

Aspects of Teen Grief

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This spring, grief has touched the hearts of many teens throughout our community. As adults we want to do what is best to help our grieving teens. When grief enters a teen's life, it can create a fear like no other.

Teenagers often feel invisible, overwhelmed, and frequently become "forgotten grievers." Adolescence is one of the most difficult and confusing stages of their lives. It is a major time of transition and subtle loss. A young adult is saying good-bye to childhood and taking on new responsibilities. For many young adults, their lives are an emotional roller coaster. Their egos are hard at work trying to establish their new identity. They are working hard to gain their own independence. If the death of a parent, a loved one, or a friend is added to their daily challenges of being a "normal" teenager, you will most often find a frightened, confused, and isolated person. There are few people that a teen can turn to for help.

As adults, we need to take advantage of the small windows of opportunity when they are willing to share their feelings and emotions. A fear like no other can set deep within that needs to be shared. It needs to be on their time schedule, when their emotions are present; not when it is a convenient time for us.

Young adults needs are unique and listed below are some typical ones:

- **They need to share in the grief process.** They need to be included so that they don't feel isolated.
- **They need to be loved.**
- **They need to be heard.**
- **They need to be understood.** Share with them about grief and validate their feelings. Let them know it's okay to cry. It is important to keep the doors of communication open.
- **Many times the death of a friend can open wounds of grief from the past.** It is important to reach out to the student who has suffered the death of a loved one, especially if their loved one died the same way. Many people keep their grief deep within until another death happens. Grief has a way of ripping open old wounds.
- **Young adults need outward signs of support** (hugs, a pat on the back, etc.—these are important physical forms of support).

- **Re-establishment of routine and discipline is an important way to provide security.** Inconsistency in family is very typical during the first days following a death.

- **They need to know that they are not alone.**
- **They may not want to talk about it.**
- **Much of the young adult's time is spent in school** and this can be a very lonely place. Though it is important to establish a normal routine again, there may be times during a school day that the student will not be able to cope or focus. Talk to their teachers. Let them know how they are coping. Give them a head's up on important dates such as the anniversary of a loved ones death, a birthday, milestone events in their life—all of which can cause grief moments.

- **Many times young adults will turn to the opposite sex for comfort.** They want to belong; they want someone who will care about them. If a teen is dating someone and they break up during this time, it can cause the loss to be more profound.

- When pain is felt, relief is sought. **Young adults often give in to pressures of drugs and alcohol. They need to know that this is only a temporary means of escape and that it can and will cause a deeper depression.** They need to be guided to a way of opening up and sharing their pain.

- **Young adults feel frightened and alone.**
- **Young adults need their loved ones or friends to be remembered.** If a fellow student dies during their school years, it is important for the school to work with the students to memorialize the student who died by dedicating something visible for the students to see. This can be very therapeutic for both the students and the grieving parents. A grieving parent's wish is for their child to be remembered.

- **They need a stable environment to come home to.** They need to see that their family is doing their best to cope with their grief. If this is not happening in a reasonable time seek professional help. We need to help the young adult feel a sense of family and belonging.

Remember, anyone touched by grief has had their life changed forever. Grief takes time and no two people grieve the same way.