

Each month during the school year NNHS will distribute a "Healthy Huskies Letter." The goal of the newsletter is to enhance our school's partnership with families, particularly by sharing our knowledge of various topics related to your child's social, emotional, and physical health, and what our school and our families can do to promote student healthiness. Each issue will address a different health topic and will contain resources for further exploration of that topic. Staff at NNHS as well as the School, Family, Community Partnership (SFCP), will be advisors for these newsletters. We encourage parents and students to suggest topics and resources. Send suggestions to kpobst@naperville203.org.

NNHS Parent, Bev Guidish, with input from Social Workers and School Nurses, has written this specific Healthy Huskies letter. We are grateful for their willingness to share their knowledge and insight.

Healthy Huskies Letter

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Grief and Loss

The topic of grief and loss is one that many students grapple with during their high school years. Students experience loss in many forms, the most obvious being when a person they know dies. This can be a relative, friend, teacher, or acquaintance. However, students can also experience quite similar reactions to a loss that is not a death, such as their parents' divorce, a loss of a relationship (boyfriend-girlfriend, best friend), failing a class, not making the team, being rejected by a prospective college and so on. There are some common reactions to grief and there are also various support strategies that can apply to many of these situations. We are fortunate to live in a school district and community that has an abundance of professional resources for students and their families to help them during these difficult times.

Grief Reactions

Grief is complex and teens experience authentic reactions to loss, just as adults do. How teens react to a loss can depend on a multitude of factors, including how much experience they have with loss, family and social supports, communication style, age and emotional maturity, how greatly the loss directly affects their lives, etc.

Everyone reacts differently to a loss. Typical reactions can include crying, anger, sadness, moving in 'slow motion,' feeling numb or 'crazy,' mood swings, confusion, panic, anxiety, physical pain, depression, guilt, and even relief. There really is no pattern, nor predictable movement from one stage or feeling to another. These feelings may go back and forth, last a long time or only several days or weeks, depending on the intensity of the loss and other factors. It is entirely individual. Many of these feelings can be foreign and overwhelming to kids.

Surprising to some, even after a difficult loss, **some students want to return to school right away**, needing the normalcy and comfort of school and a daily routine. Others may not be able to get back to a normal routine quickly or easily and need additional support to transition back to school.

In addition, there are some high school students who may have experienced a loss earlier in life, but are just now beginning to process and deal with it. Some important high school events, such as a school dance, making team captain, winning an award, and graduation, may trigger unexpected or strong emotions for them. Whether a loss occurred years ago or recently, these **big events may magnify the feelings of grief and loss**. Grief may not go away. It may seem to disappear at times, but can often resurface during important times in a high school student's life.

The pain of grief and loss is real for teens. **At no time should they feel pressure to 'get over it'** or behave or feel differently. Like many difficult times in life, you can't get around it, you must go through it. Parents and other supportive adults can assist kids in many ways with this.

Support

The greatest concern is not that teens experience loss, but that they do not have proper support. Caring adults, such as parents, teachers, and counselors, as well as the school nurse or social worker, can be a great source of support to teens. Although peers may provide useful insight and support in many circumstances, most teens are not equipped with the life experience and knowledge to be of real help to a friend when it comes to grief. This is one reason why **adult support is even more critical**. When helping a grieving teen, it is important to be available for talking, but **most especially for listening**. You may not have words of wisdom, but listening is far more important. Whatever a teen is feeling and thinking is real. Be sure not to diminish their pain, nor say that you know how they feel. Experiences of loss are different for everyone, so no one truly knows how another person feels.

Be vulnerable and let teens see your own reactions and human responses to grief. It lets them know they are not alone and that responding to a loss is indeed a difficult situation, but one which can be worked through with genuine support. There is no 'right way' to feel grief. There is no time table, no predictable order and often times, no ending. Many adults still cope with their emotions surrounding significant losses in their childhood. The intensity of the feelings may diminish, but the loss itself may never truly disappear.

Therefore, **it is critical to provide teens with the coping mechanisms** needed to deal with their loss and their reactions to it. Some teens benefit from reading books aimed at explaining grief and loss. Other kids find journaling a therapeutic way of sharing their feelings. Still others may listen to music or talk to spiritual leaders for support. Participating in a consistent physical activity is another good, healthy way to release pent up emotions.

Many people find **comfort in order** and predictability in times of great stress. Keeping family rituals as similar as possible, along with continuing to enforce family guidelines and rules gives many a sense of control and protection. Kids still need to eat regular, healthy meals and get adequate sleep. Making sure these basic physical needs are met will ensure kids have the energy to cope with their emotions.

Staff at NNHS can be a great support to students. Many students find it helpful to confide in a favorite teacher, coach, club sponsor or advisor. Those professionals are able to refer to students to appropriate in-school or community resources. Furthermore, teams of teachers and counselors who work with students (referred to as a PST or Problem Solving Team) can create a revised academic plan for students, including extra time completing assignments, tutoring, more support for projects, etc. Teachers want students to succeed and realize that coping with a significant loss may interfere with that goal. By adjusting typical requirements, students will have the extended time and support they need to remain successful academically.

Resources

There are numerous support services available in our community. Consider speaking with school teachers, counselors, the school nurse or social workers for referrals.

Many teens benefit from group support. NNHS offers a grief group, led by Pam Seubold, NNHS nurse. This group meets on Thursdays for one class period. Students can participate or merely observe and

listen. Mrs. Seubold is also available to assist families with finding ongoing support within the community, tailored specifically to the needs of the students and their families.

Some community resources include:

RUAH (Respite of Understanding, Acceptance, and Healing) Center of Naperville
www.ruahcenter.com

Lynne Staley, Grief Recovery Educator and Life After Loss Coach, conducts both individual and group counseling in Naperville.
www.life-after-loss.com

Grief Share is a Christian grief group. Various local churches host the meetings, which are a 13 week series. There is no fee to attend.
www.griefshare.org

Some online resources are the Center for Loss and Life Transition at www.centerforloss.com and Highmark Caring Place at www.highmarkcaringplace.com. Both offer many useful written and video resources for teens and families.

Lastly, several expert authors on the topic of death and loss are Earl A. Grollman, Dr. Alan D. Wolfelt, and Fred Rodgers. All have written extensively on this topic.