



## Talking with a Grieving Teen

If you share my tears,  
If you take the first merciful step toward me,  
If you walk bravely into what I am feeling,  
Then we begin to bring down the power of despair.

Molly Fumia, *Safe Passage*

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## Teenagers and Grief

By the time children are in their teens, they probably understand just as well as adults what happens when a person dies. Their cognitive skills are developed, and unlike the younger child, they see death as something universal, inevitable and irreversible. Acutely aware of themselves as people, teenagers may spend a lot of time philosophizing, criticizing, and daydreaming.

With puberty they watch their bodies change and mature, seeing the natural progression of the aging process that makes death possible. Death is a natural enemy to this new self-who's emerging. If a person grows up to die, what's the sense of life? they ask.

With very young children, we have to spend a lot of time thinking about the words to use to help them understand about death. With a teen this usually isn't necessary. But what is necessary when they are confronted with death is to be there to help them through their grief, to understand their emotions, and to teach them how to act in this crisis. In this time of flux when they're shifting from being dependent to being independent, and experimenting with values and ways of behaving, teenagers need some firm and gentle guidance, someone to talk to. They are probably concerned about where they fit in at this time, what they're expected to do, and how to handle the myriad emotions that are brewing inside them. They may be feeling guilt, responsibility, and anger. "If only I had bugged Grandpa to take his medicine." "If only I had gone to see him in the hospital." They probably also have a heightened awareness of their parents' vulnerability. It all of a sudden hits them that nobody lives forever...how transient life is.

In her book *Peoplemaking*, Virginia Satir points out that parents teach in the toughest school in the world, the school of making people. In order to help them grow into kind, stable adults, we need to listen to them, talk with them, and guide them. We have to treat them like people.

### Parents' Roles

This chapter highlights the results of a study on how teens perceive their parents as helping them move through the grieving process. Some of the difficulties that surface at this time are described, as well as what seems to facilitate communication between parent and teen.

Additional suggestions are given for how a leader can be an actual help to the parent. Guidelines are presented for beginning a group for parents of the attendees of the teen grief group.

### HOW CAN PARENTS BE HELPFUL TO THEIR GRIEVING TEENS?

Although 30% of grieving teens reported that their surviving parent was "helpful," 30% rated the parent as "not at all helpful." "Of those teens who found parents unhelpful, some reported wishing they had received more support, but others reported that they had been unable or unwilling to accept support that was offered" (Gray, 1988, p.187).



### **When Support Is Difficult to Accept**

Those teens who were “unable or unwilling to accept support” might be demonstrating the typical communication difficulties between teens and parents. Teens simply may be obeying that inner voice so necessary to allow their own identity to emerge. For some, this involves no longer looking to a parent for support during hard times. The doors to communication may have been closed from the inside, the teen’s side.

When one parent dies, some teens are apprehensive to talk to the remaining parent for fear of upsetting that parent who is now widowed. It may be difficult to see the utter weakness of that adult on whom the teen is still somewhat dependent. It is scary enough to watch one parent die, without being constantly reminded that the other parent is so vulnerable. When it is too painful to share, some teens shut down.

### **When Support is Difficult to Give**

In other cases, the parent already may have closed the communication door with the teen. The surviving parent may be so consumed by pain that there is little emotional energy to deal with the grief of the children, whatever ages may be. Some parents may not even realize the impact the death has on the children. The children often are called the “forgotten mourners.”

In some cases, the deceased parent has been the central figure in promoting communications. After that person’s death, the whole family system is now out of sync. A sense of unity may have vanished. That becomes yet another loss for the family members. The remaining parent may need to develop communications skills, skills that previously were not as essential to the family functioning. This takes time and energy. It may be a very slow process. In the meantime, the teen may feel abandoned.

