social media. Be mindful of how much time your child or youth is spending reading or speaking about the topic on social media, and how often you are exposing them to media related to the event in your home. It should be the adults' job to provide "need-to-know" information about the event.

Stay tuned to what is happening in the community

- Do not force your child or youth to attend a funeral. If they do want to go, prepare them for what they might see or hear. If it fits for you, discuss your beliefs in terms of an afterlife, or discuss the idea of those who have died living on in your hearts and minds.
- Be aware that being around friends may be difficult as the event will come up in conversation. Traumatic events may be particularly upsetting for people who have gone through similar things in the past. Make sure that your child or youth knows that it is okay to speak up or leave a situation if they do not want to discuss the event.

Reach out for help when needed

- If the event seems to be taking a real toll on your child or youth, and you find them unable to cope with the event or their feelings related to the event, be aware that there are places you can reach out to discuss your options.
- Community Mental Health ○ Charlottetown: 902-368-4430 ○ Montague: 902-838-0960 ○ Souris: 902-687-7110 ○ Summerside: 902-888-8180 ○ Alberton and West Prince: 902-853-8670
- Student Well-Being Teams (SWT). Visit the following website:
<https://www.princeedwardisland.ca/en/information/education-and-lifelong-learning/studentwell-being-teams>
- If your child or youth is experiencing more urgent mental health concerns:
 - Mental Health and Addictions Helpline is available 24/7 at 1-833-553-6983
 - Kids HelpPhone is available 24/7 at 1-800-668-6868