

Teens and Grieving

Like all of us, teens sometimes experience the deaths of loved ones. Sadly, suicide, risky behaviors and teen violence leave adolescents especially vulnerable to losing friends and acquaintances to death. Parents and caregivers often wonder how to help teens grieve and heal from this kind of loss.

Thinking About and Understanding Death

Unlike younger children, teens usually grasp the finality of death. Adolescence is a time when teens are figuring out what they think about life, spirituality, and their purpose in the world. Thinking about death, sometimes to the point of “dwelling” on it, is a common way that teens work out their views about these big questions. Themes of death in music, artwork, poetry, books, and clothes may be a sign that your teen is wrestling with these issues or is trying to fit into a social group. However, exaggerated interest in death can also be an indication of depression. Talk with your teen if he or she seems overly drawn to these things, but find out more before you react.

Grieving

Grief is a natural process that happens on its own timeline. People who are grieving often experience shock or numbness, intense sadness, anger and/or fatigue. These feelings can happen at different times for different people, and not everyone experiences all of them. Above all, grief is a highly personal reaction to a universal experience. People in the most intense stages of grieving after a death need love, patience and support. They also need permission to feel whatever they feel. Teens should be encouraged, but not pushed, to participate in all the adult rituals surrounding a death, including attending viewings and visiting hours, funerals or memorials, sitting Shivah or other religious or family traditions. The first days and weeks after a death can be exhausting for everyone involved, so teens and caregivers should be particularly careful to allow for time to stop and rest. Caregivers may need a break from the job of caring for their teen! It's OK to ask for help and extra support.

When someone dies, a teen may react in lots of different ways. Like other life events, death may provoke very strong feeling in teens: confusion, anger or intense sadness. These feelings can swing very quickly and leave teens and adults feeling tired and confused. Teens who do not want to display their feelings may choose to isolate themselves from adults, finding comfort from peers. Other teens may become clinging and more childlike for a while. Some teens try to just keep everything “normal” and go

about their lives as if nothing has happened. Any of these responses are understandable and OK.

Teens also wrestle with the question “Who am I?” after someone has died. Figuring out his or her role in a family, with friends, and in the world is always a big part of adolescence. A teen’s identity, especially in relation to the person who has died, gets called into question after a death. “Am I still my Dad’s daughter if he’s not around anymore?” “Will I be disloyal to my dead friend if I make new friends?” are the kind of things teens work to understand about their changed world after a death.

Behaviors and Signs of Grief

Grieving teens may not talk about their feelings, but they might do lots of crying, withdraw, or throw themselves into lots of activity. Teens may act out with defiance, irritability, poor grades or fights, risk-taking or experimentation with drugs and alcohol.

It’s important to talk about these behaviors, and remind your teen that, while he or she always has your love and support, the same rules about negative behavior still apply. You can be understanding and still set appropriate limits. Teens may complain, but they often secretly crave the reassurance that some things haven’t changed and someone (you) is still in charge. As we mentioned above, if troubling feelings or behavior persist a long time or seem to take over your teen’s life, talk it over and consider checking in with a professional.

Re-Grieving

When someone a child loves dies, that child copes with the event in age-specific ways. He or she may have a very limited understanding of what has happened. As the child matures, that event will be re-processed with new, more mature understanding. That’s why a teen will sometimes re-grieve a loss that happened much earlier. If a teen becomes sad or angry about a death that occurred years ago, he or she needs the same love and support that they might need for a death that occurred yesterday.

Grief and Trauma

Sometimes a loss can be made more complicated, if the teen has also experienced trauma related to the death. Seeing someone die unexpectedly, losing someone to violence or suicide, or feeling somehow responsible for the death can lead to post-trauma stress reactions. These reactions can cause a lot of distress for your teen, and slow the grieving and healing process. Some symptoms of traumatic stress include nightmares, flashbacks,

irritability and severe mood swings, long periods of feeling "numbed out" or detached from reality, intense feelings of guilt, fear or anxiety. If you feel your teen may be dealing with the aftereffects of trauma, contact a mental health professional right away for an assessment and treatment.

Ways to Support Your Grieving Teen

Like adults, teens need to be reassured that there is no "right" way to grieve and that any feelings are OK, including feeling angry at the person who died, or not always feeling sad. Adults need to share the fact that they, too, are working hard to figure out how to deal with the death and sometimes feel overwhelmed or confused. Teens should not be pressured to talk, but should be reminded that they can talk whenever they need to.

Above all, they need to be reassured that they are loved, and that someone will always be there to support and help care for them.

Grief can make people feel very alone. Make sure your teen knows that love and support is available.

Helping Teenagers Cope with Grief

Each year thousands of teenagers experience the death of someone they love. When a parent, sibling, friend or relative dies, teens feel the overwhelming loss of someone who helped shape their fragile self-identities. And these feelings about the death become a part of their lives forever.

