

# HOW TO ASSIST YOUR MENTEE TO DEAL WITH GRIEF OR LOSS



Dealing with death and loss involves intense feelings and emotions. It takes time to understand the reality of losing a loved one, significant changes or dealing with a devastating event. As a mentor you can play a vital role in the grieving and healing process, helping a young person to manage their grief and come out the other side.

Your mentee may be grieving for a range of reasons, including:

- Death of a family member or friend
- Divorce of parents
- Traumatic event
- Death of a pet
- Domestic violence
- Disaster
- Unemployment
- Homelessness
- Incarceration of a family member.

## UNDERSTANDING GRIEF

Grief is our reaction to death or loss; physical, emotional and behavioural effects can be either temporary or long lasting. The grieving process helps us adjust to life after loss. People grieve in different ways, and the experience is unique for everyone.

The array of effects can include:

- Physical: tiredness, low energy, loss of appetite, headaches, crying.
- Emotional: sadness, anger, worry, anxiety, helplessness, depression, mood swings.
- Behavioural: withdrawal from normal life, 'acting out', engaging in risky behaviours, lack of focus and concentration, truancy, reverting back to younger behaviours.

Children and young people experience grief just as much or more than adults. It can be difficult for them to understand the reality of the situation and manage their feelings, thoughts and behaviour. Young people may struggle with everyday life; school work, chores and relationships while dealing with grief.

Children may struggle to comprehend the permanency of death, whilst young people will have a better understanding of the finality of the situation. We all experience grief in different ways, below is a range of feelings that individuals may go through during their grieving: denial, disbelief, sadness, guilt, anger, shock, numbness, depression, fear, confusion, pain, overwhelmed, anxiety, loneliness, acceptance, hope, relief.

## MENTOR SUPPORT

As a mentor you can provide so much for your mentee and often it is your presence and the safety of your relationship that helps the most.

- Be reliable, provide structure and turn up!
- Be gentle and calm; your steadying presence will help your mentee feel safe and supported.
- Listen; be an active listener, don't ask loads of questions, use nonverbal (nod head, lean in, smile) and verbal (mmm, OK, yes, I know what you mean) cues.
- Acknowledge their feelings and the difficulties they are having.
- Engaging in normal activity as part of the mentor programme will help your mentee to feel somewhat 'normal', even for a short period of time.
- Help or encourage your mentee to source appropriate professional services to assist them through this challenging time. This may include a counsellor, psychologist, housing support services, tutor, etc. If you are unsure about the required service or professional, seek guidance from your programme co-ordinator.
- Let your mentee know it's OK to cry; letting out their emotions and feelings are part of the healing process.
- Where appropriate work with the other adults in your mentee's support network.
- Be flexible; your mentee may miss meetings, pull away from the programme or want to meet more. Support their participation decisions and do not pressure them to meet.
- Milestones may intensify grief. Try and be aware of any upcoming dates, such as birthdays, religious celebrations and the anniversary of the death.
- Keep within the boundaries of the programme. Moving outside expectations and policy may confuse your mentee and put you both in a vulnerable position.

- Be alert; look for signs of depression or destructive behaviours. Grief can trigger depression.
- Don't have any expectations around your mentee's grief. Although it is useful to understand stages of grief, everyone is different and experiences grief in their own way.
- Share honestly and answer questions to the best of your ability. Don't hesitate to answer 'I don't know'.
- Respect your mentee's religious/cultural beliefs.
- Speak clearly about death; do not confuse your mentee by using terms that are not clear in their meaning; such as "sleep" or "gone away".
- Encourage your mentee to celebrate the life of the person that died. Explore ways they could reflect on the life of the person who died. Ideas include a project, album, poem, photo board, song, or letter, etc.
- If appropriate for both of you, share an experience you have had with death. How did you manage? What are your thoughts now after some time has passed? How do you mark milestones?
- Your mentee may try to hide their feelings or bottle up their grief; encourage them to talk, or let it out in some way.
- Encourage a healthy lifestyle; sleep, good nutrition and exercise.
- Be available for your mentee, whether in person, by phone or by email.
- Reassure your mentee that over time their grief will be more manageable and life will gain purpose once again.

**TIP**

### TIPS FOR SUCCESS

- Be prepared to accept your mentee's way of dealing with their grief; privately, openly, crying, sharing, etc.
- Do not take your mentee's behaviour or lack of attendance personally.
- Touch; if appropriate give your mentee a hug, hold their hand or just sit close.
- Do some reading; check out books at your library, visit the websites suggested below or seek some information from your programme co-ordinator.
- If possible spend some time outdoors, go for a walk or do an activity during your arranged meeting time.
- Ask for help, training or support if you feel out of your depth, overwhelmed or in need of some guidance.
- Source support from your programme co-ordinator and debrief to ensure you are managing your feelings through the process.
- Where possible, find out necessary details about the death/event; having a better understanding of the situation may help you to support your mentee.
- Keep in contact with your mentee; send them a text or email, let them know that you are thinking about them.
- Provide your mentee with links to websites that may help them deal with their loss.
- Repeat important information and check your mentee understands.
- Explain that grief has no time limit, and there is no right or wrong way to grieve.
- Be prepared to discuss death, loss and grief.



### REFERENCES & FURTHER INFORMATION

- National Association for Loss and Grief (NZ) Inc  
[www.nalag.org.nz](http://www.nalag.org.nz)
- Skylight is a charitable trust providing specialised grief support for New Zealand children, young people, adults and their families  
[www.skylight.org.nz](http://www.skylight.org.nz)
- Barnados offer advice to people helping children cope with grief  
[www.barnados.org.nz](http://www.barnados.org.nz)
- Youthline offers counselling, support and youth development services  
[www.youthline.co.nz/contact-us.html](http://www.youthline.co.nz/contact-us.html)