

Tip Sheet: When a Classmate Dies

Students who attend classes together are close, and when a student dies, friends and classmates grieve. When the death is unexpected, it can be particularly traumatic.

The Grieving Process

Feelings and symptoms of grief can take weeks, months, and even years to manifest and evolve. People do not heal on a timetable, but over time the emotions do ease. The brief time given to attend the funeral only touches the beginning stages of grief. Broadly speaking, the feelings and symptoms of grief may include: shock, denial, anger, guilt, anxiety, sleep disorders, exhaustion, overwhelming sadness, and concentration difficulties.

When grieving, it is common to experience many emotions at the same time, though perhaps in different degrees. The extent, depth, and duration of the grief process will depend on how close people were to the deceased, the circumstances of the death and their own situation. Some outcomes of grief may include finding a new balance (which does not necessarily mean that things will be the same) and growth (readiness to move ahead with one's life).

Take Time to Grieve

You and your classmates will need time to grieve. Some people find the following activities to be a helpful during the initial grief period:

- Create a memorial board.
- Hold or participate in a fundraiser for a special cause or for the family of the deceased.
- Create a book of memories to give to the family.
- Conduct an event or memorial service on campus.
- Attend the funeral or memorial service.

People experience grief differently. You or a classmate who was particularly close to a person who died may feel depressed, absentminded, short-tempered, or exhausted. These are all normal feelings. Creating healthy memories is part of healing. Some people find talking about the deceased helps them manage their grief. Others keep to themselves. Respect the fact that others may feel the loss more or less strongly than you, or cope differently. A death also generates questions and fears about our own mortality. If a classmate dies, you may feel guilty or angry at the person, at life, or at the medical profession. It may cause you to question your own life. These are normal emotions.

Seek help from a counselor if you have trouble coping with the loss of your classmate or if you find that your schoolwork is suffering. A decrease in your performance could be a signal that this loss is affecting you more profoundly than you thought.