

Help Students Identify and Express Their Emotions

Youth will vary widely in terms of emotional expression. Some may become openly emotional, others may be reluctant to talk at all, and still others may use humor. How they express their emotions may also be influenced by their cultural background. Acknowledge the diversity of experiences and the wide range of feelings and reactions to a crisis that children may have, and emphasize the importance of being respectful of others. Some children may need help identifying emotions beyond simply sad, angry, or happy, and they may need reassurance that a wide range of feelings and experiences are to be expected. They may also need to be reminded that emotions may be experienced as physical symptoms, including butterflies in the stomach, shortness of breath, insomnia, fatigue, or irritability. To facilitate this discussion, ask children questions, such as:

- What is your biggest concern about the immediate future?
- What would help you feel safer right now?

It may help establish rapport to open a conversation by asking children what their favorite memories are of the student.

Practical Coping Strategies

Encourage children to think about specific things they can do when intense emotions, such as worry or sadness, begin to well up, for example:

- Use simple relaxation and distraction skills, such as taking three deep, slow breaths; counting to 10; or picturing themselves in a favorite calm and relaxing place
- Engage in favorite activities or hobbies, such as music, talking with a friend, reading, or going to a movie
- Exercise
- Think about how they have coped with difficulties in the past and remind themselves that they can use those same coping skills now
- Write a list of people they can turn to for support
- Write a list of things they are looking forward to
- Focus on personal goals, such as returning to a shared class or spending time with mutual friends

Often, youth will express guilt about having fun or thinking about other things. They may feel that they somehow need permission to engage in activities that will help them feel better and take their mind off the stressful situation.

Encourage children to think about how they want to remember their friend. Ideas may include writing a personal note to the family, attending the viewing and/or funeral, creating a memory book, or doing something kind for another person in honor of their friend. Acknowledging their

need to express their feelings while helping them identify appropriate ways to do so can begin the process of returning their focus to their daily lives and responsibilities.