The death of someone important to us can shake our life experience to our core, leaving us with emotional aftershocks that strike unexpectedly and/or linger long past what others may expect. Many students who have survived a loss feel isolated, while the world around them seems to go on as before. Being a student in the midst of dealing with grief can be particularly hard and lonely. Having supportive family members who are sensitive to the pain of loss can be especially comforting. If you have a family member at Western who is grieving, this handout might help you support him or her through this process.

**Be available to talk about the loss when your son, daughter or family member seems ready.** Ask how she is handling the loss—emotionally, physically, mentally and socially. Don’t underestimate the healing power of just listening attentively and being available.

**Expect emotions.** Expect that your family member will experience many different feelings that will fluctuate over time. Grieving students may appear to be doing well at first but then become sad weeks or months following the loss. Depending on your relationship with your family member, you may only get a phone call when the mood is chipper; OR you may only hear from her when she is emotionally overwhelmed.

**Share your feelings.** Your family member may be more likely to share their feelings when you share your own thoughts and feelings. Because grief can be so profound and all-encompassing, hearing another person’s story of coping with loss can help to normalize what may feel foreign.

**Be patient.** The grieving process may take a year or more. Keep in mind the saying, “Don’t push the river, help guide it.”

**Encourage your family member to continue with goals and plans when possible.** It is quite normal to want to protect and shelter your child when he or she is hurting, but it is important to get back to normal school routines. Gentle encouragement is better than nagging.

**Encourage recreation.** Physical exercise, campus events, and weekend trips may help provide hope that life can again become pleasurable.

**Encourage connection with friends and other family members.** When we are distressed, knowing that we are cared about and connected to others gives us strength to get through life’s slings and arrows. If you know of any friends or other family members who have been a source of support, don’t be shy about giving your family member a nudge to make a call.

**Stay in touch.** Even when things turn around and your family member is feeling better, he may still need your support, attention and love. Finding the balance between giving him the space he needs and extending your loving support is more of an art than a science.

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**Free and Confidential Counseling**

www.wwu.edu/counseling

(360) 650-3164
When Might Counseling Be Needed?

Sometimes students who are grieving experience symptoms similar to those of depression, such as sadness, crying spells, poor appetite, difficulty sleeping, social isolation, or numbing through drug or alcohol use. They may have a spiritual crisis or struggle with a pessimistic view of the future. Current loss also often triggers the pain from a past loss. Warning signs that may indicate a need for professional support include:

- Thoughts or statements of death or suicide.
- Prolonged sadness or depressed mood.
- Change in sleep or eating patterns (too much or too little).
- Feelings of guilt, hopelessness or worthlessness.
- Drug or alcohol abuse.
- A change in appearance (e.g., poor hygiene).
- A drop in GPA or academic performance from the previous quarter.
- Increased irritability or agitation.
- Consistently inappropriate, illogical or unrelated questions or comments.
- Distracted or preoccupied thought processes.
- Withdrawal from social interactions.
- Fearful responses, such as avoidance or fear about being alone.

Counseling can help ease the pain and emotional isolation that often follows the death of a loved one. The Counseling Center at Western provides grief support, both individually and in group counseling.

If Your Family Member is Reluctant to Seek Counseling

Some people feel uneasy about seeking counseling for any number of reasons. If you are concerned about your family member and your suggestions to seek counseling are rejected, the following talking points may help to pave a path to the Counseling Center.

- Acknowledge, validate and discuss the student’s fears and concerns about seeking help. Some students may feel that counseling is an admission of weakness or failure; we tell students that it takes considerable courage and integrity to acknowledge one’s troubles and to seek support.
- Suggest that the student visit the Counseling Center website as a way to become familiar with our services.
- No problem is too big or too small for counseling.
- Any information shared during counseling is confidential and free to Western students.
- If you have had a positive experience in counseling, share it with your family member.

Feel free to call us if you need further support on how to help your family member. If you are worried about any imminent risk of self-harm, share your concerns immediately. If it is after normal work hours, call the WWU police at (360) 650-3555 and request them to “Page the Counselor On Call.”