### **When Parent and Child Can Share Their Grief**

Within more resilient families, members have the coping skills for effectively solving problems and creating healthier patterns of dealing with grief. If a parent is willing to struggle with the pain of grief and talk openly about the person who has died, this openness provides a valuable bond between parent and teen.

The parent becomes a model to enable the teen to wrestle with the difficult feelings that accompany grief. Such an empathic parent is likely to see a mental health professional in order to develop the coping skills to maintain a desirable level of functioning. This on-going support enhances the family relationships and often facilitates sharing of grief.

## **HOW CAN PARENTS BE HELPED ALSO?**

When there is a teen grief group in operation, it soon becomes apparent to the leaders that some of the topics are typical adolescent issues, not necessarily related to the loss of a loved one. Parent and teen communication is a challenge under the best circumstances. With the changes in family dynamics and



the intensity of the feelings while grieving, a stony silence between father and daughter or a screaming episode between mother and son is more than likely to occur.

In seeking new ways of approaching a parent, teens have expressed their feelings of inadequacy and fear of opening the doors of communication. They even have said jokingly that the parents needed the training more than they did. In reality, both parent and teen need help during the grieving process.

## **The Teens Five Tasks of Mourning**

### **To accept the reality of the loss**

When someone dies, even if it is expected, there is an initial feeling that it hasn't really happened. One of the first things we need to get is that the person is really dead and we will never see them again, hear their voice again, talk to them again...at least not in this lifetime. Helping create, or at least attending the funeral, wake or memorial service can help. So does talking about how the death happened and sharing memories of the person who died.

### **To experience the pain of grief**

When we lose someone we love, it hurts really badly. As we tell stories about the death and about the person who died, we have strong feelings like sadness, longing, anger, guilt, fear, confusion, and loneliness. These are normal. The more we love someone, the more it hurts to lose them. We can think of painful feelings as expressions of love for the person who died. Some people might be uncomfortable with our strong feelings, so it is important to find understanding people to hang around with. Journaling, doing art, and playing or listening to music can help to.

### **To adjust to a world in which the deceased is gone**

The realization of what it is like to live without the deceased person usually begins to emerge after about three months. Sometimes we find ourselves thinking we hear their voice or see them driving down the street. We might even pick up the phone to call them. Each time this kind of thing happens is another opportunity to remember the truth: they are gone forever. When an immediate family member dies, there are big changes in family roles and duties. When a best friend, pet or close relative dies, that special someone who occupied our time is no longer there, so our time is spent very differently. Life has dramatically changed. It takes time to get used to this different life.

### **To reinvest in other activities and relationships**

Sometimes we fear that we will forget our deceased loved one. But really, we never do. Being



touched by someone is a forever thing. Some of us worry about replacing the person with someone new, but we can never really replace people since they are one-of-a-kind. If we try to replace someone, things are sure to fail. And if we resist loving again, for fear of replacing them, that, too, is tragic. In healthy grieving, we eventually stop investing so much of ourselves in grieving our loved one. We begin to form other relationships and invest in other activities. This is the way we go on living, even though someone we loved died.

### **To accurately remember the deceased**

It is normal during the grief process to have all kinds of memories of the deceased and of our past times with them. Some memories are good and some are not so good. If the relationship was mostly positive, we tend to remember good things at first. If the relationship was hard, we will tend to mostly remember the bad things at first. Eventually, it is important to have a wellrounded memory of the one who died, and of our relationship with them. Our memory is, after all, what we have left of them.

*Adapted by WinterSpring, from William Worden's Four Tasks of Mourning.*

## **Issues of Teen Grief**

1. This is a more volatile time of life. Kids need to cling to their childishness and assert their independence at the same time.
2. Even though kids give the impression that they're independent and tough (often through the use of sarcasm, boasting, and rough physical play) they still need love and attention.
3. With a parent's death, teens are unable to complete the normal separation with this parent. Part of this separation process is a normal pushing away of the parent. There may be some guilt on the part of the teenager about this normal pushing away process.
4. As a teen, it's not considered acceptable to express feelings, and particularly those that suggest vulnerability. Also, at this time in their life, adults are often seen as knowing nothing; they just don't understand!
5. Often, teens experience everything as very important and dramatic, it is important to accept their style of grieving, while at the same time setting reasonable limits.