Caring adults, whether parents, teachers, counselors or friends, can help teens during this time. If adults are open, honest and loving, experiencing the loss of someone loved can be a chance for young people to learn about both the joy and pain that comes from caring deeply for others.

Many Teens Are Told To "Be Strong"

Sad to say, many adults who lack understanding of their experience discourage teens from sharing their grief. Bereaved teens give out all kinds of signs that they are struggling with complex feelings, yet are often pressured to act as they are doing better than they really are.

When a parent dies, many teens are told to "be strong" and "carry on" for the surviving parent. They may not know if they will survive themselves let alone be able to support someone else. Obviously, these kinds of conflicts hinder the "work of mourning".

Teen Years Can Be Naturally Difficult

Teens are no longer children, yet neither are they adults. With the exception of infancy, no developmental period is so filled with change as adolescence. Leaving the security of childhood, the adolescent begins the process of separation from parents.

The death of a parent or sibling, then, can be a particularly devastating experience during this already difficult period.

At the same time the bereaved teen is confronted by the death of someone loved, he or she also faces psychological, physiological and academic pressures. While teens may begin to look like "men" or "women", they will still need consistent and compassionate support as they do the work of mourning, because physical development does not always equal emotional maturity.

Teens Often Experience Sudden Deaths

The grief that teens experience often comes suddenly and unexpectedly. A parent may die of a sudden heart attack, a brother or sister may be killed in an auto accident, or a friend may commit suicide. The very nature of these deaths often results in a prolonged and heightened sense of unreality.

Support May Be Lacking

Many people assume that adolescents have supportive friends and family who will be continually available to them. In reality, this may not be true at all. The lack of available support often relates to the social expectations placed on the teen.

They are usually expected to be "grown up" and support other members of the family, particularly a surviving parent and/or younger brothers and sisters.

Many teens have been told, "now, you will have to take care of your family." When an adolescent feels a responsibility to "care for the family", he or she does not have the opportunity—or the permission to mourn.

Sometimes we assume that teenagers will find comfort from their peers. But when it comes to death, this may not be true. It seems that unless friends have experienced grief themselves, they project their own feelings of helplessness by ignoring the subject of loss entirely.

Relationship Conflicts May Exist

As teens strive for their independence, relationship conflicts with family members often occur. A normal, though trying way in which teens separate from their parents is by going through a period of devaluation.

If a parent dies while the adolescent is emotionally and physically pushing the parent away, there is often a sense of guilt and "unfinished business". While the need to create distance is normal we can easily see how this complicates the experience of mourning.

Signs a Teen May Need Extra Help

As we have discussed, there are many reasons why healthy grieving can be especially difficult for teenagers. Some grieving teens may even behave in ways that seem inappropriate or frightening. Be on the watch for:

- symptoms of chronic depression, sleeping difficulties, restlessness and low self esteem
- academic failure or indifference to school-related activities
- deterioration of relationships with family and friends

- risk-taking behaviors such as drug and alcohol abuse, fighting, and sexual experimentation
- denying pain while at the same time acting overly strong or mature.

To help a teen who is having a particularly hard time with his or her loss, explore the full spectrum of helping services in your community. School counselors, church groups and private therapists are appropriate resources for some young people, while others may just need a little more time and attention from caring adults like you. The important thing is that you help the grieving teen find safe and nurturing emotional outlets at this difficult time.

Caring Adult's Role

How adults respond when someone loved dies has a major effect on the way teens react to the death. Sometimes adults don't want to talk about the death, assuming that by doing so, young people will be spared some of the pain and sadness. However, the reality is very simple: teens grieve anyway.

Teens often need caring adults to confirm that it's all right to be sad and to feel a multitude of emotions when someone they love dies. They also usually need help understanding that the hurt they feel now won't last forever. When ignored, teens may suffer more from feeling isolated than from the actual death itself. Worse yet, they feel all alone in their grief.

Be Aware of Support Groups

Peer support groups are one of the best ways to help bereaved teens heal. They are allowed and encouraged to tell their stories as much, and as often, as they like. In this setting most will be willing to acknowledge that death has resulted in their life being forever changed. You may be able to help teens find such a group. This practical effort on your part will be appreciated.

Understanding the Importance of the Loss

Remember that the death of someone loved is a shattering experience for an adolescent. As a result of this death, the teen's life is under reconstruction. Consider the significance of the loss and be gentle and compassionate in all of your helping efforts.

Grief is complex. It will vary from teen to teen. Caring adults need to communicate to children that this feeling is not one to be ashamed of or hide. Instead, grief is a natural expression of love for the person who died. For caring adults, the challenge is clear: teenagers do not choose between grieving and not grieving; adults, on the other hand, do have a choice—to help or not to help teens cope with grief.