

YOU AND YOUR GRIEVING TEEN

By Dr. Robin F. Goodman

The death of a significant person can be devastating for teens and adults. But teens have their own particular set of challenges to face as they continue to experience tremendous developmental changes. To understand how teens are doing, it is important to look at their behavior, feelings, thoughts, and physical reactions.

In general, the most upset and difficulty occurs in the first months and year following the death. However, some teens may actually be on their best behavior or be coping well at first and then have a period of acting out that seems to occur out of the blue. Teens are in the midst of negotiating the world of family and peers, striving to become more independent, and looking toward the future. When someone significant dies, the teen can experience confusing emotions that interfere with normal teen experiences and choices. It can be difficult to recognize certain teen behavior – positive or negative- as related to their grief. For example, the teen who feels guilty or a sense of responsibility to the family may limit participation in peer activities or decide to stay at home for college. Another teen feeling lost and alone and that life is unfair may give up on school work. Just as with adults, there can be an ebb and flow to a teen's bereavement. Ideally teens learn ways to integrate memories of the person into their ongoing life, and find comfort from such memories. Yet it is also quite normal throughout their life to encounter times and situations that provoke sadness or longing, often an indication and reminder of the importance of the person who died.

Over time, it is considered important for teens to engage in different grief-related tasks.

- Acknowledge the reality and permanence of death
- Experience and cope with difficult emotional reactions
- Adjust to changes in their lives and changes in their identity that result from the death
- Develop new relationships or deepen existing ones
- Maintain a continuing, healthy attachment to the deceased person through remembrance activities
- Find some meaning in the death and learn about life or oneself
- Continue through the normal developmental stages with age appropriate activities

Keep in mind

- It can be difficult to separate out typical teen behavior from behavior related to the death.
- Teens often struggle trying to hide their true feelings from adults in an attempt to feel grown up or be in control.
- It may be necessary and helpful to have teens pitch in with caretaking and chores but this should be balanced with non-family responsibilities
- As they continue to establish their own identities, a teen may try to be more like the person who died or perhaps reject characteristics that are similar.
- If the death was traumatic, the teen may have additional distressing and upsetting reactions that interfere with bereavement. The teen may show signs of worry, avoidance, or sensitivity to certain reminders that make grieving more difficult.

Suggestions for parents and caregivers

- Encourage communication by being open and honest about your own feelings, while keeping good boundaries between parent and teen.
- Model good coping.
- Support the teen's confiding in an adult outside the family – relative, teacher, coach.

- Take your cues from the teen.
- Be sensitive to the teen's struggle to balance family/peers and sadness/fun.
- Even if you disagree, hear your teen out when conflict arises.
- Maintain age appropriate limits.
- Help the teen create memories or discuss memories of the person.
- Support the teen developing new relationships.
- Respect different ways of remembering and different memories.
- Involve teens in decision making about rituals and memorial related activities.
- Mention the person who has died in natural, casual conversation.
- Expect difficult times and plan ahead at meaningful times and events in life.
- Seek outside help if the teen is struggling at school, at home, with peers.
- Remember: The better caregivers are doing the better children will do.