

COPING WITH A SUICIDAL DEATH

The nature of a death by suicide is much different than one by natural causes or an accident. For instance, in suicidal death, many "why" questions are asked which have no rational or medical explanation. For example, friends and relatives often ask "Why did the person kill himself/herself?" and "Why didn't he/she come to me for help?" In suicide, survivors often experience a great sense of guilt and anger. Guilt because they feel they should have been able to help the person, and anger over the fact the suicidal person would abandon them in such a tragic and untimely manner.

It is important in dealing with a suicidal death to be prudent in your responses:

- Do not glorify the act of suicide. Stress to the students that suicide is an error in judgement and is a "permanent solution to life's temporary problems".
- Do not announce that the death was by suicide when making general public statements. Coroner's medical findings can be legally contested and frequently are in cases of suicide. School personnel should allow the discussion of suicide as the students talk about the death, however, it is not essential that school personnel confirm the death was by suicide. As the students are discussing the nature of the death (which they will do), school personnel should take the opportunity to discuss the subject of suicide and how the students might cope with stress, personal frustration, disappointment, and other severe hardships.
- Recognize the tragedy of the event and acknowledge the varied feelings of those grieving.
- Memorials should be directed toward symbols of coping and living (e.g., planting of a tree, donations to a crisis hotline, a blood drive).
- A return to "normal" school functioning should be encouraged as soon as possible, so as, to regain a sense of stability and purpose in the lives of those grieving.