6. A teen's peer group is often more important than their adult connections. If friends permit and encourage feelings, they're more likely to express them.
7. Trust in the world is broken down. The teen may wonder what or who can be depended on, who will take care of them if the other parent dies, kids need realistic reassurance.
8. Experiencing a death is often accompanied by feelings of loss of control. This is often more of an issue for teens that may be included in decision making within their family.
9. Teens use anger to cope with their feelings of loss for many reasons:

It is more acceptable in this culture to express feelings of rage and anger than hurt and fear.

It can make you feel more in control when the rest of your life feels out of control.

Teens often feel especially vulnerable when experiencing a death. It can be more of a shock to them than adults because most teens feel invulnerable, whereas most adults can have a more realistic attitude about their own vulnerability, physically and emotionally.



## ***Deciding If A Bereaved Teen Needs Extra Help***

*Dr. Alan Wolfelt, PhD*

Sometimes it is hard to tell if bereaved teens are just being teens or are crying out for help. Because teens are going through a developmentally difficult time, we need to give them some leeway. Their frustrating actions, such as rebellion and moodiness, are often normal. But adolescents, grieving adolescents especially, may also exhibit behaviors that are not normal and require our helping responses. I consider the list that follows “red flag” behaviors- signs a teen needs extra help with grief:

### ***Red Flag Behaviors***

- Suicidal thoughts or actions
- Chronic depression, sleeping difficulties and low self-esteem
- Isolation from family and friends
- Academic failure or overachievement
- Dramatic change in personality or attitude
- Eating disorders
- Drug and alcohol abuse
- Fighting or legal troubles
- Inappropriate sexual behaviors

Suicidal thoughts or actions, such as giving away personal belongings or threatening suicide, are obviously a cry for help and should be taken very seriously. Chronic depression, sleeping difficulties and low self-esteem are also signs that a grieving teen needs extra help. Isolation from family and friends is another red flag behavior. While teen need to emotionally distance themselves from their parents, they should not physically shut themselves in their rooms and prevent all interaction.

Abandoning friends, those all-important people in the young person’s life, is definitely a signal that something is wrong. Academic failure can also be a cry for help. It’s important to let teens mourn first and concentrate on school second, but a total loss of interest in academics, especially for a prolonged period, can signify trouble. You should also look for a dramatic change in personality or attitude. Like everyone, teens are changed forever when someone loved dies, but they should not act like an entirely different person.

Eating disorders are another common manifestation of complicated grief. Be on the watch for symptoms of anorexia or bulimia. Finally, risk-taking such as drug or alcohol abuse, fighting, legal troubles, and sexual promiscuity are direct calls for help. Grieving teens sometimes behave in these ways to prove their own invincibility. But no matter what their cause, these actions can harm the teen or others and should be compassionately and immediately responded to by caring adults. *(Permission granted by Alan D. Wolfelt, PhD., Director, Center for Loss and Life Transition.)*



## **Suggestions for Helping the Bereaved Teenager**

Every teenager needs to grieve in their own time and in their own way. To try and speed up the recovery process could be harmful.

