Bereavement Resources

Helping Teenagers Cope with Grief

**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.

**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.

For more information, please contact St Louis Children's Hospital Bereavement Coordinator, Chaplain Michael Fogas, BCC/314 454 2005 michael.fogas@bjc.org

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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.

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

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.

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.

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