

Teenage Grief

Adolescence is perhaps one of the most difficult and confusing stages of life. It is a time of major transition and subtle loss, as the teenager says good-bye to childhood and the security that it represents. Emotions often ride a roller coaster of intensity and the ego is hard at work in establishing a new identity. Consequently, the teenager is extremely vulnerable to stress. Add to this the loss of a loved one and frequently you will find a teen who is frightened and confused—and often isolated, as there are few places a teenager can go for help.

Many people, because of the pain involved and lack of understanding, do not know what to do or say to a teenager who is grieving and, thus, say and do very little. It is often assumed that they will be resilient enough to come out of the experience relatively unscathed. It is dangerous thinking. If there is no support and closure for an adolescent, unresolved grief may resurface as new losses are experienced throughout their lifetime. Unhealthy behavior patterns and physical symptoms of distress may develop and be further reinforced during subsequent losses.

The needs of teens are unique. Listed below are some of the more typical ones:

- Adults often assume a teenager doesn't need or desire outward signs of affection (hugs, kisses, etc.). In most cases, the need is there, especially during the time of loss. It may be difficult for the child to ask for that kind of physical support; ask *them*.
- Teens need to share in the family's grief process. Parents and others who try to protect a teen by avoiding the subject may create an atmosphere of isolation and confusion. A child may assume others didn't really love the deceased. They may also assume, because others don't appear to be grieving, that their grief is out of proportion and unhealthy. This can be very frightening.
- It is important that teens be invited to take part in the planning of the funeral and/or memorial service, if one is planned. It is a statement to a child that their loss is recognized, while affording the opportunity to actively begin the grieving process.
- Much of an adolescent's time is spent in school, and the classroom can be an extremely lonely place. Unrealistic pressures can be put on a grieving student if teachers are unaware of the loss. Always contact the school as soon after the death as possible. There may be times when a child simply cannot cope with the classroom environment. With knowledge of the loss, a teacher can tactfully excuse the child and hopefully provide some needed privacy and personalized support.

- Identity among friends and love interests is a very important part of this stage in life. With other members of the family wrapped in the pain of their own loss, a teenager may feel a desperate need to belong. Many teens say it really doesn't matter if a friendship or relationship is even a good one; they just need to make the statement to the world and to themselves that someone else cares for them in a meaningful way. If there has been a break-up or falling out prior to the death, the sense of loss can be even more profound.
- When any of us is in pain, relief sought and, sometimes, found in "quick fixes." A teen's world is inundated with extra pressures to indulge in drugs and alcohol. This temporary escape may be more attractive than ever at this time. Openly address this appeal with teens and talk about other methods of coping.

Frequently Asked Questions by Teens:

- Did I do or say something that helped promote the death?
- What if someone else in the family dies too?
- Will I die of the same illness? When?
- How can I help the pain of others in my family when my pain is so great?
- Who will take care of me?
- How can I go to school and hold myself together?
- My friends keep telling me to snap out of it and my parents cry a lot. Who can I talk to?
- I caught myself laughing today, and now I feel guilty. Does this mean I'm bad and have no feelings?
- I loved _____. Why am I angry with him/her?
- If everybody's going to die anyway, what's the use of living?

Remember: even though a teenager strives for independence, they still need you. We don't like to experience frightening feelings alone. Your presence and the expression of your own honest grief can be an invaluable gift to the grieving adolescent. Be real! This child doesn't need a performance—they need an act of love.

Helping Teens Cope

Teens mourn, too.

Each year thousands of adolescents experience the death of someone they love. When a parent, siblings, friend, or relative dies, teens feel the overwhelming loss of a major support system—and these feelings about the death become a part of their lives forever.

Caring adults can help teens during this time. If adults are open, honest, and loving, experiencing the loss of someone loved can be a chance for children to learn about both the joy and pain that comes from caring deeply for other people.

The trouble with saying “be strong.”

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

Many teens are told to “be strong,” “carry on,” and “step up” for a surviving parent. They may not know if they will survive themselves, let alone be able to support someone else. These kinds of messages hinder the work it takes to process grief.

Teenage years are already difficult.

Teens are no longer children, yet not fully adults. Except for infancy, no developmental period is so filled with change as adolescence. Leaving the security of childhood, the teenager begins the process of separation from parents. The loss of a parent, siblings, or other close relationship can be a devastating experience during this already difficult time period.

At the same time the bereaved teen is confronted by the death of someone, often they are faced with psychological, physiological, and academic pressures. While a teen may appear to be a young adult, their emotional growth may not be as developed. This means consistent and compassionate support remains significant during the grief process.

Much of the grief that teens experience comes suddenly and unexpectedly.

A parent may die of a sudden heart attack, a sibling may be killed in an auto accident, or a friend may end their life by suicide. The very nature of these deaths often results in a prolonged and heightened sense of unreality.

It is often part of a teen’s early grief experience to feel dazed or numb. This numbness serves a valuable purpose: it gives their emotions time to catch up with what their mind has been told. This feeling helps create insulation from the reality of the death until they are more equipped to tolerate what they don’t want to believe.

Support is often 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 siblings. Many teens have been told, "Now, you will have to be the man of the house/take care of your family." An adolescent's feelings of a burden of responsibility will not provide permission for mourning.

Sometimes we assume that teenagers will find comfort from their peers, but when it comes to death, this may not be true. Many bereaved teens are greeted with indifference by their peers. It seems that unless friends have experienced grief themselves, they are often unavailable to support the teen for lack of understanding.

As we strive to assist bereaved teens we should keep in mind that many of them are in environments that do not provide emotional support. They may turn to friends and family only to be told to "get on with life" or "get over it."

Relationship conflict can exist.

As teens strive for their independence, relationship conflicts often occur. A normal, though trying way in which teens separate from 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 regret. While the need to create distance is normal, we can see how this may complicate the experience of grief.

We know that most adolescents experience difficult times with their parents and siblings. Most of this conflict comes about from the normal process of forming an identity while developing values of their own. Death, combined with the turbulence of teen-parent and sibling relationship, can make for a real need to process what their relationship was like with the person that died.

Caring adults can have a major impact.

How adults respond when someone loved dies has an effect on the way teens react to the death. Sometimes, adults don't want to talk about the death, assuming that by doing so, children 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 natural to be sad and to feel a multitude of emotions when someone they love dies. They also 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 may feel alone in their grief and may also feel responsible.

Encourage participation in a support group.

Peer support groups are one of the best ways to help bereaved teens heal. In a group, teens can connect with other teens who share the commonality of the experience. 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. (Please contact us to locate such a group.)

Don't lose sight of 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, be gentle and supportive in all your 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 something to hide. Instead, grief is a natural expression of love for the person who died.

With love and understanding, adults can support teens through this vulnerable part of a teen's personal growth and development.

Signs that teens may need extra help:

- Symptoms of chronic depression, sleeping difficulties, restlessness, and low self-esteem
- Academic changes or indifference to school-related activities
- Deterioration of relationships with family and friends
- Risk-taking behaviors such as drug and alcohol use/abuse, physical altercations, and sexual experimentation
- Denying pain, while simultaneously acting overly strong or mature

School counselors, church groups, and private therapists are appropriate resources for some young people, while others may just need a little additional time and attention from caring adults. The important thing is that you help the grieving teen find safe and nurturing emotional outlets to process grief.

It is important to recognize that helping a grieving teen may not be an easy task. You may have to give more concern, time, and support than you ever knew you had. This effort will be more than worth it.

*If you have questions or concerns about the grieving process,
please give us a call at (716) 836-6460 or email griefsupport@palliativecare.org
for more information, resource and support.*