

Live Well to
Learn Well

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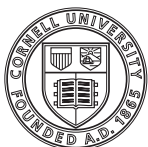
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Monday–Saturday

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Grief & Loss

For most college students, the reality of death barely registers in the mind as a topic of concern.

... And why should it, when the majority of college students are young and healthy, and many feel invincible, if not immortal. Given this mindset, it's not surprising that when you learn a fellow student, friend, or loved one has died, your brain may not be ready or able to absorb the fact without some help.

Any death is hard. Yet the loss of a young person can be especially difficult to process. And if the cause of death is not something we can readily understand (like an illness), but rather a violent or sudden act like an accident or a suicide, the grief and confusion multiply further.

Unnatural and untimely deaths often elicit a series of difficult questions. (*Why them? Why not me? Is there anything I could have done to prevent it?*) It can be helpful to process these questions with others. Know that support is available to you at Cornell, and that we can find strength and hope together.

Feelings after death

No two people respond to the same loss in the same way. You and your friends may experience one or more of the following in the days, hours, and weeks following the death:

- **Anxiety or fear:** that something similar could happen to you, or to another friend or loved one.
- **Confusion:** about why the event happened, or what it means in the larger context of life.
- **Grief:** a pure, overwhelming sense of sadness or loss.
- **Anger:** anger at the person for dying; anger at whatever or whomever caused the death; anger or increased irritability in routine situations.
- **Abandonment:** feeling that you have been left by the person, particularly if there was no opportunity to say good-bye.
- **Frustration:** that you couldn't prevent the death from happening, or that the death happened at all.
- **Guilt or remorse:** guilt if you feel you could have done something to prevent the death, or even guilt related to feeling good (even momentarily) if you think you are supposed to continually feel bad.



When someone dies, your sense of innocence and immortality dies a bit more too ...

- **Embarrassment:** feeling uncomfortable with your own display of grief; feeling uncomfortable with your friend's and family's displays of grief; feeling like you are more emotional than you should be.
- **Denial:** denial of either the feelings about your loss or about the loss itself.
- **Numbness:** a "lack of feeling" is a normal reaction to an immediate loss and should not be confused with "lack of caring".

When someone dies, your sense of innocence and immortality dies a bit more too. Your life may feel different than it did before the death. It may take you a while to fully process what happened.

Help yourself

- **Respect your feelings.** Try to acknowledge and accept all of your feelings, both positive and negative. You may not feel comfortable with these feelings, but they are normal and expected.
- **Talk to others.** Telling the story of the loss can help some people. Others might not want to talk about it, but will find comfort and security by simply spending time with someone who "gets it."
- **Listen to others.** Remember that you don't have to always respond with words.
- **Record your thoughts.** Use a journal or blog to help process; draw or play music if it helps.
- **Accept help from others.** We're all in this together, so let others' experience and wisdom guide you if you feel stuck or scared.

- **Allow yourself to cry.** Tears serve a dual purpose; they offer emotional and physical release.
- **Attend a community support group.** Groups provide an opportunity to share grief with others who have experienced similar loss.
- **Celebrate and honor life.** Death often serves to remind the living of what is truly important in life. It reminds us to keep worry and negativity in perspective. Appreciate and celebrate all that is positive in your life.

Seek support if you ...

- ... find that your feelings are persisting in ways that are uncomfortable.
- ... find that disturbing images are intruding into your waking or dreaming life.
- ... are using alcohol or other drugs, or other unhealthy coping mechanisms to handle the loss.
- ... have reactions that are getting in the way of doing what you need to do for school or in relationships.
- ... are concerned about how a friend is reacting.
- ... feel depressed or hopeless.

Please reach out to one or more of the many resources that are available on campus or in our community.

- Counseling at Cornell Health: health.cornell.edu/CAPS
- “Let’s Talk” drop-in consultation with a Cornell Health counselor: health.cornell.edu/LetsTalk
- Staff and chaplains from the Office of Spirituality and Meaning-Making (OSMM) and Cornell United Religious Work (CURW) are able to provide spiritual support at 607-255-4214 or osmm@cornell.edu.
- See more: caringcommunity.cornell.edu/get-help

Help a friend

- Be supportive. Talk openly and honestly about the situation. Use an appropriate, caring conversational tone of voice. Listen attentively and show interest in others’ feelings and beliefs. Avoid using the phrase “I know just how you feel.”
- Encourage professional help if symptoms of depression are severe or persistent and it appears your friend/peer is not coping with day to day activities.
- View additional tips on assisting a peer: health.cornell.edu [search “concern for others”].