



Supporting Children with Grief: Teenagers

Understanding about Death

- Teens fully understand the permanence of death, and that everyone dies. Teens may have difficulty relating this to themselves, and tend to see themselves as invincible.

Responses to Death

- Emotions: sadness, anger, anxiety, shock, disbelief, denial, guilt, acceptance, fear, relief
- Talking a lot or not talking at all about the death
- Talking about their feelings and questions with other people, but not with family
- Fear and anxiety about dying
- Crying, heightened sensitivity
- Intense longing for the person who has died
- Pre-occupation with death and the afterlife
- Difficulty focussing or concentrating
- Intense focus and overachievement in school and activities
- Withdrawal: decreased interest in school and activities, decline in marks or achievements
- Sleep issues: not falling asleep, sleeping more, nightmares
- Acting out: bullying, non-compliance with adults, irritability, clowning, "behaviour problems"
- Physical symptoms: headaches, stomach aches, all over soreness, startling easily, crying
- Changes in eating habits
- Changes in activity levels
- Avoidance and isolation: fear of leaving home, avoiding school, less time with friends
- Seeking out "normal" activities or distractions

What Adults Supporting Teens Need to Know

- Teens grieve differently than adults or young children.
- Teens are at a stage of life where everything is changing. They are experiencing physical, hormonal and developmental changes, figuring out who they are outside their families, trying new things and meeting new people. They may be applying to post-secondary opportunities, working, caring for other family members and figuring out what is important to them.
- Grief is a lifelong process, and it can be triggered throughout a lifetime by anniversaries, milestones, other losses, celebrations, or just day to day activities. Support likewise needs to be ongoing.

Ways to Support Teens

- Be honest and open
- Listen openly without judgment
- Avoid euphemisms
- Use age appropriate language
- Acknowledge and validate teen's grief
- Acknowledge your own grief to the teen
- Model self-care: take care of yourself and seek support
- Accept and respect the teen's feelings
- Provide reassurance and validation
- Provide opportunities to talk about loved ones who have died
- Provide opportunities to ask questions
- Share beliefs about death: spiritual, religious, cultural, academic
- Include teens in funerals, burials, memorial services or other traditions
- Provide routine, with flexibility built in
- Maintain consistent rules and expectations
- Provide creative outlets
- Plan an "out" with teens for when they are in public and have a grief response
- Be patient
- Ask how you can help
- If you do not know what to say or cannot answer a question, be honest – it is okay to not know

Teachers and Staff Can:

- Reach out to the family before the student returns to school
- Make a support plan to help the student through difficult moments – create an "out" and identify a safe place the student can go to be alone
- Provide the opportunity for the student to talk about the grief feelings and about the person who died: this can be formal or informal
- Acknowledge that the student may experience a range of emotions - there will be good and bad days
- Be flexible with assignments and expectations for school assignments and quality of work
- Be aware that certain topics, holidays and events may be triggering for the student
- Listen
- Offer resources and refer to school counsellors or social workers

When to Seek Professional Help

- When grief responses impact daily functioning over a long period of time or are very pronounced
- If alcohol, drugs or other substances are being used
- If there is self-harming, suicidal thoughts or suicide attempts



GOT QUESTIONS: If you have questions please email or give us a call.



Let us know that you're coming. Please RSVP:

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