

SUPPORTING TEENS IN GRIEF

How adults respond to a death has a major impact on how teens react. We must never assume it is too painful to talk about the death. Teens grieve anyway, so there is no point in trying to spare them. If we do not allow the expression of grief, teens may feel there is something wrong with them. This can be very frightening

Some adults may be tempted to encourage/pressure teens into acting like they are doing better than they are, which may be their own coping strategy. This does not give teens permission to grieve and they may feel forced into being a child again **or** taking on an adult role. If asked to take on extra responsibility within the family they may rebel, since is a normal teen reaction. We may need to allow for defensive behavior that teens use to cover up grief and to communicate to them that grief is a natural expression of love for the person who died. It is nothing to be ashamed of.

Loss is a shattering experience for teens. It comes in addition to the many changes and losses that they are already experiencing as they mature, so we need to acknowledge and support them with their secondary losses as well. As a result of their loss, a teen's life is under reconstruction. At this time they may ponder existential issues like the meaning of life.

Ways we can support:

- Acknowledge, normalize and accept what is happening.
- Keep communication open.
- Always be honest.
- Let them know that tears are ok..
- We cannot take their pain away, but we can listen, listen, listen.
- Use active listening and paraphrasing: "So you were pretty scared when you heard the ambulance." or "This must be very painful for you."
- Don't use platitudes: "I know how you feel", "The person lived a full life, "It was the will of God", "Don't cry."
- Help them explore their grief using open-ended questions: "What was that like for you?"
- Expect thoughts and feelings to be contradictory and inconsistent.
- Expect ambivalent behavior and hidden emotions. Respect and treat gently, especially when defences and resistance are present. It is their timetable.
- Make sure the school knows about the death and understands how to support the teen.
- Expect unrealistic responsibility for the death and protectiveness of parents.
- Expect anxiety to be expressed with reckless behavior to prove their own invincibility.
- Remember that when teens are ignored, they feel isolated. They need to know that it is OK to be experiencing so many emotions. Normalize feelings. Let them know scary feelings will not last forever.
- Encourage them to tell their unique story over and over (support groups help).

- Acknowledge that life has changed for ever (it is already under reconstruction)
- Allow the teen to express anger in a healthy way (be firm with limits).
- Ask to see pictures and mementos. Let teen tell you about the person who died, how the death happened, where they were at the time, what their experience was then and is now.
- Ask about dreams which can be very powerful.
- Writing a letter is helpful, especially if the teen did not have a chance to say goodbye. Collages are good too. Remember anniversaries. Journaling is cathartic and helps them see progress.
- Encourage physical activity.
- Give a sense of hope (remembering makes hoping possible).
- Remember that if teens cannot tell someone what they need, they become a victim and victims seldom heal.
- Ask about plans for suicide (may need to seek medical advice re: depression).
- Watch for PTSD (flashbacks etc.).

