

HAMPDEN-SYDNEY COLLEGE

FORMING GOOD MEN AND GOOD CITIZENS SINCE 1776



HOW TO: HELP A STUDENT WITH A BREAKUP OR LOSS?

Students sometimes have trouble coping with a breakup or loss of a loved one. This can affect their academic performance, relationships with peers, and mood. Not all students need counseling for this, but as an RA, it would be beneficial to provide support. Below are some ways you can help a student cope with this along with a brief explanation of the grief process.

- **Loss:** the EVENT that occurs (i.e., breakup, mother becomes ill)
- **Grief:** the PROCESS and feelings that occur because of the event (i.e., sadness, anger)
- **Types of loss:**
 - Death of loved one, breakup, divorce, job loss, money loss, rape/violent crime, moving, illness, changing schools, success...etc.
- **Natural responses to loss:**
 - Anger, guilt, sadness, frustration, confusion, anxiety, exhaustion, hurt, lost, overwhelmed, uncertainty about future, low self-esteem...etc.
- **Natural responses to breakup:**
 - Attribute relationship failure as personal failure, fear of being alone, fear of starting over, feeling rejected
- **How to help a student cope:**
 1. Set up a time and location to talk to the student. You do not have to explain why before the meeting.
 2. Using a simple model, create a conversation with “I care,” “I see,” LISTEN, and “I want.”
 3. I care – “As your RA, I care if you are struggling with something difficult.”
 4. I see – “I have noticed Sally is not coming around as often as she used to, did something happen?”
 5. LISTEN – Listen to the student, sometimes having someone to talk to is all they need.
 6. I want – If the student is really struggling, it may be beneficial to offer a referral to Counseling Services. For example, “I hear you are really hurt by this, and rightfully so, do you think it would be helpful to talk to someone about it?”

- **Things to remember:**

- Many times, students (especially males) think they are supposed to move on from a loss and not experience any feelings. WRONG. Educating the student that how he is feeling is normal, can be healing in itself.
- There is nothing you can say to make the situation better, read the Do's and Don'ts on the back of this handout before meeting with a student.
- Only time will help the student heal, along with using healthy coping skills, which are listed on the back of this handout.

- **Do's:**

- Offer your presence and a listening ear.
- Tell the student it is okay they feel ____, they should feel that way.
- Check-in with the student after talking, this shows you care.
- After listening, sometimes, briefly telling the student a time where you had a similar experience can be helpful.
- Provide the student with healthy coping ideas, if the student seems receptive or wanting the help.
- Explain that grief is the process we all go through after something like this and it takes time.
- We naturally either don't know what to say to people who are grieving or say things, wanting their pain to go away or to make it right. Understand there is nothing you can say to make it right.

- **Don'ts:**

- Avoid these statements – “Everything will be okay,” “Everything will work out,” “Everything happens for a reason,” “You did not need her anyway,” “At least he is not suffering anymore,” “God has a plan for all of us,” “He is in a better place.”
- Avoid authoritative statements or providing solutions, “Why don't you just do...?”
- Do not try to bring humor into the conversation, take it seriously.
- Ask too many questions or push for information not offered.

- **Healthy Coping Skills:**

- Accept feelings and give yourself time to heal.
- Share feelings and spend time with others that support you.
- Eat healthy foods, sleep well, and exercise
- Set a time each day for relaxing activities
- Create daily routine, structure helps
- Join new groups or find new things that interest you (if needed)
- Journal feelings, cry, express yourself

- **Unhealthy Coping Skills :**

- Isolating self from others
- Fighting feelings
- Making any major decisions right after breakup/loss
- Coping with alcohol, drugs, or excessive food intake
- Not attending class
- Thoughts of harming self or others

If a student begins to have thoughts of harming himself or others, this is NOT a normal or healthy coping skill. Contact the Dean of Students office and the Wellness Center, if this occurs.