

How to Help a Grieving Teenager

After Princess Diana died in an automobile accident, many people wondered how her two teenage sons, William, 15, and Harry, 13, would deal with their grief. "Please give them a cuddle and clear your calendar," advised a London columnist in an open letter to Prince Charles.

This was good advice for the prince and for anyone seeking to comfort a grieving teenager. The high-profile death of Princess Diana raised the important issue of teenagers and bereavement. Too often teenagers feel "invisible" or are "forgotten grievers" when there has been a death. Yet, every day a teenager experiences the death of someone they know and love a parent, sibling, grandparent, schoolmate, friend or relative. Like adults, teenagers can feel overwhelmed by such a loss. Here are a dozen effective ways to help teens get through the grieving process.

Be available. You may be the key, caring adult that a young person needs following a death. Remember that a little support and understanding goes a long way, whether from a neighbor, teacher, coach or a religious leader. Offer condolences straight from your heart, and maintain eye contact with a grieving teenager, letting your eyes say, "I care." "I'm here for you." "Talk to me."

Listen, don't lecture. Like adult grievers, teenagers facing bereavement need to be surrounded by sympathetic listeners. Show that you care by sitting quietly with a teen. Let your presence, not your words, offer strength and security. Being a listener, not a lecturer, paves the way for a teenager to express feelings, thereby allowing a caring adult to help clarify issues.

Consider the example of Anna, a 17-year-old whose father died two years earlier. She felt conflicted about her mother's new relationship with a man she began dating a year after her husband died. Confiding in her grandmother, Anna explained tearfully, "I think it's too soon for my mother to be dating. Although I like her friend, Allen, I feel she's just grabbing the first man who happened to come along. Mom is very pretty, and I know she can't live alone forever, but this is just too soon," she lamented.

Because Anna's grandmother listened carefully and respectfully, she was able to help the teenager sort through her feelings. She effectively helped Anna understand that her mother was not being disloyal to the memory of her father; rather, she felt lonely since his death and possibly saw the new relationship as a way of reestablishing a stable home-life. "Remember, no one is trying to replace your father," her grandmother explained. "Your family deserves another chance at happiness, and Allen may be instrumental in helping you find it," she added.

Know the dangers of the "Big Man/Big Woman Syndrome". One widower expressed concern to a friend that his daughter was trying to be just like her mother. Wendy is only 14, yet she is trying to cook all the family meals and chose to sit where my wife sat at the dining room table. She's at the door when I come home from work and even asks me how my day went.

The friend suggested the father enter into a conversation with his daughter, gently inquiring why she was taking on so much responsibility. The father learned that at the funeral, several well-meaning adults told Wendy she would now have to be the "woman of the house." Those comments forced a sense of maturity upon her which was inappropriate for a 14-year-old. Fortunately the father and daughter were able to resolve the issue, and Wendy functioned more like a teenager again.

A similar danger is directed at teenage boys who may be told, "You are now the man of the house." Always avoid creating the "Big Man/Big Woman Syndrome" in a teenager. Instead, offer comfort and understanding by saying, "It will be hard to manage without your father/mother, but I know your family will work together as a team. I am available to help if you ever need me."

Learn how to be helpful. If you're uncomfortable with death and bereavement issues but want to be helpful, educate yourself via books, courses and seminars. One woman recalls, "Many years ago, my neighbor Marcy died suddenly, leaving three teenagers. I wanted to comfort the children, but no matter how hard I tried, I felt awkward and stumbled over my words whenever I tried to talk to them. After that experience, I decided to sensitize myself to the grieving and took hospice training. Now I know how to listen with my heart and how to respond compassionately to the bereaved."

Watch what you say. Many well-meaning people do not respond appropriately to grieving teens. Here are some statements to avoid when trying to comfort a bereaved teenager:

- I understand how you feel.
- Your father/mother lived a full life.
- You must be strong.
- It was the will of God.
- Don't cry.

The problem with these statements is that they are "closed," leaving no room for further discussion and exploration. Better responses to a grieving teenager are statements which invite the teen to talk openly about their feelings. For example:

- What was your relationship like?
- Can you tell me about the death?
- This must be very painful for you.
- I'm sorry. How can I help?
- How are you doing? How is the family doing?

Do something practical. Bake and deliver some warm cookies. Give a teen a tape or CD of their favorite music. Invite them out for lunch. Rent a movie for them from your local video store. These small gestures convey a larger compassion. Although a teen suffered a serious emotional blow because of the death, your practical kindness will be a reminder that they were not left without love, support and friendship.

Acknowledge teen grief. When visiting the funeral chapel or in the home, deliver your condolences to surviving teens as well as adults in the family. Learn from this teenager's experience. "When my mom died after a prolonged illness, I was only 16," recalls Jaimie. "At the funeral home, I felt almost completely neglected as everyone came and greeted my dad. Finally, after speaking with my father, one man came over to me and said, 'Jaimie, I'm really sorry about your mother's death. I know you really took good care of your mother while she was ill. You can feel very good about that. It was obvious to me that you loved your mother very much and that your mother loved you deeply as well.' That man's praise and his awareness of my grief lifted my spirits and today, more than a year later, I continue to relish his words in my mind."

Recommend a support group. One of the most effective ways for teens to heal is through peer support. Check with your school counselor, clergy or an area hospital to determine the location of a teen support group. There, the grieving teenager will be encouraged to share their loss in a non-judgmental environment. The teen will receive validation of feelings, find the strength to carry on in spite of the loss and, eventually, will be able to help others dealing with the death of a loved one.

Remember the teen on special days. The first year after a loss is especially difficult, particularly a birthday, anniversary, Mother's Day, Father's Day and the holidays. What was once a festive occasion may now be a time of private, painful sorrow. Visit, phone or send a brief note letting a teen know you are thinking of them.

Use touch to comfort. Holding a hand, placing an arm around a shoulder or giving a hug are physical ways of delivering emotional comfort. Be prepared for your touch to set off a flood of tears which may have been held back, but let the teen cry freely. They will feel better for shedding the tears.

Stay in touch. Do more than simply visit at the time of death. Pick up the phone or visit with the teen during the weeks and months following the funeral. Initiating regular contact lets a teen know you are available. As other family and friends recede, your calls and visits can be very helpful and prevent a teen from feeling isolated with their grief.

Recognize the signs that a teen may need extra help. While most teens will experience normal grief, some may lapse into complicated grieving patterns. Watch for these signs indicating their grief is becoming unhealthy:

- Appetite changes resulting in dramatic weight gain or loss.
- Altered sleep patterns either unable to rest or sleeping excessively.
- Prolonged withdrawal from others.
- Deterioration of relationships with family and friends.
- Risk-taking behaviors such as drug and alcohol abuse or sexual experimentation.
- Inability to experience pleasure.
- Feeling overly guilty, hostile or resentful.
- Demonstrating helplessness and hopelessness.

A combination of the above signs indicate a teen could benefit through counseling from a therapist skilled in bereavement issues.

Finally, your love and understanding will strongly support a teenager through a difficult and vulnerable time. Bereavement will eventually come to an end, and your kindness will help make the experience an important part of the teen's personal growth and development.

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