

UNDERSTANDING TEEN GRIEF

By Sheila Munafo-Kanoza

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 teens 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 feeling 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 grief process.** They need to be included so that they don't feel isolated.
- **They need to be loved.**
- **They need to be listened to.**
- **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 a 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 head's up on important dates such as the anniversary of a loved ones death, birthdays, 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.

UNDERSTANDING YOUR CHILD'S GRIEF

By Linda Sullivan

As adults, when someone close to us dies, we are oftentimes so caught up in our own grief and fail to recognize that our children are grieving as well. We are often at a loss as to how to help our children grieve whether because we are grieving as well or because we simply do not know how to help them.

No matter how young or how old we are, anyone who loses someone feels the loss. Our abilities to understand and express our feelings vary, but they still exist. Children will oftentimes hide their feelings in an effort to make the adults around them feel better. Children do not want to contribute to the sadness of their parents or other siblings.

Children may blame themselves for the person's death. They may feel abandoned by parents or others who are close to them because they are grieving. If they see parents crying over the death of one child, they may feel that the parents loved the dead child more than them and they should have been the one to die. Their feelings are oftentimes diverse and can be complicated.

Following are tips from Alan Wolfelt, Ph.D. which give guidance about children's grief.

Learning about the Death

- News of the death should be delivered by someone close to the child who already has a close, loving relationship with the child.
- Explain that the person's body no longer works the way it used to. Their eyes cannot see, their ears cannot hear, they cannot breathe, their heart doesn't beat, they cannot feel, and their brain cannot think.
- Don't try to say everything at once. Say only what your child can comprehend or wants to hear. Let your child set the pace of the conversation.
- In order to know how to help our children, we must first understand our own feelings about death.
- Use age appropriate terminology the child will understand.

How Children Grieve

- A child old enough to love is old enough to mourn.
- No child is too young to understand loss.
- Grief reactions may include:
 - Acting silly
 - Lack of concentration
 - Impulsivity
 - Disruptive sleeping
 - Regressive behavior
 - Loss and loneliness
 - Acting out/explosive emotions
 - Apparent lack of feelings
- Just like adults, there is no "right or wrong way to grieve" and no two children will grieve the same.

Helping Children Grieve

- Let them know it's okay to talk to you. If you wait for them to come to you, they may not.
- Listen to them, reassure them, give them attention, hug them. Let them know they are loved and their grief counts.
- Use simple, honest, age-appropriate language.
- Reassure children that nothing they did/did not do/said or did not say was responsible for the death.
- Take care of yourself so you can take care of the children.
- Let them know it is okay to be upset, angry, or sad.
- Give them safe outlets for their anger – a punching bag, a pillow, paper to rip.
- Give children opportunities to help.
- Help children memorialize the person who died, draw pictures, write notes, etc.
- Give them a journal or drawing pad. Tell them this is for them – they do not have to share anything they put into the notebook unless they want to.
- Return to routines as much as possible.
- Ask children what they'd like from you.

A child old enough to love is old enough to grieve. And even the smallest of babies know how to love.