



## Student's Reaction:

The initial reaction to a tragedy is one of shock, disbelief and denial. This is usually followed by a state of intense emotional turmoil during which students may express fear, anger, rage, confusion and sorrow. This is followed by exhaustion.

By the time you receive this brochure, your child has probably been informed of the tragedy and has already experienced some aspects of the initial reaction. What you will probably observe now are the long term reactions to the crisis. These will vary somewhat depending on the age of the student.

**Middle School** - At this age, some students may sensationalize the event. This tends to be a volatile age and intense emotional reactions, especially anger should be expected. Other students will engage in defiant humour to cover up their feelings. Decreased academic performance may occur. Acting out, behaviour and personality change may also occur.

**High School** - Teenagers often operate under the assumption of the immortality of youth. When someone young dies they undergo a crisis in their realization of vulnerability. This may challenge many of their belief systems and feelings about the meaning of life. Most teens are eventually able to incorporate this event into their lives and to make sense of it. However, others who have experienced additional recent losses may start to act out in self destructive ways (drinking, drugs, risk taking, etc. ). All of the teens affected by the tragedy will go through the normal grieving process and most will emerge as stronger, more mature individuals.

## Parent/Guardian's Guide

### Secondary Students' Reaction to Loss & Tragedy



### Services Being Provided

*Evaluation of Students' Needs:* Trained professionals may meet with your child to determine the most appropriate intervention for him/her.

*Defusing* - If your child has found out about the tragedy at school, support staff will be on hand to support them, explain the crisis and ensure safety.

*Group Debriefing* - As part of the district's crisis response plan, all students affected by a crisis will have an opportunity to discuss their reactions and feelings about this event once the initial shock has worn off. This usually occurs a day or two after the tragedy. This is done in an age-appropriate way. Students may have an opportunity to participate in small group debriefing sessions. Participation in discussions is encouraged but is voluntary in nature.

*Individual Debriefing/Counselling* - A number of counsellors will be available to provide individual debriefing/counselling for students who want to talk to someone individually. The focus of the counselling is on the tragic event and the student's reaction to it.

*Follow-up* - When necessary, selected groups of students may meet as a group on a number of occasions to assist them in dealing with their grief. In addition, teachers have been encouraged to allow for special activities and discussions in class. The curriculum may be adjusted for a short time during the grieving period. Parents/guardians will be contacted for students who the school feels are particularly at risk. If you have concerns about your child's reaction, please contact your child's teacher and/or guidance counsellor. Please contact the school if you do not want your child to receive this type of service.

Every child affected by a tragedy is going to display some emotional upset and needs to go through the grieving process in order to accept the loss. For most students, all that is needed is time, understanding and support from teachers and parents. Some students are more at risk than others and may require more individual support to assist them in coping. The following students should be considered at possible greater risk:

- close friends and relatives of person(s) involved.
- eye witnesses to a tragedy
- those who have had recent losses (deaths, family break-up)
- those experiencing depression
- have recently attempted or threatened suicide
- socially isolated students
- those who were showing signs of poor coping before event



## Tips for Helping Adolescents After a Crisis

Reactions	Responses	Examples of Things to do and Say
<b>Self-consciousness</b> about their fears, sense of vulnerability, fear of being labeled abnormal.	Help teens understand that these feelings are common. Encourage relationships with family and peers for needed support during the recovery period. Don't expect them to be brave or tough.	"I was feeling the same thing. I was really shocked and sad. Most people feel like this when something like this happens. Why don't you call Peter and see how he's doing."
<b>Acting-out behaviour</b> (using alcohol and drugs, accident-prone behaviour)	Help teens understand that acting out behaviour is a dangerous way to express strong feelings (like anger) over what happened. Have them let you know where they are going and what they're planning to do.	"Many teens feel out of control and angry when something like this happens. They think drinking and taking drugs will help somehow. It's very normal to feel that way-but it's not a good idea to act on it. It's important during these times that I know where you are and how to contact you."
<b>Detachment, shame, guilt</b>	Provide a safe time to discuss with your teen the events and their feelings. Emphasize that these feelings are common, and correct self-blame with realistic explanations of what actually could have been done.	"Many teens feel like you do, angry or blaming themselves that they couldn't do more. You're not at fault-it was his/her choice to get into that car with someone who had been drinking."
<b>Radical changes in attitude</b>	Explain that changes in people's attitudes after a tragic event are common, but will return to normal over time.	"We are all upset. When something like this happens, we can feel angry. It might not seem like it, but we'll probably start to feel better when we get back to a more structured routine."
<b>Concern for families of individuals involved in tragic event.</b>	Encourage constructive activities on behalf of others, but do not burden with undo responsibility.	Help teens identify projects that are age-appropriate and meaningful (e.g. baking cookies for family, making a card, raising money for a charitable cause, etc.).
<b>Abrupt shifts in interpersonal relationships</b> (Teens may pull away from parents, family, and even their peers)	Explain that the strain on relationships is to be expected. Emphasize that we need family and friends for support during the recovery period. Encourage tolerance for others' courses to recovery.	Spend time talking as a family about how everyone is doing.

Adapted from *Tips for Helping adolescents after Disasters* from the National Center for Child Traumatic Stress