

Grief: Assisting teenagers through loss

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Understanding the grief process

While the following stages commonly occur in the grief experience, it is important to remember that grief does not follow a defined pattern. These stages may be experienced repeatedly, in differing sequence and with differing intensity.

Denial is a shock absorber which temporarily reduces the full impact of the crisis, such as a person's unwillingness to talk about the loss. In the early stages denial isn't something that is wrong; however, problems can occur if it continues. Give permission to feel the feeling.

Anger/guilt often occurs due to a person's feeling of powerlessness over their loss. Questions include: How could he/she do this to me? Why would God allow it? How could this happen to someone at our school? Blaming others can also be a common response. It is important to admit the anger, identify the real source of the anger, and understand that it is okay to be angry. Seek healthy ways to express it such as strenuous physical activity, keeping a journal, sketching or talking with people you trust.

Sorrow/depression are evidenced by some or all of: crying, isolation, silence, a loss of energy, and an inability to sleep. Allow and encourage expressions of grief. Emphasize that crying is not a sign of weakness, rather it is facing and acknowledging loss. Recording thoughts in a journal can also be very healing. Activity is helpful for depression, although sometimes depression is so deep that even activity seems too difficult. Referral to the family physician is encouraged for depression that persists.

Bargaining is a means of trying to regain control or to make sense of what has occurred. This often takes the form of a promise to God that things will change if only He does something. The question "Why?" is very naturally asked through all stages but is perhaps most prevalent in the anger and the bargaining phase. The real problem cannot be faced until the "why" is abandoned and the person looks at "who, when, where and how" things happened. The reality of what has happened cannot be changed.

Acceptance and admission of our powerlessness in the situation is not quickly or easily reached. Having grieved we can move on with life. Emphasize that acceptance is not a matter of forgetting the person or minimizing the

pain. In fact, it is a full acceptance that the loss was real, significant and painful.

Suicidal thoughts

Threats or attempts to harm oneself are not uncommon among teenagers. Feelings of helplessness and worthlessness are strong indicators of potential suicide. It is imperative to take these feelings seriously.

Suicidal thoughts may be expressed by withdrawal, anti-social behaviour, loss of interest, apathy, agitation, sleep and appetite disturbances, perceived loss of alternatives, poor judgement and reasoning ability. Giving away possessions can also be a sign of suicidal thoughts.

If someone is thinking about suicide or shows other signs of being suicidal, discuss it openly and frankly. Phrases such as, "everything will be okay" or "things will be better in time" tend to communicate that the listener doesn't fully understand what the person is dealing with. The greatest help is given by taking the person seriously and being a concerned listener. Most grief reactions are normal responses to disaster or loss, however, it is imperative that suicidal thinking be treated seriously and help is sought.

In general, any person with suicidal thoughts should be referred for professional help. The Crisis Intervention and Suicide Prevention Centre of B.C. has trained counsellors and is a helpful resource (604-872-3311) or SPEAC - Suicide Prevention Education & Counselling (604-584-5811.)

How you can help?

While most helping response occurs in the first few weeks after a traumatic event, grief often lasts longer than anticipated. The effects

of grief are often revisited long after the event. These delayed, seemingly unrelated responses to grief can be baffling. It is important to keep this in mind when dealing with behaviour that is uncharacteristic.

Be a listener. Most help comes from genuine concern that listens rather than seeks to give the 'right' piece of advice. Communicate that grieving lasts far longer than anyone expects although the intensity usually subsides. Certain events such as birthdays and holidays may result in a "revisitation" of grief.

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Do not avoid talking about the person or event because you feel it might reawaken the pain. Avoidance of the topic conveys a lack of caring rather than the more likely fact that you do not know what to say. Usually your teenager will want to talk, although it may not come in the fashion or the time you had planned. Follow their lead and be a listener.

Try not to make any unnecessary changes during this time. Times of grief and loss are not the times to be making important decisions. Attempt to keep the situation as normalized as possible.

Perhaps the greatest challenge you, as a parent have, is to encourage and allow the admittance and healthy expression of grief.

Assisting teenagers through loss

The loss of people we care for is very painful and confusing. We recognize pain expressed by tears, but pain evidenced by withdrawal, hopelessness and anger can be harder to detect. Sometimes we see pain and grief as short term so when certain behaviours appear, we wonder what is behind them.

Grief can last far longer than anyone expects. The experience of a loss or a sudden violent event can produce intense anxiety and fear. These feelings are very normal. Suffering, loss and death can shatter the teenager's sense of invincibility and immortality. Teenagers often present an image of strength and other forms of 'best face forward'. Unfortunately, this results in a tendency for emotions to be buried, only to surface later, sometimes in less healthy ways.

The need not to reveal weakness often causes pain and grief to go unnoticed. These coping strategies can often be rewarded unwittingly with comments such as, "You are handling things very well." While this may appear to be the case, it is often not.

What to watch for

Trouble signs to watch for in adolescents following a loss may include:

- withdrawal and isolation
- physical complaints (headache, stomach pain, loss of sleep, agitation)

- emotional concerns (depression, sadness, tension, suicidal thoughts, confusion)
- anti-social behaviour (stealing, acting out, aggression, substance abuse)
- school problems (avoidance, disruptive behaviour, academic failures)

Most of these are temporary. Teenagers who appear to be withdrawn and who isolate themselves from family and friends may be experiencing emotional difficulties. The need to appear competent may work against their reaching out to others for assistance.

Loss and disaster can thrust teenagers into an adult role. Regardless whether these results occur, it is important they give themselves permission to grieve.

Caring for the caregiver

Disaster and loss can have a profound effect far beyond anything this brochure can address. Those in the midst of crisis understand that it is one thing to know helpful ideas; it is quite another issue to practice them. The whirlwind which results from pain and loss can only fully be understood by those in the situation.

Walt Whitman said, "I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself become the wounded person." At one level Whitman is describing the attitude needed to help people in pain but his words also point out that the wounds felt by those we love, are felt by us as well. In order to take care of yourself, be certain not to put unreasonable demands on yourself by trying to be all things to all people. Expectations and normal daily activities may need to be scaled down. Sleep needs to be taken.

Other sources of help

Loss and disaster wound many, even those who seem not to be touched by what occurred. Encourage openness to help from others; school counsellors, counselling clinics, hospice staff, Health Department personnel, and the clergy are just some of the resources available to assist you and your family. If you need help and don't know where to find it please contact your school staff or Student Support.

Adapted from a brochure by School District #38 (Richmond)