

Helping Your Grieving Adolescent

by The New England Center for Loss and Transition

Parenting teenagers... it is a tough job under the best of circumstances. But when a teenager is grieving as well, four dynamics place additional stress on the situation.

First — Grieving families often feel a need to pull together for support. Since adolescence is increasingly a time for breaking away and relying on peer support, these conflicting needs can place parents and teens at odds with one another.

Second — Adolescents are keenly aware of parental reactions and, when parents are grieving, often try to protect them from further pain. Most commonly, this takes the form of not talking about it.

Third — Simply because they've experienced the death of a loved one, grieving teens tend to feel different from their peers. In an attempt to fit in, they may try to ignore their own grief reactions. Nevertheless, their normal grief reactions seethe beneath the surface, waiting for expression...healthy or unhealthy, at appropriate or inappropriate times.

Fourth — The stress of bereavement adds to the physical and emotional swings already common in adolescence.

So, what is a caring parent or caregiver to do? Here are some strategies for helping your adolescent through bereavement.

1. Provide an environment the adolescent perceives as safe. Like adults, if they do not feel safe, young people can not do their necessary grief work. They need to know they can trust themselves as having grief reactions that are normal, their peers and adults to be supportive, and parents to be a dependable safety net.
2. You can help through structure, discipline and education. Structure and maintaining routines provide adolescents with a subtle, daily sense of continuity and permanence at a time when everything else seems up for grabs. Discipline, reasonable and caring but consistent and firm, reassures adolescents that someone is in control and will save him or her from serious harm.
3. Education can transform a neutral environment into a healing one for your teen. Make sure the adults in his or her world (school personnel, coaches, bosses, clergy, etc.) know that a death has occurred. Share with them printed materials about normal grief responses and what grieving teens need. Use health class and all-school assemblies to educate peer groups about bereavement. Educate your child about normal grief reactions so that he/she knows that he/she is not going crazy and can trust the way his/her mind, body and emotions are responding. If the child pulls back from discussion, provide books or movies that illustrate normal grieving.
4. Encourage your teen to express what the grief response is for him/her. Recognize and affirm that the experience is different for each person, even each person in the family. Provide "emotional coaching" for your child by modeling appropriate reactions to loss.
5. Facilitate an ongoing connection with the person who died. Give your adolescent a photo of him or her with the deceased. Tell stories about the person who died. Support your child in visiting the gravesite if your child would consider that gesture meaningful. Make sure your child has a memento of the person who died...a favorite tool, a piece of jewelry, a book, a sweater...by which to stay connected. Make sure you remember (in discussion, in prayer, by way of a small gift) to include the memory of the person who died in your celebration of important events in your child's life, such as graduations, birthdays, getting a driver's license, participating in the school play or sporting event.
6. Encourage your teenager to participate in normal adolescent life as he/she feels able. Grieving takes an enormous amount of energy, so your child may need to slow down a bit while grief is being processed. However, it is important for him/her to know that an adult role is not expected to be taken on now that a significant person in your family's life has died. Let your child know that you love and accept and support him/her...just as your child is now, with all the normal living and loving and learning that is still to come.

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