

TAG: Teen Age Grief Grief and the Adolescent

Linda Cunningham

Unfortunately, the needs of the bereaved teenager have been sorely overlooked for decades. In many grief recovery programs, support is often available for younger children and adults, but there is a definite void in teen services. I have seen this void throughout our country. Teenagers often give us mixed messages. They tell us that they need and expect our help in providing them with food and a nurturing environment but also tell us, on the other hand, that they can run their lives on their own. Because people do not always know how to respond to teens, they frequently back off, resulting in a teen that is left to grieve alone or with very limited support.

What Makes Adolescent Grief Different From That Experiences By an Adult?

Adolescence is perhaps one of the most difficult and confusing stages in life. It is a time of change and with every change, comes a grieving process. As an example:

- The teenager who has a brother or sister move out of the house to get married or go to school will have to adjust to life in the home without their sibling. Meals and family events will not be spent together with the frequency of the past.
- Divorce in a family will also bring about a grieving process as one parent leaves the home.
- Children who have been abused or sexually molested will experience the loss of innocence and control of their bodies a very painful grieving process.
- The dating process, a very natural process in adolescence, also involves grief as relationships build and then dissolve as they discover who they are and what they want in life.
- Death of a pet. A pet is one of the few sources of unconditional love that life affords us. We can tell a pet our secrets, and in most cases, the pet is always glad to see us. Losing a pet can bring about profound grief in many children and adults alike.
- Abortion: Whether we are in agreement or disagreement with the issues of abortion, when it occurs, there is a very real loss that is experienced both by the mother and father. This loss frequently comes back to the surface as other pregnancies occur later on in life.

These are only a few of the grief issues that a teen may experience as a natural part of growing up. Add to these experiences the death of a loved one, and you are likely to find a child who is terribly confused and in great pain.

Experiences of the Bereaved Teenager

Because grief can be very complex and unique to every individual, we will address the more frequent reactions of teenagers who are grieving.

SHOCK/DISBELIEF

Knowing, intellectually, that someone has died does not always mean that the death seems real, especially in the early days and weeks of bereavement. Many teens experience what I call "automatic pilot": they function as usual but with a feeling that "this really didn't happen." Teenagers, in particular, may show little signs of grieving in the beginning. This numbness or form of denial is an important coping mechanism and should be respected. In months to come, the numbness will fade and they will need you more than ever. If the teenager witnesses a traumatic death, this state of shock and disbelief could last for months. Be prepared for signs of post-traumatic distress such as flashbacks, nightmares, etc.

GUILT

Most people who grieve experience some level of guilt. We put ourselves through the If onlys: If only I could have prevented the death; If only I hadn't had that argument; If only I had said "I love you." Arguments are a part of family life, especially during adolescence. Because of this fact, teenagers often experience extreme feelings of guilt or take on responsibility for the death in some way. It is important that we do not try to "fix" their grief. Most teens simply need to tell you what they are feeling and, in time, the guilt, with good support, can diminish.

UNUSUAL HAPPENINGS

It is not at all uncommon for a bereaved teenager to hear the voice of the deceased or feel as though they see that person passing by or in a crowd. These occurrences can be frightening unless there is someone around to let them know that this is a natural part of the grieving process.

THOUGHTS OF SUICIDE

It is not uncommon for a teenager to have thoughts of suicide as a way of escaping pain or joining their loved one. It is important that these thoughts can be shared in a safe environment without the fear of judgment or panic from the person who is listening. Wanting to escape the pain is a normal response. When teens are made aware of the fact that these thoughts often accompany grief, which can offer some relief. This subject should always be handled with great care. If the teenager is describing to you a method of how they plan to take their life, this is clearly a "red flag" and professional help should be made available immediately.

SEXUAL ACTIVITY

It is not unusual for a teenager to become sexually active during the grief process. If the teen has lost a family member, frequently other family members will not be available for them emotionally, because they, too, are in pain. The need to be close to someone, both physically and emotionally, can be very strong at this time and sexual activity can also serve as a distraction from their pain.

DRUGS/ALCOHOL

When teens are grieving, it is a very natural response to want to numb the pain - when someone is drunk or high, they do not have to feel. Bereaved teens are at high risk for involving themselves in self-destructive behavior. While these drugs may temporarily numb the pain, they very clearly prolong and complicate the grieving process. It is important to be open with the teenager in this area without pointing a judgmental finger.

ANGER

When we have been abandoned through death, anger can become very powerful. Many teens have said "I want to punch someone out" or "I want to destroy something." It is important that teens be given healthy options in expressing their anger. Some suggestions might include: screaming into a pillow; pounding a mattress; ripping Kleenex out of a box until it is empty; throwing ice cubes at a wall or nearby tree. All of these expressions of anger release the physical energy that words alone cannot. It is important to note, also, that none of these expressions of anger will hurt the teenager or those around him or her.

TEARS

Tears are a natural and necessary part of grief. If you do not see the tears, do not assume they are not there. Many teens will grieve privately, crying in the shower, in their rooms or alone at the gravesite. If a teenager should share their tears with you, be still, be quiet and listen don't try to fix their pain.