- Ask to see a picture of the person who has died. Let them tell you about this person and why they were special. Have them share some special memories with you.
- Let the teenager tell you about their experience with the death; where they were when the death occurred, what happened immediately afterwards, and what are they experiencing right now. Adults who avoid the subject or put on a front may create an atmosphere of isolation and confusion. The teenager may assume others really didn't love the deceased. They may also assume, because others do not appear to be grieving, that there must be something wrong with them- this can be very frightening.
- Let the teen tell you about any dreams they have had regarding the death of their loved one. Dreams can be very powerful and a listening ear can provide needed support.
- Writing a letter to the deceased can often provide an opportunity for the teenager to say good-bye to their loved one. While this can be a painful exercise, it frequently provides relief and a safe expression of feelings. Writing a letter to someone they love who is still alive can also be helpful. Many times teens will distance themselves from loved ones fearing that they could lose again and it would be more pain than they could bear. This letter can help them to reconnect with the important people in their lives.
- Making a collage can be a creative way of enhancing the healing process in grief. Let the teenager gather magazines and cut out words and pictures that remind them of the deceased and place them on construction paper. When they complete this project, they will find that they have told a story through their collage. These collages become treasured items. Frequently they are placed in a visible place in the home where people visiting will ask questions about it, affording the teen the opportunity to bring up the subject themselves.
- Help the teenager identify what they need during this time and encourage them to let others know what they need. The common complaint of many bereaved is that people don't seem to care and they are not around when you need them. Frequently people are not around because they don't know that to do or say and they back off for fear of creating more pain. If we don't tell people what we need, we remain a victim and victims seldom heal.

Remember, even though the teenager is striving for independence, he or she still needs you! Your presence and the expression of genuine support will be a gift they can carry with them for a lifetime.

-Linda Cunningham



## What teens wish their teachers knew about grief

1. Our fights and arguments may be in response to the death we've experienced.
2. Sometimes we might "space out." Please cut us some slack.
3. We are not the same people we were before the death.
4. Sometimes taking care of ourselves, and being allowed to grieve our loved one, is more important than our homework.
5. Sometimes it is hard for us to concentrate.
6. Sometimes we stay up all night in our grief and are not able to keep up the next day.
7. When we're talking to others in class, we might be talking about the death.
8. Unless you've been in our shoes, you really don't know how we're feeling.
9. Please ask before assuming things.
10. When we're feeling bad during class, we'd like to be able to leave without permission.
11. We need room to be alone.

Suggestions from Teen Grief Group  
Eagle Point Junior High School 2001



## What to say to grieving students

Counselors/Teachers.....

"I'm sorry that your mother died."

"I'm available at lunch-time (be specific) if you want to talk or shoot some baskets."

"Let's talk about what would make you feel more comfortable in class."

Some ideas might be:

homework issues;

being able to leave class when needed;

having a journal or drawing paper for times the student can't concentrate

"I care about you."

"I am aware that today is your birthday/ your mother's birthday/ Mother's Day/ the anniversary of the day your mother died. I'm thinking about you."

"When is your basketball game? Maybe I can stop by and watch you play."

Other Students or School Staff.....

"I can't know how you feel, but I want to."

"I can't know how you feel, but I did have my Grandfather die...(share)."

"If you want to talk, I want to listen. If you don't want to talk, I'll hang out with you."

"If you don't want to talk to other students, I'll tell them about our mother."

"I'd like to do something with you on Saturday. We can sit and talk about your Mom if you'd like, or we can go roller-skating at the mall- both is O.K."

"Do you want a hug?"

"Show me her pictures."

(Don't forget to continue to joke and crack-up. Laughter is food to help us endure.)

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## Death at School

### Middle School and High School Students

After a death, a teacher, nurse or counselor who is especially close to the bereaved child might tell the child privately that they would like to talk with him or her. It is not enough to say, "If you ever need to talk, let me know." Try, "I know what has happened, and I know this must be very difficult for you. Even though you may not agree, I think it is important that we talk about it to be sure you are going to be okay. These are the times I can spend with you. Which do you prefer?"

If the teacher or counselor has difficulty getting the student to talk about it, a back door technique is to ask how the student's parent, sibling, other relatives, or friends are handling the death.

Most youth do not talk about their grief at home because they don't want to upset others. They may feel that they have to be strong and take care of their parents who may be more with their grief. Therefore, close ties with supportive adults at school are very important. If it is determined that the youth is relating well to another adult outside the school, such as a minister or counselor, the school professional might ask frequently if he/she is still talking about the death and their feelings about it with that person.

