



## Basic Needs of Grieving Teens

Adapted from: *Helping Teens Cope with Death (2004)* by The Dougy Center for Grieving Children

### **Truth**

Truth heals and promotes a healthy grieving process. Griefers appreciate truthful disclosure about all information relating to the person who died, the circumstances and potential changes that will affect them.

### **Assurances**

Grieving teens want to feel certain that their parent or caregiver is healthy, balanced and in control. Parents should feel free to express emotions, but need to find adult support rather than depend upon the teen for support.

### **Boundaries**

Young griefers need to know that adults care enough to set loving, specific limitations on their behavior. Reasonable and consistent boundaries provide safety and support teens during a period of disorienting change.

### **Choices**

Teens are empowered when they are given choices and options. In the face of death, teens often feel powerless and out of control. Providing the teen with informed choices and accepting their decisions can help them regain a sense of balance, and show that you respect their decision-making abilities.

### **Food & Water**

Grief work uses and depletes energy. Healthy, nutritious food provides fuel, so have it available in large quantities. Plan eating times that are comfortable and relaxed. Griefers also often experience dehydration. Water is a forgotten healer. Offer healthy liquids to teens who are grieving.

### **Listeners**

Private grieving becomes public mourning when a teen finds an accepting listener in whom to confide. A safe listener can have a profound influence on the life of a young person who is grieving.

### **Models**

Teens watch the adults in their lives to learn how (or how not) to grieve and mourn. Adults who abuse alcohol or other drugs, who refuse to display any emotions, or who run from their grief in other ways are poor models for a healthy grieving process.

### **Privacy**

Much of grieving is a private process, including reflection, contemplation, communication, evaluation, emotion, determination and memorialization. Remember to respect the privacy of grieving teens.

### **Recreation**

Griefers need time to have fun. Either with friends or alone, recreation can be a means of grieving or can provide a much needed break from the serious work of grieving.

### **Routines**

Routines, such as regular bed times, meals and chores, provide a safe, predictable environment for teens. Routines allow teens consistency; they do not have to constantly worry about what will happen next.

### **Sleep**

Grieving can cause fatigue. Grief work demands rest. Try to ensure that your teen gets enough sleep.



## Six Basic Principles of Teen Grief

Adapted from: *Helping Teens Cope with Death (2004)* by The Dougy Center for Grieving Children

### 1. Grieving is the teen's natural reaction to a death.

Grief is a natural reaction to death and other losses. However, grieving does not feel natural because it can be difficult to control emotions, thoughts or physical feelings associated with a death. The sense of being out of control that is often a part of grief, may overwhelm or frighten some teens. Grieving is normal and healthy, yet may be an experience teens resist and reject. Helping teens accept the reality that they are grievers allows them to do their work and progress in their grief journey.

### 2. Each teen's grieving experience is unique.

Grieving is a different experience for each person. Teens grieve for different lengths of time and express a wide spectrum of emotions. Grief is best understood as a process in which bodily sensations, emotions, thoughts and behaviors surface in response to the death, its circumstances, the past relationship with the deceased and the realization of the future without the person. For example, sadness and crying may be an expression of grief for one teen, which another may respond with humor and laughter.

While many theories and models of the grieving process provide a helpful framework, the path itself is individual, and often lonely. No book or grief therapist can predict or prescribe exactly what a teen will or should go through on the grief journey. Adults can best assist grieving teenagers by accompanying them on their journey in the role of listener and learner, and by allowing the teen to function as the teacher.

### 3. There are no "right" and "wrong" ways to grieve.

Sometimes, adults express strong opinions about "right" or "wrong" ways to grieve. But there is no correct way to grieve. Coping with a death does not follow a simple pattern or set of rules, nor is it a course to be evaluated or graded.

There are, however, "helpful" and "unhelpful" choices and behaviors associated with the grieving process. Some behaviors are constructive and encourage facing grief, such as talking with trusted friends, journaling, creating art and expressing emotion, rather than holding it inside. Other grief responses are destructive and can cause long-term complications and consequences. For example, some teens attempt to escape their pain through many of the same escape routes adults choose: alcohol and substance abuse, reckless sexual activity, antisocial behaviors, withdrawal from social activities, excessive sleeping, high risk-taking behaviors, and other methods that temporarily numb the pain of their loss.

