



Helping Grieving Teens

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 can help teens when someone dies 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 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 though 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. 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.

Teen Years Can Be Naturally Difficult

Teens are no longer children, yet neither are they adults. 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.

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.

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 independence, relationship conflicts with family members often occur. If a parent dies while the adolescent is emotionally and physically pushing the

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parent away, there is often a sense of guilt and “unfinished business”. While the need to create distance is normal this may complicate the experience of mourning.

Signs a Teen May Need Extra Help

Some grieving teens may 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 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 and all alone in their grief.

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 that grief is nothing 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.

With love and understanding, adults can support teens through this vulnerable time and help make the experience a valuable part of a teen's personal growth and development.

Adapted from an article by Alan Wolfelt, PhD, available from hospicenw.org