

Understanding Grief and Loss through the Eyes of an Adolescent or Young Adult **by Mariadonna Litwak, MSW, LCSW**

How does a teen or a young adult respond when someone close to them dies? Do they respond differently to the death of a family member than the death of a close friend? How does the way a person dies, or a death by suicide, impact the teen's or young adult's journey through grief?

The grief journey for teens/young adults differs greatly from the grief journey for children or adults. Grief impacts and complicates the developmental process of adolescence: a time when teens are developing their own identities and are often closer to their peers than they are to their families.

Despite the common adolescent myth that a parent's intelligence decreases with age, one thing remains constant: we will always be a parent to our teen. And, as a parent, we think that we should know what to do or say when our teen loses someone close to them. Parental instinct tells us to "make it better" and tell our teen how they should grieve. As adults, we have certainly had experiences with death over the years. Our experiences have shaped our expectations of how people grieve. Frequently our own experiences with death were uncomfortable, yet they are what shaped our expectations! Our expectations may produce anxiety in both our teens and in ourselves that further impacts the process of grief.

Based upon extensive experience in working with grieving teens/young adults, Lynn Snyder, LPC, ATR-BC, CT, founder of Common Ground Grief Center, identifies basic needs of grieving teens:

- **Honor:** There is no right way or wrong way to grieve. Honor and respect your teen's own unique way of grieving, even if it seems at times to be very dramatic.
- **A good listener:** Teens need someone who will listen to them without judgment or question. Consider becoming an "unconditional listener".
- **Routines:** Teens find comfort in having routines. If your family always eats a big breakfast on Sundays, or goes to visit Grandma, now is not the time to change.
- **Assurance:** Teens need to know that their parents are in control of their own emotions. Of course, you can express your emotions, but don't go overboard. Be a good emotional role model by finding your own source of adult support.
- **Choices:** Your teen's world can seem so powerless now. Show them that you respect their choices.
- **Boundaries:** Although it may seem hard to believe, teens do find safety and support within reasonable and consistent boundaries. If your teen's curfew on weekends is 11:00 pm, now is not the time to change it.
- **Privacy:** Allow and respect your teen's need for privacy, but don't ignore warning signs of what your teen may be doing in private. (A can of air freshener in a teen's room could be masking the odor of marijuana. An unexpected windfall of cash in a teen's wallet did not come from hitting the jackpot with a scratch-off lottery ticket!).
- **Health:** Teens need proper food, nutrition, and plenty of sleep. Since parents usually have little control over this, look for changes in your teen's appetite or sleep patterns.

- **Honesty:** Be honest and truthful regarding what you tell your teens about the death, and tell them what you know, as long as it is based upon fact. Evaluate your knowledge: if there is the slightest chance that it is based upon a rumor, wait until you have the facts.
- **Respect for individuality:** Teens need to find their own personal way to memorialize the person who died. Many teens do this by writing in a journal, or using some other form of self-expression, such as blogging.

Suicide is frequently perceived as being a choice that a person has made in the manner of their death. Teens' individual responses to suicide vary in intensity and duration, but often include guilt, anger, judgment or blame. Teens may feel **guilty** for not knowing that a person was suicidal; or for not being able to prevent the suicide. They may be **angry**: either towards themselves for what they believed they should have done, or towards the person who committed suicide. Teens may **judge or blame** themselves or the deceased for either abandoning them or doing so without warning.

It is important that teens understand that they are not responsible, in any way, if someone close to them dies by suicide. There was nothing that they could have said or done that could have prevented the suicide. The *choice to die by suicide* was not a rational choice. It was a decision that was made by someone who was in great psychological pain that impacted their ability to think rationally.

The Dougy Center, a national non-profit organization for grieving children and families offers a variety of online resources, including an online support group for grieving teens.
<http://www.dougy.org/>

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