

Helping Teens Grieve



Teens don't grieve like children. They are beyond that maturity level. But neither do they grieve like adults. They just aren't there yet. Other than during the first few years of life, there is no other time that is filled with so many massive changes - physically, emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually. What a teen experiences at the death of a loved one will be the sharpest emotion he or she will ever experience.

Often, when a teen encounters death, it is sudden. A parent's heart attack, a sibling's automobile accident, or a friend's suicide. But even if the death is not sudden, the finality of life hits hard.

Feeling dazed or numb when someone loved dies is not uncommon. It is a psychological defense mechanism designed to give the emotions time to catch up with what is going on. It insulates us from the reality of death until we are able to take in and begin to grasp what we don't want to believe. Teenagers experience the same things but without the life experience to understand or know whether such numbness or lack of feeling (or extraordinarily strong feeling) is normal and acceptable.

Unfortunately, many people expect that teens have a support system to help them get through the grieving process, but parents and siblings are often grieving on their own and are not as available as they might wish to give comfort. When it comes to peers, teens often find an indifference. Those friends have not, themselves, experienced death, so have no idea how they can be of help - or perhaps, that they even should be.

Complicating all of this is the fact that teens are often in conflict with their parents at any given moment. If a parent dies while conflict is still fresh, feelings of guilt may be paramount and need to, somehow be dealt with. Sometimes that is through "talking" to the deceased or praying for forgiveness or making life change promises.

Here are a few things to watch for in determining whether a teen needs help in dealing with grief:

- Sleeplessness, low self-esteem
- Academic failure or no interest in school-related activities
- Deteriorating relationships with friends and family
- Risk taking - abusing drugs or alcohol or becoming active sexually
- Denying pain while acting overly strong or mature

How to help:

- Talk is always the place to start. Talk with your teen about death and dying. Parents sometimes believe that talking about death causes pain. Quite the opposite is true. Discussing death issues is critical to healing.
- Let teens know that it is alright to be sad or to feel whatever emotions they are feeling at the time of loss and afterward.
- Find a peer support group. Here teens can express their unique emotions with others who may be feeling the same way. They can share the knowledge that their lives have been changed forever and, perhaps, how to deal with those changes.
- Death is a highly spiritual thing. It may help to have a pastor, priest or rabbi talk to the teen about death and help answer some of the questions both teens and adults have. Seeking help from God is often very helpful - especially if the teen's family relates to a church or synagogue.

The death of a loved one is shattering to a teenager. The new life ahead is often frightening because of its uncertainty. They will certainly be asking themselves, "Will I die next?" "What is death like?" "Will my other parent (sibling, grandparent, etc.) die and leave me, too?" Allowing (helping) them to express some of these fears can help immensely. But grief is complex and differs from person to person. Adults must reassure the teen that whatever they are feeling is okay and that it is okay to heal and allow the pain to lessen.

The challenge is to help those young people who are going through so many changes in all avenues of their lives, to navigate this one, too - knowing they can share with someone who understands and sympathizes.

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