

Supporting students who have a family member with an advanced serious illness



If you're a school staff person, you will likely encounter a student who is living with the anxiety of a family member's life-limiting illness. You will have the opportunity to be a support person for your student, providing empathy as they face the serious illness, and perhaps death, of a family member.

1. LISTEN

One of the most helpful and healing things to do for your student is to listen to their story without judging, interpreting, evaluating or offering advice. Listening, even briefly, to anything they're willing to share sends the message that you are a safe and supportive person.

2. ACKNOWLEDGE

Say something to the student that acknowledges you know about their family member's illness. Be authentic. Although "I'm sorry" is a common response, children and teens tell us they don't like to hear "I'm sorry." Better to say "I'm thinking of you" or "You've been on my mind."

3. UNDERSTAND

You can't take away the feelings of pain, fear, loneliness, or being different that students experience when a family member has been diagnosed with a terminal illness. Your role is not to get rid of the feelings, but to create a safe environment where they can be shared.

4. PROVIDE CONSISTENCY

The structure, routine and consistency of the school

environment can provide a child or teen dealing with a family member's illness with a sense of stability. At the same time, allow for some flexibility for students who may be having a bad day.

5. HELP

Help the student make a plan for completing schoolwork. Stress and anxiety can manifest in students as well as difficulties with concentration, memory, low energy and fatigue. Communicate often with the child to discuss specific, flexible goals for schoolwork completion.

6. SAFETY

Provide a safe place for students to go when feeling overwhelmed, stressed or anxious. Have the student designate a counselor, teacher or other support staff person who is willing to be available, to listen to and talk with the student.

7. PROVIDE RESOURCES

Get the student help if needed. Most students have a mix of some easy days and other days that are challenging and difficult to get through. A child or teen who is profoundly affected may experience drastic changes which can include: prolonged depression or anxiety, risk-taking behaviors or suicidal thoughts. If you observe changes such as these, it is important to consult a qualified mental health professional for additional support.



The National Grief Center
for Children & Families

Our Mission

Dougy Center provides grief support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families can share their experiences before and after a death. We provide support and training locally, nationally, and internationally to individuals and organizations seeking to assist children who are grieving.

Dougy Center Bookstore/Resources

Dougy Center has been helping children, teens, young adults and their parents cope with grief since 1982. Our practical, easy-to-use materials are based on what we have learned from more than 55,000 Dougy Center participants. To order online, visit dougy.org or dougybookstore.org, or call 503.775.5683.

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