When a classmate or teacher has died, it must be dealt with openly at school and some of the exercises given above for elementary schoolers may be useful. Older children will probably do better with written rather than oral expression.

Asking to see a photo or looking through a yearbook together might facilitate interaction with a reluctant student. Photos carry underestimated power as symbolic representations of the people we love. They can offer a welcome point of emotional focusing and a break from the strain of direct one-on-one conversation. They may also generate sadness and start tears, offering an opportunity to affirm the cleansing and healing nature of grief. Students should be allowed to attend the funeral and decide about a memorial of some kind. Watch for trouble signs noted above with special attention to the possibility of teen suicide following the death of a family member or close friend.

#### **Response to Trauma**

1. Detachment, shame and guilt
2. Self-consciousness about their fears, sense of vulnerability; fear of being labeled abnormal
3. Post-traumatic acting out behavior (e.g., drug use, delinquent behavior, sexual acting out.)
4. Life threatening reenactment, self-destructive or accident-prone behavior
5. Abrupt shifts in interpersonal relationships
- 6.
7. Desires and plans to take revenge
8. Radical changes in life attitudes which influence identity formation



9. Premature entrance into adulthood (e.g., leaving school or getting married) or reluctance to leave home.

#### **First Aid**

1. Encourage discussion of the event, feelings about it, and realistic expectations of what could have been done.
2. Help them understand the adult nature of these feelings, encourage peer understanding and support.
3. Help to understand the acting out behavior as an effort to numb their responses to, or to voice their anger over, the event.

4. Address the impulse toward reckless behavior in the acute aftermath; link it to the challenge to impulse control associated with violence.
5. Discuss the expectable strain on relationships with family and peers.
6. Elicit their actual plans of revenge; address the realistic consequences of these actions; encourage constructive alternatives that lessen the traumatic sense of helplessness.
7. Link attitude changes to the event's impact.
8. Encourage postponing radical decisions in order to allow time to work through their responses to the event and grieve.

Adapted for use at WinterSpring from *Death at School, A guide for Teachers, School Nurses, Counselors, and Administrators*, by MADD (*Mothers Against Drunk Drivers*).



## Feelings Teens May Feel after the Death of a Parent, Sibling, Friend or Loved One

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Sadness • Confusion • Alone • Left behind • Abandoned  
Severe • Frustration • Sorrow • Depressed • Violent  
Nervous/Jumpy • Angry at the World • Mad at Everybody  
Guilt • Loss of Direction • Unstable • Unable to Function  
Trust People Who Have Experienced a Death • Appreciation  
Looking for Fights • Anger • Cursing  
Fear That Something Might Happen Again • Regret • Shock  
Disbelief • Inability to Accept the Death • Selfishness • Not Knowing How  
to Live Anymore • World is Unfair • Jealousy  
Lost • Bitter • Cold • Values Change • Lots Learned  
Regret for things left unsaid and undone  
It's Somebody's Fault • Protective of Family  
Out of Control • On the Edge • Back Off- Or Else  
Don't Want to Listen or Follow Rules • Rebellious  
Don't Want to Do Anything • Avoiding Feelings • Short Temper  
Why didn't it happen to someone else instead?  
Relief that Suffering is Over • Weird and Scary  
Hating the Killer (in cases of murder)  
Happy Killer Got What He Deserved (In cases of murder)  
Sad at Suffering • Should have known • Helpless  
Feel like Hitting Someone or Something  
Feel Like Being Alone • Felt Uncomfortable Around People  
Loss of Appetite • Sleep Problems • Running Away  
Want to Die • Loss of Reason to Live  
Nobody Can Understand • Lack of Trust  
Clamming Up • Disbelief  
Hard to concentrate • Overwhelming Sadness

