

## JUST FOR KIDS: Returning to School after a Loss

*Someone you love has died or is gone from your life. You feel strange, like someone came behind you and pushed you into deep water: nothing is normal. Sometime you feel like you are drowning in your own emotions, and they came fast—one minute you're angry, the next, crying—but always unable to shake a deep heavy sadness. Your stomach may be queasy, churning or pained: you may be nervous and jittery, or so calm you feel numb. You may be tired all the time, like be sick, or so full of thoughts and energy you can't sleep at all.*

### **This is grief and we all go through it—because to love and lose is part of life.**

No two people experience grief exactly the same, so, in your family or family of friends, it's quite possible for one person to be bitter and yelling, another to be quiet and isolated, and for another to avoid the whole thing and try to leave. The whole mess gets really complicated if one member is alcoholic or abusive.

### **Now it's time to return to school. How do you handle all this and school, too?**

It's an old saying, but the answer is "one little step at a time." If you stuff a whole candy bar in your mouth, your cheeks puff out, you slobber when you try to talk, and you look stupid. Just like with the candy bar, learn to take just one bite at a time. You decide how big. Set your own pace, and don't bite off more than you can chew.

### **Okay, here are some real problems for you or a friend coming back to school after a loss. Later on, we'll talk about a few suggestions for feeling healthy again.**

#### **The good news about school is that:**

It keeps you busy, puts structure in your life, and keeps it normal.  
It forces you to be with people, and among them are some healthy, happy ones. Find them. You need them.  
It offers knowledge; in fact, it tries to push it into your head.

#### *What's good about this is that:*

- 1) it helps you put other things in your head besides your grief; and
- 2) the knowledge you take in now becomes the building blocks you use to build a positive future.

#### **The bad news about school is:**

There are a ton of escapes and quick fixes; socializing, getting into trouble, drugs, etc.  
It's noisy when you might crave quiet  
It's a hassle and it's stressful: assignments, schedules, etc.

*Young people express the problems of returning to school after a loss like this:*

**1. “I don’t want to go: people will stare at me.”**

The same people who thought you were cute will still think you’re cute; the people who think you’re a slug will still treat you the same. Life is normal here, even though something has happened to make you feel “weird.” Some will look at you strangely, They may be afraid this will happen to them.

**2. “My friends avoid me, turn away, and pretend they don’t see me. They’re faking it – like nothing happened – and spreading rumors.”**

You’re not the only one that wants this to be over. Your friends are afraid for you, and afraid to hurt you by asking. Maybe they don’t know the facts, and by guessing are “spreading rumors.” You can help. This is like the person in a wheelchair with an obvious handicap that has to be the one to reach out and make others comfortable. You do, too. Say “Hi.” Speak the truth. “My brother died, but I didn’t. I still need friends.” This will let them know it’s okay to talk about your brother, and that it won’t upset you if they do. It will also stop the rumors that hurt.

**3. “I don’t want to answer all the snoopy questions.”**

Expect to be irritable and stressed out. You can tell when questions are snoopy and when they come from honest concern.

If you feel grumpy, say so. Thank a friend or well-meaning teacher for asking, and suggest another time to talk. If, as some time, you’re in a role of a friend to someone in grief, remember what it was like for you. Be ready for their moodiness, and don’t take any of this personally. Ask again another time. You know what it’s like to be grumpy and nasty, but still need someone to care about you.

**4. “I can’t concentrate or think straight. I am failing.”**

It’s normal to have weird dreams or nightmares, and thoughts that interrupt your school work. It’s normal to eat more, or not feeling like eating at all, to cry at strange times, or to feel completely out of balance. It’s shock you’re experiencing, and this is how it feels for awhile.

Try to keep things simple, at first. Tell your physics teacher: “Mr. Jones, my brother died, I’m here, but I’m having trouble thinking straight.” Most teachers will give you a break. You may have to settle for less than good or perfect grades for a while. Don’t worry. It will get better. If a teacher seems unreasonable or gives you a hard time, go straight to your counselor principal. It’s their job to support you during this time.

**5. “I feel like quitting and just getting a job, or like getting high all the time.”**

When you lose someone, what you feel like doing is the opposite of what is good for you. You need to be around people. Stay in school, take homework one step at a time, stay in sports or clubs to keep busy. Stay away from drugs and alcohol. They are temporary highs with long term lows.

