

Grieving the End of the School Year:

On Friday, Governor J.B. Pritzker effectively ended the school year for over two million students in Illinois by announcing the suspension of all in person learning for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year due to COVID-19. Though e-learning will continue, the loss of being in school, interacting with friends and teachers, and missing out on annual school events and activities may be difficult for some students. This may be especially felt by seniors and eighth graders who won't have the opportunities to experience the spring sports season, class trips, Ditch Day, Prom and graduation. These events are not just important milestones in an adolescent's life, but are part of bringing closure to one chapter of their life as they transition into the next one.

Due to the sudden loss of what students expected this school year to be, many students may show signs of grieving, and as parents it is important that we help them navigate through this difficult time. It is important to remember that at this moment adolescents are being challenged to behaviorally and cognitively cope with a major life stressor though their rational thought processes have not fully developed. It is not uncommon for a teen to experience mood changes, trouble sleeping, feelings of restlessness, and express a sense of feeling empty inside. As parents, we are tasked with understanding our child's unique experience of this loss and their need for assistance in coping with the loss.

Stages of Grief

The psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross is best known for the Five Stages of Grief model of understanding the steps that individuals go through in process of death and dying. The stages are:

Denial: This may come across as a disbelief in what is happening or "why me" statements.

Anger: Anger can cover up other emotions such as fear and sadness. If your son or daughter is expressing anger, it's important to ask what else they may be feeling.

Bargaining: A teen may look back and ask rhetorical questions like what if the virus was contained sooner, or what if we did small classes and sat six feet apart. They are trying to figure out if there is/was a solution to a confusing situation.

Depression: A teen may express sadness over the losses of this school year and may withdraw.

Acceptance: This is an acceptance of the reality that this is something that they cannot control; it does not mean that they are happy about it.

Individuals do not necessarily experience these stages in a straight line and it does not mean that once the individual has moved to a different stage that they won't go back to a previous stage. This includes when they have reached a sense of acceptance of the realities of the school year being over. It is also possible that your child will not experience all five stages. Having an understanding of where your child may be in the grieving process may help you assist your child navigate this confusing time.

As a parent, you should acknowledge your child's unique opinions, thoughts, and feelings about the impact that COVID-19 is having on them. Help them focus on the things that they do have control of. It is important to listen and not discount what they have to say, even if you don't understand it. Being present to them during a time of isolation is vital. You need to give them space to be upset or angry and

utilize their coping strategies as long as those strategies are not self-destructive like isolation, or substance abuse.

It is also important to acknowledge the ways that COVID-19 is impacting you. This is also a time in which adults may be feeling a sense of loss of control and normalcy. It is okay to share your feelings of uncertainty and not having answers with your teenagers.

Sources:

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