



Montreal

Royal West students tackle grief, end-of-life in workshop on death



Teens invited a grief counselor to answer questions about dying, helping friends

[Laura Marchand](#) · CBC News · Posted: Nov 30, 2019 12:40 PM ET | Last Updated: November 30



Grief counselor Dawn Cruchet, right, speaks to a group of Royal West Academy students about dying and grief during a workshop on Friday. (Submitted by Daniel Smajovits)

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How do teenagers talk about death and dying? They don't, really — which is exactly why Royal West Academy students decided that they should.

"In our society now, it's becoming more and more acceptable to talk about depression, anxiety, ADHD, OCD, all those other things," said Kiva Richer, a grade 11 student on the high school's Mental Health Awareness Committee.

"But grieving? Still, grieving and death is one of those things that are just not discussed."

After sending out a survey to the student body, Richer said it was clear that students wanted to talk about it — many of them said they just didn't know how.

"When it comes down to it most people are a lot more curious than you think," she said. "They wanted to know more about grief, how to deal with it, how to help friends with it."

Students and the school invited grief counselor Dawn Cruchet to come and hold a workshop on death, loss and grieving Friday, so the teenagers could ask her those questions directly.

An 'emotional' discussion

Cruchet, who coordinates bereavement support groups, including for children and adolescents, said it is important to have these conversations in schools.

"Every classroom has grieving kids. Every school has grieving children," she said. "And so, if nobody's talking about it, how do you support those kids?"

"We don't talk about death, and I think it puts everybody behind the eight ball."

But Cruchet said it was "amazing" that the students were so open, not only with their questions, but with their experiences.





Dawn Cruchet (left) and grade 11 student Kiva Richer (right) both felt like the workshop opened up the conversation around death. (Submitted by Daniel Smajovits)

"There were grievors there, so it was kind of cool because I could say: OK, your dad is ill. Do you want people to ask how your dad is doing?" Cruchet said.

"She was able to say yes. So that was very nice, because they're really the experts of their own grief."

Most of the kids had questions about how to help a friend, but also what to do if someone in their family is dying, and how to talk about a death in the family with each other.

Richer said that her family dog died during the summer, and during the workshop, she realized she had never broached the subject with her little sister.

"We kind of just shut it out, we didn't really talk about it," she said, choking up. "I think that tonight I'll say: 'hey, I want to know how you feel about our dog passing away.'"

"I miss my dog, and I think it's important to be able to talk about that."

Kids should learn about dying: counselor

While Cruchet said it was great to have the workshop at Royal West, she said that the conversation should start even younger.

She's held similar talks with kids as young as daycare, and she said that their inquisitive nature makes it easier to talk to kids about death.

"Kids under ten are curious about life. They're curious about death. They have questions, they've got their nose in a coffin at an open casket [funeral], they're right in there looking," she said.

- **McGill's death café 'a safe space' to talk about life and death**

"They have a natural curiosity. And kids don't have an innate fear of a dead body. So I think the earlier the better," Cruchet said.

It's the adults who feel awkward talking about death, Cruchet said, and that often gets projected onto kids as they get older.

She said she's heard that other schools were not willing to hold similar workshops on death and grieving, something Cruchet thinks is a missed opportunity.

"[What] I've learned just from these kids is they want to talk," Cruchet said.

"It's the adults that need to provide that place for them."

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