#### **4. Every death is unique and is experienced differently.**

The ways teens grieve differs according to their personality and the particular relationship they had with the deceased. They typically react in different ways to the death of a parent, sibling, grandparent, child or friend. For many teens, peer relationships are primary. The death or loss of a boyfriend or girlfriend may seem to affect them more than the death of a sibling or grandparent.

Within a family, each person may mourn differently at different times. One may be talkative, another may tend to cry often, and a third may withdraw. This can generate a great deal of tension and misunderstanding within the already-stressed family. Each person's responses to death should be honored as their way of coping in that moment. Keep in mind that responses may change from day to day or even hour to hour.

#### **5. The grieving process is influenced by many issues.**

The impact of a death on a teen relates to a combination of factors, including:

- Social support systems available for the teen (family, friends and/or community)
- Circumstances of the death; how, where and when the person died
- Whether the young person unexpectedly found the body
- The nature of the relationship with the person who died – harmonious, abusive, conflictual, unfinished, communicative
- The teen's involvement in the dying process
- The emotional and developmental age of the teen
- The teen's previous experiences with death

#### **6. Grief is ongoing.**

Grief never ends, but it does change in character and intensity. Many grieverers have compared their grieving to the constantly shifting tides of the ocean; ranging from calm, low tides to raging high tides that change with the seasons and the years.

The "never-ending, but changing" aspect of grief may be one of the least understood. Most people are anxious for teens to have closure and "put the death behind them" so they can move on. But death leaves a vacuum in the lives of those left behind. Life is never the same again. This does not mean that life can never be joyful again, nor that the experience of loss cannot be transformed into something positive. But grief does not have a magical closure. People report pangs of grief 40, 50, even 60 years after a death. Grief is not a disease that can be cured, but rather a process we learn to incorporate into our lives.

## No One Tells You This about Loss, So I Will

*Author: Cora Neumann*

No one tells you this.

So I will.

No one tells you that you may want to die. No one tells you that you may lie in bed and pray for your heart to stop. That even your most cherished and beloved children and husband may not be able to rouse you from the depths of your sorrow. That even the breathtaking sunrises and majestic shooting stars above won't give you pause.

No one tells you this.

I'm not talking about depression. Or suicide. Or hopelessness. I'm talking about how you may feel if a person you love so deeply, a person who knew and stood by you from birth — and was supposed to be with you until death — dies. All of a sudden. With no warning. Way too young. Frighteningly full of life. And then in an instant, they are gone.

My brother Wyatt died suddenly at age 42 of an aneurysm. We were closer than most siblings. Our dad died when we were one and three years old and, bonded by this early trauma, we were each other's keepers. He was my anchor, my last stop, my wingman for life. My cradle to grave.

When he died, I lost all connection to planet earth. A window opened between dimensions and I climbed right in.

'Take me with you,' I repeated. Over and over and over. It was disorienting and at times completely engulfed me. But it was the only place I wanted to or could be. For months I would drift in and out of this state.

And when you articulate this to friends and family, when you try to give words to these feelings, every alarm rings. Everyone starts to worry. Our culture has nowhere to put these dark feelings and sorrow.

No one tells you this. Not in our American culture anyways.

So now that I've made it to the other side, I will.

Each individual mourns differently, but I have now witnessed how many people suppress their grief for fear of upsetting others.

First of all, the urge to 'die' isn't exactly about dying. It's about holding on to your loved one with all your might, about delaying the separation for as long as humanly possible. It comes from the deepest source of connection a human can feel. From a sense that souls are entwined, like a living whole, and that when one half dies the other simply can't go on.

It is normal, it is born of love and connection, and it is okay. You will return from this dimension, feel like you can live again, but not until you've seen the depths of that darkness.

The saying that kept me afloat on some of my hardest days was, 'the depth of your grief is equal to the depth of your love.' That is exactly how it felt.

