

Helping a Grieving Teen

Teen years are already tumultuous years, and the bereaved teen needs special attention. Under ordinary circumstances, teenagers go through many changes in their body image, behavior, attachments, and feelings. As they break away from their parents to develop their own identities, conflicts often arise within the family system. Life becomes even more complex when a father, mother, or other significant person dies - a shattering experience faced by one child in every ten under age 18. While people in all age groups struggle with such losses, teenagers face particularly painful adjustments following the death of a loved one.

Do teens grieve like adults?

Teens grieve deeply, but often work very hard to hide their feelings. Fearing the vulnerability that comes with expression, they look for distractions rather than stay with the grief process long enough to find real relief. Feelings can be turned off quickly, much like flipping a light switch. Teens can act as if nothing has happened while they are breaking up inside. You may observe teens who take on the role of caregiver to family members or friends, in effect denying their own grief.

Gender makes no distinctions when it comes to experiencing grief, but the outward signs may be different. Young men of this age may have a particularly hard time when they have been taught that showing emotion is something that girls do, but macho guys don't.

Who do teens trust and talk to?

Teens often trust only their peers, believing that no one else can understand how they feel and how they react to life's problems. Relationships with friends can be deep and meaningful, sharing conflicts occurring at home and details of their love lives.

How can adults gain the trust of teens?

To gain the trust of teens, adults must become good, nonjudgmental listeners. Let teenagers know that you are interested in them, in their views, and in their ideas and thoughts. Let them know that you like and care for them. Support their ideas or gently introduce new ways to approach their ideas. Acknowledge their grief and offer your thoughts on how to ease their pain.

Does peer counseling work?

Because teens are most open to fellow teens, one approach to providing help is through peers. And it works. Peer counseling is now an elective course in many schools for teens. Peer counselors are trained to look at all kinds of life problems on a personal level and then at ways to help their peers. They are introduced to different situations that may occur, and speakers are brought in to teach them about specific topics.

Because teens are willing to listen to other teens, peer counseling can play an important role in establishing communication with distressed classmates and friends, as well as steering them to professional help if it is needed. Peer counselors learn about depression, grief, communicating with parents and other adults, suicidal ideation, etc. At the same time, they learn about their limitations and are assured of the support and expertise of their peer counseling teachers for consultation.

Selecting the right teacher for peer counseling is of course critical, since he or she must gain the trust and respect of the students - just as students will seek the trust and respect of the peers they may be called upon to counsel.

Do grief support groups work?

Another approach to dealing with grief is through grief support groups, and they work, too. By sharing feelings with one another, teens find out they are not alone and that others are also struggling to rebuild shattered lives. Grief groups help teens feel understood, accepted, and supported.

Support for a Grieving Teen

It can be difficult to separate normal teen behavior from that of a grieving teen in trouble. Some of the indicators that let you know when a teen needs more than a help group or peer counselors are:

Dramatic behavior changes. A teen's home, school, and social life are the arenas for observing behavioral changes. Listen and take notes if comments and concerns are being expressed.

Extraordinary pressure. Get to know the teen and invite discussion regarding his or her activities at home or at school. Find out if keeping up with work is a problem or if the teen is feeling overwhelmed with what needs to be done. Ask if there is some time to spend alone or with friends.

Isolation. Is the teen spending too much time alone, canceling out on dates and parties, or dropping out of after-school activities?

Depression. Discuss the differences between bereavement depression and clinical depression. Encourage the teen to consider further help, if indicated. Supply information about where to go to get counseling.

Death wish. Always take any talk of dying seriously and explore the teen's thoughts and feelings on the matter. Listen carefully to messages from the teen indicating there is a death wish. When a loved one has died, it isn't uncommon to make statements such as, "I just wish I could go to sleep and not wake up in the morning," or "I don't care if I get in a car wreck." These are passive death wishes - something or someone causing a death.

On the other hand, if a teen starts talking about when, where, and how to do "it," or if there is a history of depression or suicidal behavior, this is a much more serious matter and needs immediate attention. *Get prompt professional help.*

Anger. Anger can often create problems at home, at school, or with friendships. Anger needs to be expressed, but in appropriate ways. Unspoken anger can become depression. If the angry teen is creating problems, and normal ways of expression are not helping, this teen may need further counseling for anger management.

Guilt. Feelings of guilt often leave the teen isolated and alone, with an absence of self-esteem. The shame that accompanies guilt takes the form of deep, dark secrets - a very heavy weight to carry around. You can help the teen find some relief from these feelings by being a good listener and by not trying to talk him or her out of it. Suggest writing a letter to the person who died, asking for forgiveness, perhaps even taking that letter to the grave and reading it out loud. Or list the things that are most guilt-inducing on a biodegradable helium balloon and let it go. If measures like this don't help, don't hesitate to refer the teen for further therapy.

Substance abuse. Have information about the perils of substance abuse available. There are times when teens use drugs or alcohol to try to take away the pain. Look for denial, anger, and guilt with teens you suspect are using drugs

or alcohol. When referring such a teen for additional help, find a therapist who specializes in grief and substance abuse.

Skipping school or dropping grades. A normal part of grief is not caring about anything and a lack of motivation or interest. Help the teen understand that these intense feelings of grief are temporary, and that the more they skip school or don't do their homework, the harder it will be to catch up. Teens who are staying away from school may not know that, if this continues, they could be brought before a judge and sent to a probation home or juvenile detention center.

Acting out sexually. The pain of grief is so great and the emptiness so profound, it is not uncommon to look for a warm body to fill the void. This closeness is only a "temporary fix" that usually leads to regret, shame, and fear of disease and pregnancy. If a girl is thinking that sex will make her feel better, help her understand her displaced needs, and what she may get herself into. If a boy is showing the same tendency, help him understand that the issue goes beyond contraception; what is involved is his own need to address his grief in a way that will bring him real relief.

Working with teens is both challenging and rewarding - challenging because you need to break into their world and develop a trusting relationship; rewarding because of the pleasure you will have in being a confidante to their secrets and concerns, seeing smiles and cheery greetings gradually replace those frowns and stares. Becoming a part of a teen's life as he or she struggles with life-shattering grief is a privilege to be exercised with care, but a privilege all the same.

Resources Are Available

Additional information, self-help tools and other resources are available online at www.FOH4YOU.com. Or call us for more information, help and support. Counselors are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week to provide confidential assistance at no cost to you.



Employee Assistance Program
We Care, Just Call

1-800-222-0364

1-888-262-7848 TTY Users
www.FOH4YOU.com

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