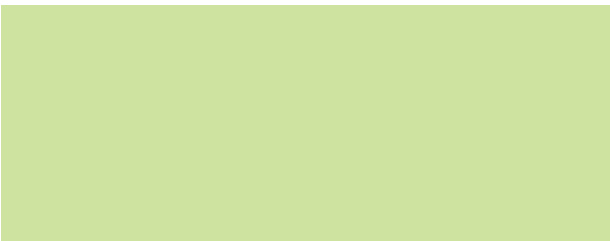
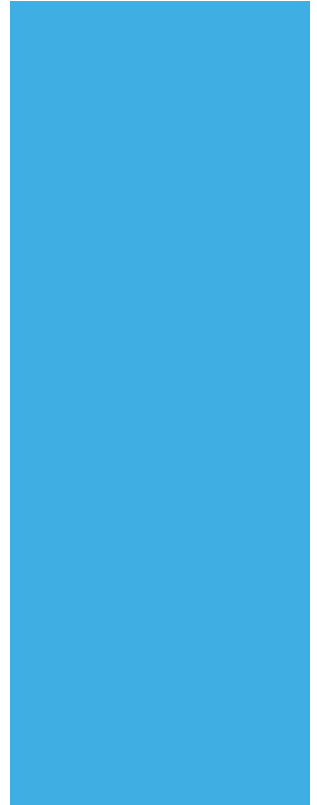
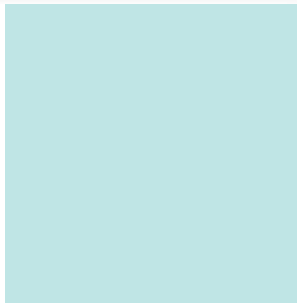


Supporting the Grieving Adolescent

Information for Professionals



Grief is a natural response to love and loss. Adolescents who have experienced a death can be a particular challenge for those who work with them in professional settings. What do we say? How can we help?

Sometimes adults may act as if nothing significant occurred and return the adolescent to typical routines or expectations. Unfortunately, when this occurs, an adolescent might conclude that the death did not matter, that his/her feelings are not important, or that no one cares. The effects of these erroneous conclusions can be long-lasting and far-reaching. The purpose of this booklet is to help those who work with secondary aged adolescents better understand how to provide support to adolescents who are grieving.



It is estimated that one in 20 children will experience the death of a parent before his or her 18th birthday. This estimate does not include the other types of losses that children may experience including that of a grandparent, sibling, close family relative, or pet.

Adolescents who are grieving experience a variety of feelings, sometimes in succession, sometimes at the same time. You can help adolescents identify and express these feelings, which can include:

Helplessness

Sadness

Hopelessness

Guilt

Fear

Confusion

Emptiness

Restlessness

Despair

Irritability

Low motivation

Low energy

Loneliness

Anger

Shock

Inability to concentrate/focus

Increased/decreased appetite &/or sleep

Additionally, adolescents may experience loss of confidence and identity, changes in security (emotional and physical), or changes in goals, hopes or dreams.

There is no time frame for grieving! Grief can come in spurts, feelings can come and go, but each person's grief journey is unique and impacted by other losses and grief experiences that the teen may have had. Adults can misread students who are grieving, concluding when they have a "good day" that they are "back to normal" or that they are "attention seeking" when they struggle with grief for an extended period of time or following a time of more typical behaviors.

What can you do to help?

Visit the teen.

Attending the service or visitation that is part of funeral arrangements communicates to the teen that he/she is cared about and supported.

Create a safe place.

Adolescents need a safe place to ask questions and explore their own answers. Your presence and willingness to listen is more important than specific answers to questions. They need opportunities to experience their feelings and express them without having others try to “fix” them.

Provide opportunities to express thoughts and feelings.

Some adolescents will want to talk about their thoughts, feelings and experiences, while others will want to express them through art, music, movement, or other activities. Adolescents often prefer to discuss their thoughts, feelings, and experiences with peers rather than adults. Providing opportunities for small group discussions will be invaluable in facilitating expression of thoughts and feelings.

