

Facts about Grieving Youth

Teen Years Can Be Naturally Difficult

Teens are not children or adults. Adolescence is filled with more change in life than any other stage of development, aside from infancy. There are a great deal of psychological, physiological and academic pressure that teens have to cope with and the death of a loved one can be particularly devastating during this already challenging period of life. While teens begin to look more and more like mature “men” or “women”, they will still need consistent and compassionate support as they do the work of mourning, because physical development does not always equal emotional maturity.



Teens Often Experience Sudden Deaths

The grief that teens experience often comes suddenly and unexpectedly. A parent may die of a sudden heart attack, a brother or sister may be killed in an auto accident, or a friend may commit suicide. The very nature of these deaths often results in a prolonged and heightened sense of unreality.

Support May Be Lacking

Many people assume that adolescents have supportive friends and family who will be continually available to them. In reality, this may not be true at all. They are usually expected to be “grown up” and support other members of the family, particularly a surviving parent and/or younger brothers and sisters.

Many teens have been told, “Now you will have to take care of your family.” When an adolescent feels the responsibility to “care for the family”, he or she does not have the opportunity, or the permission, to mourn.

Teens may not always find comfort or support from peers either. It seems that unless friends have experienced grief themselves, they project their own feelings of helplessness by ignoring the subject of loss entirely.

Relationship Conflicts

It is very common to experience relationship strains between family members after a loss. If a parent dies while the adolescent is emotionally and physically pushing the parent away, there is often a sense of guilt and “unfinished business”. While the need to create distance is normal we can easily see how this complicates the experience of mourning.

Signs a Teen May Need Extra Help

There are many reasons why healthy grieving can be especially difficult for teenagers. Some grieving teens may even behave in ways that seem inappropriate or frightening. Pay attention to:

- symptoms of chronic depression, sleeping difficulties, restlessness and low self esteem
- denying pain while at the same time acting overly strong or mature.
- academic failure or indifference to school-related activities
- risk-taking behaviors such as drug and alcohol abuse, fighting, and sexual experimentation
- deteriorating relationships with family and friends

To help a teen who is having a particularly hard time with his or her loss, be sure to explore a wide variety of helping services in your community.

- Bereaved Families' *Teen Share & Support* – great for youth aged 14-19 (see our website for more information)
- School counselors and social workers
- Church groups or mentors
- Private therapists
- Trusted adults and caregivers

But keep in mind that others may just need a little more time and attention from caring adults like you. The important thing is for teens to receive safe and nurturing support from friends and family at this difficult time.