**6. “I feel so guilty, like it’s my fault, or like I should have done something.”**

People often feel this way after a death. It’s the “would’ve, could’ve, should’ve” syndrome. In your head it sounds like; “If only I had done this, then that wouldn’t have happened.” Even with a completed suicide, it’s not your fault. You may regret some of your behavior as a brother, daughter, friend or lover, but another’s suicide is never your fault. If you think others blame you, the pain feels even worse. But since no guilt or self-blame will change the fact that someone you love is gone, don’t torture yourself this way. Talk it out with people whose opinion you respect: “reality test” these thoughts.

**7. “I just want to die.”**

Talk about this one with people you trust: a person or relative, friend, counselor, teacher, minister, or priest. It is much more scary to think “crazy” thoughts like this, and keep it to yourself than to talk about it with others. At times, we all wonder about death and what it is like. The thing is, death can’t be undone. Good things happened to you before, and good things will happen again. It is because you miss the good things about someone that you think it would be easier to stop living. What about keeping those good memories alive? “Hey, remember when we used to...?” A 16-year old girl I know makes a special box for each person in her life she has lost. She fills it with notes, dance decorations, music tapes, sport schedules, even some dirt from the grave. When ever she wants to remember someone, she takes down the box.

**8. “How long will I feel this way?”**

Everyone is different. The grief period takes longer than you may think, and things are never going to be exactly the same as they were. Next year there will be a birthday or holiday or anniversary, and the feelings of loss will come back – sometimes as strong. You need to know that, after a while, it does get easier. Somehow, it’s good we don’t forget so easily. That means people we love won’t forget us either, and that life has real meaning.

*So, where do you go from here? Here are some suggestions to help you work through grief.*

- 1. Write down your thoughts.** The more you keep stuff in your head, the bigger the stuff gets. You’ll be surprised just how much putting the stuff on paper gets it out of your head.
- 2. Exercise every day.** Your body is young, but stress and loss can turn you into a slug in no time, and, as a coping skill, that stinks. So, walk, ride, run, play – move and work up a sweat.
- 3. Cry.** Did you know tears are healthy? They are like perspiration: they even flush toxic substances out of the body that our natural reaction to the loss put there.
- 4. Eat healthy.** When you’re hurting it’s easier to get sick. Skip the extra fries or sugar and pick up fruit, veggies (Veggie pizza is great!), and juice.
- 5. Talk a lot.** Find a good listener – someone who is not going to judge what you say. Find more than one, because, when we’re hurting, we’re hard to be around – and remember this, when you are lending an ear to a family member or friend who has loss someone. Tell them when you’ve had enough for a while.

**6. Make a “Memory Book.”** Jot down a few things that stand out about the person who died...a funniest moment, a good story, the time when you helped, or were helped, an incident that made you laugh, an incident that made you mad, things that you will miss most, and things that you will not miss.

**7. Commemorate the life once lived.** Do something that honors the life of the person that died, such as collecting a box of old clothes for a homeless shelter and donating it in their name, name a star after them, make a video of friend and family talking about their best memories.

**8. It’s not being weak to ask for help.** In fact, it takes courage and strength to know when you’re overwhelmed. This is tough, but if your concentration is really bad, consider changing your course schedule to lighten the load or check for a tutor or an extra study hall. And remember, what seems like a failure can be a gift in disguise. You will finish what needs to be done – one step at a time.

**9. You can’t hurry grief.** It takes as long as it takes. Be with your family as much as with friends. Think of ways to just be there: suggest a walk, offer to do the dishes (who, me?). It’s amazing, but when you reach out to someone else, you help yourself. *HINT:* Pick the person in your family you’ve been avoiding the most. Chances are, you are together in pain and both scared to talk about it. Dare to become close to others again, even though doing so opens you up to the possibility of pain again if something should happen to them. Also, pay attention to the young children involved. They hurt just like you, and need to know someone is there for them. Take the time to listen to and answer their question.

**None of this is easy, but ALL OF IT is normal.**

You can make it through the process of grief. Carrying on your day-to-day routines will help the process of adjustment, and, in no time, special interests and pleasures will again assume their normal place in the scheme of things.

Adapted from article by Jackie Kettler and Art Kirsh. Jackie Kettler, MA is affiliated with the Psychiatric Center of Michigan – Adolescent Unit. A secondary educator for 20 years, she facilitates groups for “at risk” and bereaved adolescents.

