

When a Teen Grieves

Providing Support for the Journey of Healing



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Amber was deeply shaken by her mom's death and A wondered how she would make it the rest of her teen years. David had always assumed that car crashes happened to "other people," but when his three best friends were killed on the way home from a football game in the fall of their senior year, he realized that he had just become the "other." And Jacqueline couldn't fathom what life would be like for her now that her big brother had died after a fairly short fight against cancer.

These teens—and thousands like them every year—face the death of someone loved and the grief that accompanies it. For many reasons, teens have an especially difficult time when someone they love dies.

- **Adolescence is the era of crisis and change.** With all the changes that accompany puberty and the growing independence of adolescence, grief becomes one more big change in the ongoing process of transition.
- **A teen's perception of invincibility is shattered** with the death of a good friend or family member. No longer can one believe these things only happen to others.
- **Most teens don't want to be different** from the crowd so they might want to keep the death and their grief to themselves. As a result, many teens resist formal grief groups or counseling.
- **When a teen is grieving,** often the death was to a younger person—and those deaths are most frequently unexpected, further complicating the bereavement process. Sometimes, teens need the assistance of a competent professional to help them resolve the traumatic parts of their grief.

Grief is best faced when faced with others—companions to travel the journey together

• **Today's teen is under enormous pressure** to succeed academically and in life. Even young students are already aware that their grades and test scores affect what college they will attend. Remember that grief challenges one's ability to concentrate, and so academic struggles are both common and challenging—to parents, teachers, and teens.

Sometimes caught in the environment of trying to help others and provide care for the rest of the family, teens sometimes feel like they must "stay strong" for grieving parents and "stuff" their own experiences with the loss. Of course, this method of coping doesn't work long-term.

Caring adults often want to "shield" children and teens from the bereavement process. These well-meaning adults may not tell the truth about the circumstances of the death or discourage participation in the funeral rituals. In the end, however, this "shielding" is not supportive and leaves teens feeling alienated and alone.



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So what can parents, educators, clergy, and other caring adults do to help a teen in grief? Here are some proven suggestions.

Support healing with your presence. Nothing communicates care as clearly as being present with the teen in grief. Remember that even if they resist talking or even say they prefer being alone, teens need to know that adults care about them. Sitting quietly, even in the next room, can communicate volumes to a teen in grief that this caring adult is there when needed, whenever the teen chooses to talk to or be with you.

Encourage teens to safely gather with their affected friends. When a friend dies, teens often prefer to be together with other teens rather than with adults. After four friends were killed in a car crash, a large group of high schoolers gathered at the beach for a bonfire “memorial,” and didn’t invite adults along. While this might be alarming to parents and school staff, these students most needed to be with each other, and later, were more ready to receive the assistance of caring adults.

Be sensitive to a teen’s need to not be “different.” Since most teens resist being “different,” provide options for how the death is announced. One teen girl asked that no public announcement be made at school about her mother’s death, preferring only that her classmates be told in their classes. Teach students about the nature of grief and skills for offering support to their friends.

Offer opportunities to talk with caring adults. Telling teens that adults are ready and willing to talk makes them aware of the availability of services. However, remember that many teens aren’t ready to talk about the death of a classmate or family member within hours of the death. Remind the teen two weeks and two months after the death that you continue to be available if he or she ever wants to chat.

Provide a sense of routine and expectation in normal tasks and assignments. School assignments and household chores still need to be done, even for students who are grieving. While grief does make it more difficult to concentrate and forgetfulness is a common experience, teens need the predictable routines they have come to know. Most students return to school within a few days of the funeral of a parent and often miss classes only a day or two when a friend dies. However, teachers and parents should remember that teens will usually have difficulty concentrating during the early weeks after a significant loss. Teachers can provide a bit more time by giving advanced notice to grieving students of upcoming tests and assignments, effectively giving them a head-start. And when an entire school is impacted, for example by the death of a student, teachers should expect to make modifications to the lesson plans, especially until after the funeral.

Suggest ways to offer tribute to the life lived. *Teens are inclined to want to create enduring memorials—at the scene of the death, in the planting of a tree on the school campus, or by creating a special tribute page in the yearbook. Encourage these normal means of memorialization; they seem to help us adapt to the loss. Involving teens in the planning is also useful, however. Make sure they consider what effort will be required to maintain the flowers, tree, or whatever other memorial tributes they create.*



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