



Grief in Tumultuous Teens

Teens are often plagued by rapidly shifting moods, have difficulty navigating closeness and distance with parents and peers and may have intermittent anxiety about the future. These normal scourges of adolescence are heightened when the teen is also mourning the death of someone close. As many as 1 in 10 teens experience the death of a parent before age 18 in Los Angeles County. But in a society where death is the last taboo subject, communities are often unprepared to support their grieving teens. Consider the following when determining the need for support for the grieving teens in your life.

1. The Developmental task of adolescence: **identity vs. role confusion**, as described by Erickson, is difficult to achieve when a teen lacks a peer group of similarly bereaved peers. Instead they struggle with feeling misunderstood and may isolate or be shunned by non-bereaved peers.

TEENS BENEFIT FROM THE OPPORTUNITY TO PARTICIPATE IN GRIEF GROUPS DURING OR AFTER SCHOOL OR AT BEREAVEMENT CAMPS WHERE THEY HAVE A PEER GROUP WITH WHICH TO IDENTIFY

2. Social Scientists have now determined that the teenage brain continues to mature until age 25. This explains the tendency for teens to make decisions that adults may question. Decisions may be made impulsively and show questionable judgment. This can lead some teens to cope with their grief in ways that can be dangerous and don't promote healthy life styles.

TEENS NEED TO BE TAUGHT TO COPE WITH THEIR GRIEF IN HEALTHY WAYS THAT ARE NOT HARMFUL TO THEMSELVES OR OTHERS

3. The teen years are also characterized by **magical thinking**. They typically view themselves as invincible and engage in behaviors that appear to tempt fate because they fail to consider that the consequences might be fatal. For example, even when faced by the death of a classmate because of texting while driving, or driving without a seatbelt, teens will soon resume those same activities.

CONSIDER ASKING YOUR TEEN'S SCHOOL TO OFFER WORKSHOPS ON SAFE DRIVING; SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND SUICIDE PREVENTION

4. Teens may take on adult roles prematurely when a parent has died. These responsibilities may interfere with the age-appropriate activities and school work that their non-bereaved peers engage in on a daily basis. Tardiness and absences can often be attributed to the teen's need to help out at home with younger siblings or work part-time to help with household expenses.

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MAKE CERTAIN THAT YOUR TEEN HAS THE OPPORTUNITY TO ENGAGE IN SIMILAR ACTIVITIES AS THEIR NON-BEREAVED PEERS.

5. Life plans may be derailed when a death occurs in the family. Teens may be concerned for the welfare of their family if they are not around to manage caregiving tasks.

ENCOURAGE TEENS TO PURSUE THE GOALS THAT THEY HAD PRIOR TO THE DEATH INCLUDING LEAVING HOME FOR COLLEGE, THE MILITARY, TRAVEL OR TO SEEK FULL-TIME EMPLOYMENT OUTSIDE OF THE HOME.

6. Your teen is keenly aware that you are grieving too and may avoid going to you for comfort for fear of burdening you. They may also be reluctant to express their grief outwardly, fearing ridicule.

SERVE AS A ROLE MODEL FOR HEALTHY EXPRESSION OF GRIEF WHILE REASSURING YOUR TEEN THAT YOU ARE STRONG ENOUGH TO SUPPORT THEM IN SPITE OF YOUR OUTWARDLY FRAGILE APPEARANCE.

7. Some teens will experience depression and/or anxiety in conjunction with their grief that interferes with their day to day functioning.

ALWAYS SEEK PROFESSIONAL ASSISTANCE IF YOUR TEEN SHOWS SIGNS OF DEPRESSION INCLUDING MARKEDLY DEPRESSED MOOD, INABILITY TO EXPERIENCE PLEASURE FROM NORMALLY ENJOYABLE ACTIVITIES, LETHARGY, TROUBLE SLEEPING, CHANGES IN APPETITE, AVOIDANCE OF SOCIAL SITUATIONS, ACADEMIC PROBLEMS AND THOUGHTS OF SUICIDE.

8. Your teen's adjustment after the death will be influenced by both the presence of social supports but more significantly by your own adjustment to life without the deceased.

TAKING GOOD CARE OF YOURSELF WILL DIRECTLY IMPACT YOUR ABILITY TO EFFECTIVELY PARENT YOUR TEEN AND THE OUTCOME TO THEIR GRIEVING PROCESS.

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