

Assisting Teens Dealing with Death of a Friend/Classmate

Losing someone we care about is a painful experience for all of us, but it is particularly difficult for a teenager who may not yet have experienced the loss of a close friend or relative and who may still consider himself/herself immortal or invincible. The loss of a teenage friend may require young people to make a paradigm shift that could result in their questioning their own mortality as well as recognizing the reality that people they love do, in fact, die. This can be frightening.

Parents of teens may find that grief can often look different in young people than in adults. While as adults, we tend to cling to other family members after experiencing the loss of a loved one, teens seem to need the comfort of their peers, particularly when the life lost represents another of their peer group and even more so when the event happens suddenly and unexpectedly. In spite of this, parents can serve an important role in helping teens cope with the tragedy of a friend's death. Most grief experts agree that the following parental behaviors are effective when offering support to grieving teens:

Listen: This is probably the most effective of all assistance that parents can offer. Let your teenagers know that you are there to talk about any thoughts, questions, or feelings that they may have about the loss. Even when they resist talking or say they prefer being alone, it is important that teens know that parents are nearby when needed or when they may choose to talk.

Respond Honestly: If teens ask questions about the death, parents should resist the urge to shield them from the circumstances surrounding the loss of another young person. Give them accurate, simple, and clear answers. While there is no need to be graphic, they are old enough to hear the truth, so give honest explanations about what happened. If teens express concern about their own safety, this may be a good time to ask questions about situations where they may be at risk and to offer them the opportunity to suggest ways in which they might protect themselves. You should refrain from lecturing your children out of your own fear but should ask smart questions and let them tell you.

Validate Feelings: Be accepting of how teens feel and validate that emotional experience even if it may be different from your own. Sometimes teens are embarrassed by the strong emotions that they may feel for people who die, even if they are not close to them. Help them to understand that these feelings are normal even if they were not close friends. We all experience a surge of emotions upon learning of a death, particularly a sudden one. Feelings of pain are actually feelings of love and you should commend them for caring about other people so deeply.

Alleviate Guilt: Sometimes teens may experience guilt as the result of the death of one of their peers. This is a good time to discuss what is and isn't in the realm of their control and what is and isn't their responsibility. If young people seem to want to assume an inappropriate amount of responsibility for the friend's family, help them to accurately assess what can and should be done to help without letting them carry too much adult responsibility.

Maintain Consistency: Grief reactions may cause some teens to spiral out of control, and they may test established boundaries and limits during this time. It is important, however, for parents to maintain established limits and consequences as this provides a sense of safety and security in teens.

Connect with Support Agencies: It may be helpful for parents to review the steps in the grief process with their teens. Individuals often experience denial, anger, depression and acceptance – in that order. This can help them to understand that their feelings are normal. Teens should know that parents are

there to support them for as long as is needed, but there are also other caring adults with whom they may find it helpful to talk. School counselors, community mental health specialists, and faith leaders are all appropriate individuals who can assist teens during their time of grief. Here are some things for which parents may look when determining whether or not to seek professional help:

- unusual drop in grades
- depression or withdrawal from family or friends
- prolonged trouble sleeping
- risk-taking behaviors
- alcohol or drug use

Remember, it is okay if you don't have all of the answers. There are many resources available from books to counselors to support groups that can provide assistance at this difficult time.