

Coach Resource for Crisis Communication

PURPOSE

In light of the unexpected passing of a member of the Wayzata hockey community, the Wayzata Youth Hockey Association has engaged a specialist in crisis incident support to provide resources that can help our community during this difficult time.

As part of this support, we are sharing information and guidance prepared by a mental health professional. This resource offers suggested language and best practices around the topic of death, intended to help coaches feel supported and prepared should questions or conversations arise. There is no expectation for coaches to initiate these discussions — the materials are simply available to assist if needed.

SUPPORTING CONVERSATIONS AFTER A LOSS

The death of a friend, acquaintance, or colleague is shocking and confusing to most people. How adults talk about death can set a tone that helps kids and parents process their reactions.

You don't need to be an expert on unexpected loss to provide comfort and direction. In fact, the simpler your guidance, the more helpful it can be.

When a community experiences an unexpected death, it's natural for players and families to have questions and strong emotions. Coaches often serve as trusted adults, and your calm presence can help create a sense of stability. The following "Dos and Don'ts" are intended to guide supportive, age-appropriate conversations, and to help you feel more prepared if the topic arises. Remember, there is no expectation for you to lead these discussions — these guidelines are simply here as a resource.

DO	DON'T
Speak about death in a neutral, matter-of-fact way. Consider how you might talk about a death from cancer, a heart attack, or a car accident — use the same calm tone and language. Use accurate, nonjudgmental language. Phrases such as <i>"unexpected death, sudden passing, or tragic loss of life"</i> are factual and neutral.	Don't avoid talking about the loss because it feels uncomfortable. Kids and teens will likely be discussing it. Open, calm conversation helps relieve anxiety, normalizes reactions, and creates space for them to share worries about themselves or others. Avoid stigmatizing language. Do not speak to the factors that may have contributed to the loss of life, or judgements about the deceased's decision making.

Acknowledge emotions as normal. It's natural for people to feel sad, upset, scared, angry, or guilty — especially if they had a personal connection with the person who died. Emphasize that it is no one's fault. No one made this happen. Death is often the result of many complex factors. Process your own feelings with adults, not youth. Any anger, confusion, or guilt you may feel as an adult should be discussed privately with other adults or mental health professionals, not with children or teens. Focus on care and action. Encourage supportive actions within the team and community — emphasize that “we take care of each other” and “have each other’s backs.” Model empathy toward the family. Offer simple, caring statements such as “I’m so sorry for your loss” or “I feel sad for your family.” Reach out and include the family. Small gestures matter — inviting them to team events, sending notes, or simply checking in can mean a great deal. Share positive memories. If you have kind or meaningful stories about the person who died, consider writing them down on a card for the family.	Don’t focus on details or the manner of death. Avoid discussing how the person died or details associated with the person’s passing— this can unintentionally sensationalize death. If kids ask for details, gently redirect: “<i>The life they lived is more important than how they died.</i>” If a child continues to ask, let their parents or guardians know. Don’t tell kids what to feel or think. Avoid correcting kids unless there is a clear reason to do so. Open, nonjudgmental conversations encourage kids and teens to express their true feelings. Don’t share your own past experiences with unexpected death. Doing so may overwhelm or confuse young people and can unintentionally make death seem more common. Don’t avoid the family. And encourage kids not to avoid them either. Avoidance — even if well-intentioned — can cause additional hurt. Simple gestures of care and presence can mean a lot.
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For more information:

<https://namimn.org/support/information-and-resources/crisis-resources/>

If a child expresses thoughts associated with self harm or harm of others, don’t minimize it. It is not your job to determine if the child is at risk for further action. It is your job to alert their parents and ensure their safety. Resources for support may be a respected teacher, a school counselor, a mental health professional or crisis assessment program.

This document was created in collaboration with CISC to provide guidance on how to approach difficult conversations that may arise in a team environment. You can learn more about CISC at www.cistreeconsultants.com.