

Coping with Death and Grief

College students all fear death and they all believe that they will live forever. But death will enter our lives. Students therefore need to learn how to live with death, dying and grief.

Why the Fear of Death?

There are several reasons why college students may be afraid of dying:

- The premature interruption of life activities.
- Effects of death upon family members, classmates and friends.
- The fear of death without dignity, for example, being kept alive by machine.
- The fear of nothingness after death.

Impact of Loss: The Grieving Process

When a loved one/classmate is dying or dies, there is a grieving process. Recovery is a slow and emotionally painful one. The grieving process can be less painful if you try to understand that loss and grief is a natural part of life. Learn to accept your loss and believe in yourself. Believe that you can cope with tragic happenings. Let your experience be a psychological growth process that will help you to deal with future stressful events.

The grieving process usually consists of the following stages. Note that not everyone goes through all these stages.

Denial and Shock

At first, it may be difficult for you to accept your own dying or the death of a loved one/classmate. As a result you will deny the reality of death. However, this denial will gradually diminish as you begins to express and share your feelings about death and dying with other students or friends.

Anger

During this stage the most common question asked is "why me?". You are angry at what you perceive to be the unfairness of death and you may project and displace your anger unto others. When given some social support and respect, you will eventually become less angry and able to move into the next stage of grieving.

Bargaining

Many students try to bargain with some sort of deity. They probably try to bargain and offer to give up an enjoyable part of their lives in exchange for the return of health or the lost person.

Guilt

You may find yourself feeling guilty for things you did or didn't do prior to the loss. Forgive yourself. Accept your humanness.

Depression

You may at first experience a sense of great loss. Mood fluctuations and feelings of isolation and withdrawal may follow. It takes time for you, the grieving student, to gradually return to your old self and become socially involved in what's going on around you.

Please note that encouragement and reassurance to the bereaved student will not be helpful in this stage.

Loneliness

As you go through changes in your social life because of the loss, you may feel lonely and afraid. The more you are able to reach out to others and make new friends, the more this feeling lessens.

Acceptance

Acceptance does not mean happiness. Instead you accept and deal with the reality of the situation.

Hope

Eventually you will reach a point where remembering will be less painful and you can begin to look ahead to the future and more good times.

Ways to Cope with Death and Dying

- Discuss feelings such as loneliness, anger, and sadness openly and honestly with other students, instructors and family members.
- Maintain hope.
- If your religious convictions are important to you, talk to a member of the clergy about your beliefs and feelings.
- Join a support group.
- Take good care of yourself. Eat well-balanced meals. Get plenty of rest.
- Be patient with yourself. It takes time to heal. Some days will be better than others.

Ways to Help a Bereaved Student

- Be supportive but do not attempt to give encouragement and reassurance when a student is in the depressed stage of grieving. It will not be helpful.
- Talk openly and honestly about the situation unless the student does not want to.
- Use an appropriate, caring conversational tone of voice.
- Show that you care. Listen attentively and show interest in what the grieving student has to say about his/her feelings and beliefs. Share your feelings and talk about any similar experience you may have had. Avoid using the phrase "I know just how you feel."
- If symptoms of depression are very severe or persistent and the grieving student is not coping with day to day activities encourage that student to get professional help.

Help! Where to find it.

Counseling Services
120 Richmond Quad, Ellicott Complex
716-645-2720

[Campus Ministers and Advisers](#) (645-2998)
227 Student Union
North Campus

[Life Transition Center](#) (836-6460)
3580 Harlem Road