Stay in touch with the family.

After the teen has returned to school, stay in touch with the family to check in about how the return to school has gone for the teen and the family. Have resources available if the family needs referrals for additional services and support.

Offer support.

Listen to the teen in a supportive, nonjudgmental way. Be present for him/her.

Assist peers in supporting the teen.

Prepare peers for what they may see or hear at funeral/memorial services. What etiquette protocol/decorum is expected for these types of events? What will be expected of them?

Help peers identify ways to assist the family after the funeral when they feel helpless or at a loss about how to help, such as preparing a meal or volunteering to do laundry, yard work, light housework, or errands.

Prepare for the adolescent's return to school.

Going back to school after a death can be very difficult for a teen who is grieving. Facing other students, concentrating on school work, and going through typical routines can present special challenges. You can help by:

- discussing with the adolescent/family any special requests they might have about talking with teachers and other students. (What do they want others to know? Do they want to be part of the discussion about what happened?);
- offering suggestions of how to handle questions that friends and teachers might ask;
- developing a plan with the teen and teachers for when the teen might become upset and unable to remain in his/her classroom. Include in that plan: where to go, how to communicate the need to go to that place, who the people are the teen is willing to talk to when he/she becomes upset at school, how to communicate to the teacher the need to complete an alternate activity;
- working out a plan if the teen has difficulty keeping up with schoolwork;
- planning how to handle celebrations that might be especially difficult for the teen, such as holidays, Mother's Day, Father's Day, and anniversary dates.

Common Questions & Supportive Responses:

Adolescents who are grieving need to know that they have adults to go to with their questions, worries, or concerns and they need to know that it is okay for them to ask questions. More than specific answers to their questions, they need someone to listen to them and provide support.

Examples of common questions the grieving teen may ask and the possible thinking behind them include:

“Who else will die?”

An adolescent may be concerned about his/her own safety and security, or may cling to the surviving parent or a sibling.

“Who will take care of me?”

This is especially relevant if one parent has already died. A supportive response to this question is, “You are wondering what will happen to you.”

“Why?”

To validate the adolescent’s pain, a supportive response is, “That’s a good question. I have wondered that, too.”

“Is it my fault?”

While we are tempted to respond with “No,” this type of response shuts down the conversation related to what the adolescent is thinking or feeling. Try instead, “It feels like it was your fault,” or “You are wondering if you could have done something differently.”

“Is it my responsibility to take care of the family now?”

Although adolescents may have to help out more, they are still adolescents. Sometimes, however, a death will cause family members to take on additional responsibilities. Talking to the adolescent about the changes can be helpful.

When talking with the adolescent, the following comments have been found to be helpful:

“What you’re feeling or thinking is typical. I’ve felt that way too.”

“Tell me more about your thoughts or feelings.”

“Tell me about ___ (the person who died), and what he/she meant to you.”



Grief is grief.

It can be tempting to judge or evaluate whether someone's grief is legitimate based on the relationship between the teen who is grieving and the person who died. A recent death can stir up thoughts and feelings from a previous death in one's life. Additionally, adolescents begin to struggle with concepts such as "not existing," "forever," and "bad things happening to good people," which can heighten fear, anxiety, sadness or anger. If a teen is having a strong emotional reaction to a death, this reaction should be treated as a genuine reaction, rather than evaluated as attention seeking or as a way to get out of work.

Signs that additional assistance/referral is needed

An adolescent who:

- is depressed or withdrawn;
- begins or resumes cutting;
- shows aggression or has frequent emotional outbursts;
- makes verbal or written statements that suggest the teen is at risk to harm self or others;
- has auditory or visual hallucinations;
- is using drugs or alcohol;
- shows dark content in assignments or creative projects;
- has experienced multiple losses in a relatively short period of time;
- has an adult caregiver who is overwhelmed by grief and who may be unable to attend to the teen's grief journey as well.



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