

PARENTING A GRIEVING TEEN

When someone your teenager loved has died, it can be overwhelming. It's hard to go from seeing this person so full of life to no longer seeing them at all. It's normal for teens to feel all kinds of things, including:

- Sadness - crying, nightmares, not enjoying favorite activities
- Guilt - thinking it's their fault, spending time with friends, going out
- Anger - it's not fair, hating the world, God, the person who died
- Fear - what's going to happen next, what's going to happen to them
- Confusion - why is this happening, why did their person die
- Disappointment - thinking there would be more time
- Regret - thinking, "I wish I had," "if only I hadn't said that/done that"

None of these responses (and hundreds like them) are bad or wrong. It's okay to be angry sometimes, sad sometimes, and confused most of the time, or whatever it is that they're feeling. The important thing is to help them find ways to get it out that don't get them in trouble. If possible, they might need to:

- Talk about it. Talking to you may or may not be the right answer; help your teen figure out who helps them talk stuff out and then encourage them to talk to that person. If it is you, then listen way more than you talk and accept what they say without judgment as long as no one will be getting hurt.
- Do something to heal the soul. Ride a bike, shoot hoops, go to a movie, whatever. Doing something fun can get rid of feelings that can weigh your teen down.
- Sleep. Our minds process our thoughts and feelings while we sleep, yet when we are stressed we tend to sleep less. If your teen is having trouble sleeping, help them find ways to get to bed earlier or sneak in a nap.
- Stay involved. Keeping up with school, work, or friends can help your teen to get by, and there's nothing wrong with that. Setting aside all the stress for a while will help them deal with it long-term.

Give your teen permission to just be. Time is short. If they have to re-take a test or even a subject, so be it. It's a hard road they're on, so help them be kind to themselves.

The death of a loved one often means that teenagers will start to think about bigger issues, like their own vulnerability or the meaning of life. It is important to know that kids grieve differently than adults. They may cry one minute and then talk on the phone with their friends the next. This is perfectly healthy and normal grieving. Teens grief may be demonstrated in a number of ways:

- Grief will be largely displayed through verbal expression. Some teenagers may be more comfortable talking about their grief and loss, whereas others may lose themselves in activities.

- Teenagers feel very strongly about fitting in with their peers and maybe quite distressed that this death has made them different from other kids their age. In fact, your teen may try to pretend that the death didn't happen or that it doesn't affect them so that they don't have to talk about it with their friends.
- This is already a confusing time for teenagers as their bodies mature, and they strive for independence. The addition of the loss of a loved one may result in dramatic mood swings from the upheaval and helplessness these changes introduced into their life.
- Common grief displays include withdrawal, crying, nightmares, guilt, aggression, changes in sleeping or eating, school problems, physical ailments, or regression.

The best thing you can do for your child is to demonstrate and share your grief. Social relationships are very important to your teenager, but they may be hesitant to let their peers know about their loss.

- If you are open and honest with them about the death and your grief, they will learn that it is okay to be sad and miss someone who has died. If you hide your grief, they will learn that grieving is not okay.
- Death and loss at this time often cause an inner struggle for teenagers, as they simultaneously want to push away from their families, yet need extra support because they are grieving. Being available to your teen when they approach you will help your teen to grieve.
- Talk about the death and your own grief and coping with your teenager. Right now, their world is changing daily, and knowing that they are not alone in their loss may help them in their grief.
- Respect your teenager's need for privacy. They may seek out another adult or peer for support during their time of grief. Encourage their development of these supportive relationships as they can only help.
- Seek out same-age peers who have similar death experiences as your child. This will help to make their grief feel more normal and give them important peer support for their grief. They may also learn from their peers about different ways to cope and express themselves about their loss.

For more information, please call Heartlinks at 618-277-1800.

