Helping Teenagers Cope With Grief

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Teenagers Mourn Too

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 a 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 if 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.

Feeling dazed or numb when someone loved dies is often part of the grieving teen's early experience. This numbness serves a valuable purpose: it gives their emotions time to catch up with what their mind has been told. This feeling helps insulate them from the reality of the death until they are more able to tolerate what they don't want to believe.

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. Many bereaved teens are greeted with indifference by their peers. It seems that unless friends have experienced grief themselves, they project their own feelings of helplessness by ignoring the subject of loss entirely.

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."

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.

We know that most adolescents experience difficult times with their parents and siblings. The conflicts result from the normal process of forming an identity apart from their family. Death, combined with the turbulence of teen-parent and sibling relationships, can make for a real need to "talk-out" what their relationship was like with the person who died.

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 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.

A 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. In a group, teens can connect with other teens who have experienced a loss. 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.

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.

While the guidelines in this article may help, it is important to recognize that helping a grieving teen will not be an easy task. You may have to give more concern, time and love than you ever knew you had. But this effort will be more than worth it.

By "walking with" a teen in grief, you are giving one of life's most precious gifts -- yourself.

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