



Helping Your Grieving Adolescent

Parenting teenagers...it's a tough job under the best of circumstances. But when a teenager is grieving as well, four dynamics place additional stress on the situation.

First, grieving families often feel a need to pull together for support. Since adolescence is increasingly a time for breaking away and relying on peer support, these conflicting needs can place parents and teens at odds with one another.

Second, adolescents are keenly aware of parental reactions and, when parents are grieving, often try to protect them from further pain. Most commonly, this takes the form of not talking about it.

Third, simply because they've experienced the death of a loved one, grieving teens tend to feel different from their peers. In an attempt to fit in, they may try to ignore their own grief reactions. Nevertheless, their normal grief reactions seethe beneath the surface, waiting for expression... healthy or unhealthy, at appropriate or inappropriate times.

Fourth, the stress of bereavement adds to the physical and emotional swings already common in adolescence.

So what's a caring parent or caregiver to do? Here are four strategies for helping your adolescent through bereavement.

1. Provide an environment the adolescent perceives as safe. Like adults, if they don't feel safe, young people can't do the necessary grief work. They need to know that they can trust themselves as having grief reactions that are normal, their peers and adults to be supportive, and parents to be a dependable safety net.

You can help through structure, discipline, and education. Structure and maintaining routines provide adolescents with a subtle, daily sense of continuity and permanence at a time when everything else seems up for grabs.

Discipline...reasonable and caring but consistent and firm...reassures adolescents that someone is in control and will save them from serious harm.

Education can transform a neutral environment into a healing one for your teen. Make sure the adults in his or her world (school personnel, coaches, bosses, clergy, etc.) know that a death has occurred. Share with them printed materials about normal grief responses and what grieving people need. Use health classes and all-school assemblies to educate peer groups about bereavement.

And educate your child about normal reactions to grief so that he knows he is not going crazy and can trust the way his body, mind and emotions are responding. If he pulls back from discussion, provide books or movies that illustrate normal grieving.

2. Encourage your teen to express what the grief experience is like for him or her. Recognize and affirm that her experience is likely to be different from everyone else's in the family. Provide "emotional coaching" for your child by modeling appropriate emotional reactions to loss.

If your teenager is a quiet or private person, encourage other methods of expression. Helpful ways of expressing emotion include playing music or musical instruments, writing (songs, poetry, diaries, letters to the person who died), sports (including the martial arts and punching bags), and art and photography.

3. Facilitate an ongoing connection with the person who died. Tell stories about the person who died. Give your adolescent a photo of him or her with the person. Support him in visiting the gravesite if that is meaningful to him. Make sure he has a memento of the person who died... a favorite tool or sports or hobby item, a piece of jewelry, a book, a sweater or robe...by which to stay connected.

And make sure you remember (in discussion, in prayer, by way of a small gift) to include the memory of the person who died in your celebration of important events in your child's life, events such as graduations, getting a driver's license, participating in his or her first school play or first varsity sporting event.

4. Encourage your teenager to participate in normal adolescent life as she feels able. Grieving takes enormous energy, so your child may need to slow down a bit while she works on her grief. However, it's important for her to know that you don't expect her to take on an adult role now that someone important has died. Let her know you love and accept and support her...just as she is now, with all the normal living and loving and learning she has yet to do. ■