

Understanding Grieving Teenagers

In the world that today's teenagers inhabit, death can be found everywhere, making up more of their normal life experience than most adults appreciate. It is contained in the music they listen to, the technology they use, and the media they engage with. However, this is death at a distance, with little impact on their daily lives. It is when death comes close that a teenager's world can be disrupted in a major way. Adults should not assume that "close" always means the death of a family member. The death of a friend, or even someone a young person barely knew, can have a huge impact and this is sometimes unrecognised. Bereavement combined with the upheaval of youth has been described as a "double jeopardy". A bereaved young person supported by Child Bereavement UK put it another way, expressing it as "grief with knobs on." Add to the mix an individual whose stage of development is part adult, part child, and we can start to get a feel for why teenage grief feels very daunting both for the young person experiencing it and the adults who are trying to help.

This leaflet has been written with help from members of Child Bereavement UK Young Person's Advisory Group. Here are the issues as they see them:

"Don't think it's the same for everyone"

All young people are individuals and each will grieve in their own way. *"I acted completely different from my brother because I was much more angry whereas he was more quiet."* Emily age 17. Family members may be grieving for the same person but each will have had their own, unique relationship with that person and therefore the meaning of the death will be different for each one. Complex family relationships can leave a young person confused about just who it is they are grieving for, or they may result in ambivalent feelings towards the person who died. It is very important to this age group that they are seen as their own person with needs specific to them, regardless of what the rest of the family may think.

"Losing a parent at a young age, you lose most of your childhood"

The journey to adulthood is normally a bumpy but also gradual path. The young people we support say that the death of a parent, or sibling, forces them to grow up overnight. They suddenly perceive themselves to be in an alien world of adult responsibilities for which they are not prepared. The resentment can be huge, especially initially. *"It's not only a bereavement....so your hearing your Mum cry and trying to get over your Dad's death....and then you're trying to get your family to school so by the time you get to school you've got a million other things to think about."* With time, there can be a positive side to this. Bereaved young people can show a maturity and wisdom beyond their years with real empathy for others who are finding life difficult.

"Sometimes it's hard to know what we are feeling"

Teenagers who are grieving can feel completely overwhelmed by powerful feelings and emotions that they do not understand or expect. These feelings of grief are often no different from those experienced by adults but are more intense. Guy, age 17, explained that he doesn't always know how he is feeling, or what he needs or wants, and so adults shouldn't expect him to have an answer when they ask how they can help.

“I feel very angry at no one in particular, just anger”

Anger makes up a large part of any child’s grief but for a teenager even more so. Some teenagers have told us that they don’t know why they feel angry, they just do. They may experience angry outbursts at school, or at home. Teenagers are often at a loss as to what to do with their anger and feel quite frightened by it. Often powerless to control it, the pressure builds and the resultant explosion comes out as challenging or extreme behavior. This can be very difficult for an already distressed family to deal with. Let a young person know that they are entitled to be angry but need to express it in a way that is safe for themselves and others.

“I went a bit mad”

Even after someone has died, a frenetic social life often continues to be an important part of any teenager’s day. This might seem out of place but bereaved young people have told us that they find spending time with friends, and going out to their usual haunts, a helpful coping strategy. It also enables them to escape from a possibly highly-charged atmosphere at home. Teenagers may try out risk-taking behaviour in an attempt to get back some control in a life that for them now feels very out of control. Parents, siblings and friends are not meant to die when young. Being out of the natural order of things, young people can view these untimely deaths as a huge injustice and intensely unfair. Misuse of alcohol and drugs helps blot out painful feelings. Driving recklessly, but remaining unscathed, can give a teenager a sense of being back in control, particularly of their own mortality.

“It’s hard to talk to your parents about who died in case you cry and make them cry.”

Many young people find it easier to speak to friends rather than family. This can feel quite hurtful for adults who are trying their best to offer support and comfort which is then rejected. Try to remember that teenagers can be very protective of their family. In order to avoid causing further distress, they may prefer to speak to someone of their own age group, or other adults they trust such as a teacher. The websites mentioned at the end of this sheet are another way that this age group find support through shared experiences, with the added attraction of anonymity.

