

Communicating with Young People about Grief and Loss

Communication is more than your words. Be calm.

Emerson said, "What you do speaks so loud that I cannot hear what you say."

How you say something is often more important than what you say. There is a lot of uncertainty and fear in our culture about death. Frequently young people take on this fear without realizing it, and simply modeling calmness when talking about death is a powerful intervention.

Affirm feelings.

When faced with the death of a loved one, feelings that young people are having or the feelings of those they live with can be scary, confusing and sometimes totally new and foreign. Affirming that feelings are not right or wrong, but just are, can aid young people in their acceptance of them. Affirming feelings means we do not try to change them or "fix" them. In other words it's okay to simply say, "You seem sad."

Be careful not to make assumptions. Grieving is individual.

Although there are commonalities in the grieving of young people, there are aspects that are unique to all individuals. When this is communicated, young people feel understood. Making assumptions can cause confusion, guilt, or anger and complicate grieving.

Listening attentively is an intervention in and of itself.

Attentive, engaged listening facilitates healing. Use reflective listening techniques to demonstrate that you are hearing the young person's story. This means that you are not always trying to solve their problem or communicate a possible resolution. It means you are demonstrating with actions and words that you are hearing them - period. Part of working through grief is getting the story out. This happens best when someone creates a safe place for the telling by simply listening.

It is okay to say, "I don't know." This includes not having an answer or resolution to a problem or painful situation.

There are many unknowns about death and also about life. Modeling that the unknown is part of our life experience aids the grieving process. Modeling that it is okay to not have answers encourages honest doubt and exploration of personal beliefs. Acknowledging that no one has all the answers creates a sense of safety and a sense of belonging. It communicates that you are all in there together not knowing, but that because you have each other it is better, and there is hope.

Do not underestimate the ability of young people to find their own answers.

Expect that young people will have their own answers. Demonstrate a belief in their ability to resolve their own issues. When a setting is created where feelings are respected, young people will say what they need to hear themselves saying. Sometimes this means allowing moments of silence or awkward pauses. Moments of quiet can indicate young people are thinking and processing and that is what you want to happen.