

How to Help Teenagers Cope with Grief

By Sasha J. Mudlaff, M.A.

Writing/Journaling

Having a teen keep a journal of his/her thoughts and feelings in the aftermath of a death is a wonderful tool for expression. Some teens benefit from writing a letter to the person who died in order to release their grief feelings.

Reading

Books written specifically for teens can be very helpful in validating and normalizing a teen's grief feelings.

Music

Music is a powerful form of communicating, especially for teenagers. Not only can music be an excellent vehicle for bringing feelings and memories to the surface, but it also provides a way to help teens relax. Teenagers can be asked to share music that reminds them of the person who died or a favorite song that that person liked. If they play a musical instrument, they can bring it to play the musical selection. The following music may be highly effective with teenagers:

"I Can Only Imagine"-MercyMe

"I Miss You"-Avril Lavigne

"Over You"-Miranda Lambert

"Paradise"-Coldplay

"When I Get Where I'm Going"-Brad Paisley

"I Drive Your Truck"-Lee Brice

"Time of Your Life (Good Riddance)"-Green Day

Visible Memorials

An extremely important mode of grief expression for teens is through visible memorials. This may take the form of posters, murals, Facebook pages, items left at the place of death or interment, etc. Teens should be given ample opportunity to express themselves and honor their special person in this way, with the understanding that this need may continue for some time.

Keepsakes

Some teenagers cherish items that belonged to the person who died. It is not unusual for them to save clothing, jewelry, toys, locks of hair, photos and other personal items. Such "linking objects" help teens remember the person who died and honor the life that was lived.

Rituals

Teenagers **MUST** be given the opportunity to honor their special person through ritual. This may take the form of an actual memorial service or ceremony, a tree planting, some type of dedication, or perhaps visiting the place of interment. If it is a classmate who has died, corporate grieving-friends doing something together to honor their friend's life-can be very healing. In addition, perhaps it would be meaningful for the surviving friends to do something special at graduation or at a sporting event.

Key Considerations

All too often, adults are negatively influenced by the cause of death, particularly if the death was suicide or alcohol/drug-related. It is extremely unhealthy for teens to be denied adequate outlets for their grief based on how or why the person died. The bottom line is: someone special to them has died-irregardless of the circumstances of the death. Adults (i.e., parents, school personnel, etc.) who disallow memorialization because it is a suicide for example, are creating an environment of frustration and hostility for the surviving friends. These survivors are left to feel as if they are being punished for their friend's decision. Furthermore, it is, in effect, denying the life of that person who died! One of the most important things we can teach teenagers is how to honor life.