“I lost (friends) simply because they did not know what to say or do”

Friends can also be a source of distress and upset. Insensitive remarks or even deliberately inappropriate comments are not unusual. The situation can remind friends of their own inadequacies and losses and they then withdraw their friendship, finding the situation just too hard to handle. Bereaved teens can feel that friends just don’t understand and they then struggle to maintain social groups.

“I wondered what the point of going back to school was”

For a teenager whose world has just fallen apart, life can lose its purpose and meaning. They may become apathetic, depressed, withdrawn and develop a “what’s the point” attitude to school or even life. *“I felt like nothing mattered any more, like everything seemed really trivial and all my work just didn’t really matter.”* Others may become very hard working to compensate for feelings of guilt.

How To Help

“I tried to talk to various people but I couldn’t relate to anyone”

Most of the help offered to grieving teenagers by adults involves talking. This is something most teens find very hard to do, especially with someone they do not know. The young people that we work with at Child Bereavement UK tell us that they prefer support from adults they already know and trust. Taking part in an activity helps a teenager to feel less pressurised into talking. Just being with an adult who they know cares is sometimes enough. When ready, they might start a conversation about what has happened, but don’t expect it. In our experience, other things that work include being with other bereaved people the same age, doing something creative such as a memory collage cut of magazines, making a short film about what helps, using a box of buttons to talk about important people, or simply taking the dog for a walk.

Give options

Try to offer a young person options for support and leave them to decide which they want to take up, if any. A gentle reminder of adults other than family, whom they can go to should they wish, gives choice. Suggest they have a look at the websites given at the end of this sheet. They offer online contact with others their own age who will be experiencing similar situations. If help is rejected, continue to let them know that you will be there to listen when they are ready. A consistent, but unobtrusive presence will feel less pressurised making it easier for a stressed teenager to accept some help.

Boundaries

Try to maintain the usual expectations around behaviour. When a teenager's world has fallen apart, they need familiar boundaries maintained, not removed, to create a sense of safety and continuity of normal life, even when life feels very far from normal.

Boost self-esteem

Bereaved young adults can experience feelings of low self-worth and lack of self-esteem. However, they often have a maturity beyond their years, a greater appreciation of the value of life than their peers and can be less judgemental than others their own age. These are very worthy attributes to highlight to a young person who is struggling to think of themselves in a positive light.

When is extra help needed

Grief is not an illness or a condition, it is normal, as are extreme responses to it. It is when these responses continue into the long term that there may be cause for concern. A young person will not get over their grief, but with timely and appropriate support, they will hopefully learn to live with it. If it is preventing them from engaging with normal life, do not hesitate to seek help. Most young people will not need professional help but some will need a bit of extra support. Others will require a more in-depth approach with bereavement counselling, or therapy.

Being alongside a grieving teenager is not always easy, especially if you are dealing with your own grief at the same time. The Child Bereavement UK Support and Information Line 01494 568900 offers a listening ear to families and professionals who would appreciate some guidance or just a reassuring chat. The team can also signpost you to any organisations in your area who might be able to help.

Websites for bereaved teenagers

www.childbereavementuk.org/For/ForYoungPeople

Short films and film clips made by bereaved young people. Films include What Teachers Need To Know, A Message to Parents, A Message To Friends, Messages From Young People Bereaved By Murder and Manslaughter. Details of the Young Persons Advisory Group based in Buckinghamshire.

www.rd4u.org.uk

Run by CRUSE Bereavement Care with a "Lads Only" section. Details of a confidential telephone number and private email service to contact a bereavement counsellor. Monitored message board to share experiences.

www.winstonswish.org.uk

Section for Young People has films and various options for support including frequently asked questions and a topic specific message board which is monitored.

Resources for Teenagers

A Teenage Guide Cost 50p

Pocket sized leaflet written by a bereaved teenager with advice and guidance. Available from Child Bereavement UK.

Out of the Blue Cost £9.95

A workbook of tried and tested ideas for this age group to remember and express feelings. From Winstons Wish.

Resources for Adults caring for bereaved teenagers

Young People, Death and the Unfairness of Everything by Nick Luxmore Cost £13.99

Explores the problems that arise when death is not openly discussed with young people and offers advice about how best to allay concerns without having to pretend that there are easy answers.