Secondly, if it offers any solace, in other cultures and parts of the world this feeling is a known entity. In cultures where death is tied to the cycle of life, not shunned and feared as people desperately try to elongate life and escape death at all costs, there is an understanding and even an openness to the pain that accompanies loss.

In Middle Eastern cultures the saying that is ubiquitous with loss, which is showered on the survivors at the funeral and beyond, is *don't die with the dead*. 'We know you want to die with your loved one. But please don't. We see and understand that this urge is intimately tied to your love, and we remind you to stay with us,' the saying seems to imply.

In Judaism, there are periods of seven days (shiva), 30 days (shloshim) and twelve months (avelut) during which close family members are encouraged to or expected to abstain from celebrations and large social gatherings. It is understood that you will feel bereft, need to be alone, need to fall apart and slowly rebuild yourself.

In Mali and a number of other African countries, widows wear blue for an entire year after loss. In this way, they don't need to speak the unspeakable, and have the space needed to grieve.

We sorely need more of this acceptance and courage in the face of pain in our society. Each individual mourns differently, but I have now witnessed how many people suppress their grief for fear of upsetting others or seeming too wounded.

Let us be brave. Let us stay open to pain and hold space for what, ultimately, is not about pain as much as it is about love, connection, and life.

My telling you won't lessen your pain even slightly. But I hope to help you know that your pain is normal, socially accepted and even embraced in cultures less frightened than ours, and completely yours. When you tell me you just want to die, I for one will not be alarmed, but will say instead, 'I know. Of course you do.'

*If you — or someone you know — needs help, please call 1-800-273-8255 for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline.*



## Top 10 List for Helping Grieving Children & Teens

By Sasha J. Mudlaff, M.A.

### 10. Get rid of assumptions and let the child or teen TEACH you about their grief

#### 9. Deal with the FACTS

By clearly communicating the facts of a death you can help prepare a child or teen for the pain of grief by minimizing the additional pain and confusion that occur when facts aren't communicated clearly or on purpose. Keep the facts consistent, clear and truthful.

#### 8. Be Honest

Do not lie to children or teens. Trust is the essential element in all human relationships. *The trust of a child is trust in its most sacred form.*

#### 7. Help with "connecting the dots"

Coach children and teens to continue to be true to who they are. Help them see how they can "take their grief with them" to their favorite activities and hobbies and even use those activities as an effective means for grief expression.

#### 6. Encourage memorialization and ritual

Children and teens often have the best ideas for rituals – explore ideas together.

#### 5. Connect with community (grief) resources

Peer support can be very healing for grieving children and teens as they realize that they aren't alone in what they are experiencing.

#### 4. Identify Secondary Losses

Secondary losses can be past, present or future. They can be physical, relational or material. Identifying secondary losses helps give children and teens "permission" to feel their pain as they realize how far-reaching their grief really is.

#### 3. Validate feelings – especially anger

Many children believe there are *wrong* feelings. Validate any and all feelings and distinguish between feelings and behavior. Talk about the importance of expressing feelings and distinguish between the *good ways* and the *bad ways* of grief expression.

#### 2. Model and teach how to honor life

There are two ways we honor someone special who has died:

- ♦ The things we do to show honor (lighting a candle, speaking their name, sharing memories, making a donation, visiting a place of memory, etc.)
- ♦ The way we choose to continue to live our lives

#### 1. LISTEN



# My Stages of Grief

**Instructions:** Describe how each of the stages of grief has affected you.

**Denial:** "This can't be happening."

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**Anger:** "Why is this happening to me?"

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**Bargaining:** "I will do anything to change this."

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**Depression:** "What's the point of going on after this loss?"

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**Acceptance:** "I know what happened, and I can't change it. Now I need to cope."

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# Grief Sentence Completion

Right now, I feel... \_\_\_\_\_

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I feel the saddest when... \_\_\_\_\_

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The thing I miss most about the person I lost is... \_\_\_\_\_

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Since the loss, things have been different because... \_\_\_\_\_

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My family usually feels... \_\_\_\_\_

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If I could ask the person I lost one thing, I would ask... \_\_\_\_\_

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Something I liked about the person who I lost was... \_\_\_\_\_

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One thing I learned from the person who I lost is... \_\_\_\_\_

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