

Opinion

LETTERS

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COPING WITH TRAGEDY

The following excerpt is from Dr. Robert Evans' book "Family Matters."

The sudden, tragic death of a student can have strong effects throughout a school community. Everyone feels shock and disbelief, as well as concern for the student's family and friends. Faculty and parents alike want to be helpful to students but often have trouble themselves understanding how such a thing could happen. They may find themselves reminded of major losses in their own lives or suddenly concerned about what might happen to other students. They can worry about saying too much or too little, about not having enough information, about saying the wrong thing. Though there is no perfect solution, there are five guidelines that can often make a positive difference in talking with students.

1. It is helpful not to over-assume what the tragedy means to them. They react differently depending on their closeness to the situation, their own personalities, and so on. Some may be deeply moved, others less so. Some may have many questions, others fewer. Not all will be intensely affected. Showing little reaction does not automatically mean a student is hiding or denying his or her feelings. At the same time, some students who have little immediate reaction may become upset later on, even in a way that doesn't make sense to them. There is no predictable timetable.

2. Adolescents are remarkably resilient. They may become quite upset, but given a chance to

express what they feel, they usually resume their normal lives — and often do so more rapidly than older adults. Most students do not benefit from extensive, probing questioning about their reactions. They do profit from simple, direct information and from faculty and staff being available to respond to their questions and to listen when they themselves want to talk.

3. If you receive difficult questions it can be useful to understand these before answering them. Often a question is spurred by a feeling. Rather than plunging into an immediate answer, it can be helpful to learn what motivates the question by asking, "What made you think of that?" or "Can you tell me what you were thinking about?" Once you know the source of the question, it is easier to answer effectively.

4. There may be questions you cannot answer, which can make anyone feel inadequate. But all of us are typically more comforted by straight talk than by false assurances. Rather than to invent a response, it can be much more helpful to say, "I don't know," and to ask, "What have you heard?" or, "Did you have an idea about that?"

5. Above all, coping with a tragic death is not primarily a matter of technique, not something best handled by a particular set of tactics that deviate sharply from one's familiar patterns of communication. The regular routines of school and of family life, for example, are, all by themselves, a source of comforting continuity and assurance. Faculty and parents will rarely go wrong by relying on what is most basic between them and students — caring and connection. At these times, your presence — your simply being with students, their knowing that you are available — can be very reassuring.

sad incident of last week. That is so wrong. It would be the school's responsibility if the students were doing inferior schoolwork and not learning up to "standards." It would be the school's responsibility if one or more of the teachers were using questionable teaching standards. Many have said there is a lack of activities for the young people on this island. I disagree.

There are numerous opportunities for the youth on this island to grow, learn and enjoy themselves in the process. There are many dedicated adults already looking after our young people in these various activities. I, myself, do not have any children. However, I have attended many of these activities to watch these young people enjoying themselves, having fun and learning. Sadly, in many instances I would be the only non-parent there. Yes, parents were there in most instances because they would have to drive their child to the event, yet in many cases they would drop them off and return for pick up. Do not get me wrong; there are some extremely dedicated parents who I would see at every event, faithfully and also paying attention to what the activity was and how their child was performing.

We are all extremely busy in today's life. Some of us balance more than one job to make ends meet on this island. Some have more than one child and cannot always be in more than one place at a time. Then there are the few whom I swear are cloned because again I see them at all of the activities!

So what is my point? Have you ever had the feeling as an adult that you are being pulled in 19 different directions and an unbearable sensation begins to overwhelm you? I am sure you have. We all have. Now, consider a young person 13, 14, 15, 16, etc. ... years old. Is maybe the "activities" thing too much of a burden for some to keep up with, and these activities become more of a burden than a joy?

Imagine a 16-year-old with school, sports of many varieties such as football, hockey, baseball, soccer, field hockey, lacrosse, basketball and swimming.

I am sure I have probably forgotten some — both school-related and privately organized — anticipating a driver's license and learning to drive, friends,

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— Courtesy Dave Provost,
Head of Nantucket New School

OUR RESPONSIBILITY TO LISTEN

To the editor:

I may have misunderstood a comment that it was the school's responsibility in the

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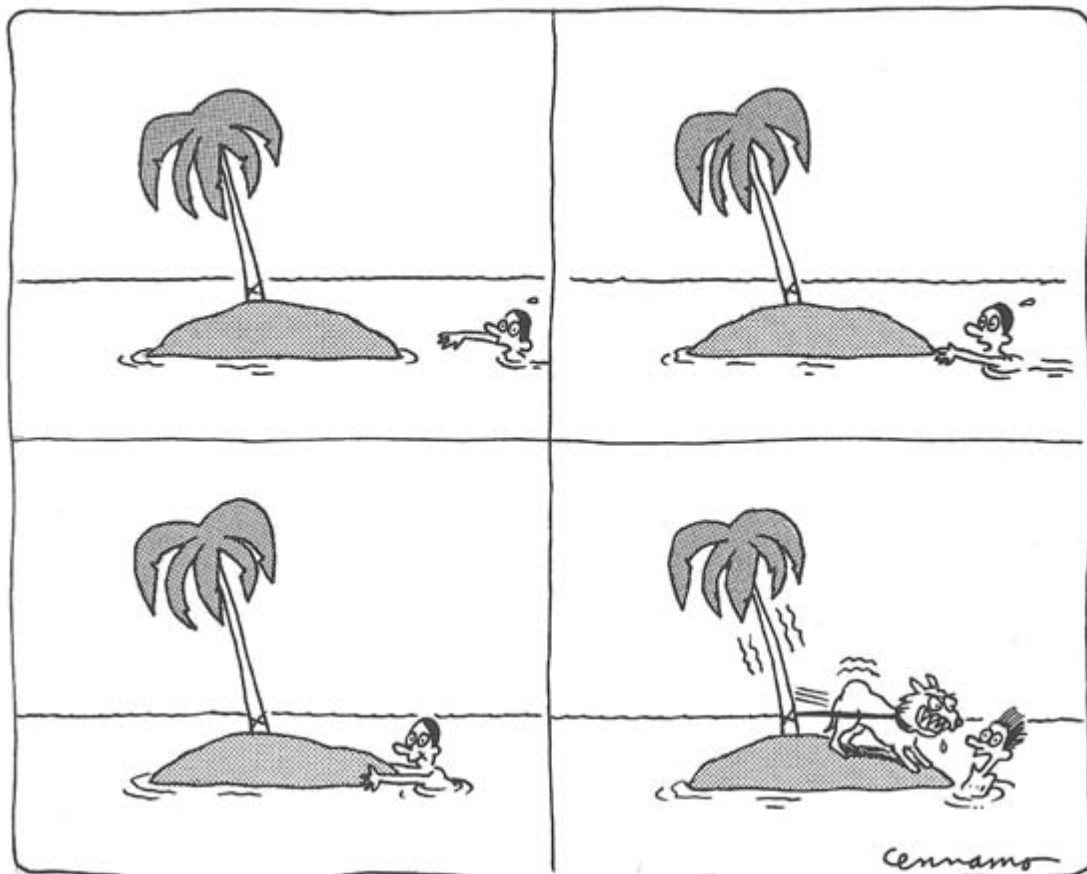
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