

## FROM THE SCHOOL COUNSELLOR

### Teenagers and grief

- Teenagers grieve in much the same way as adults but because at this stage of their development they often have emotional 'ups and downs' they can become deeply distressed.
- Teenagers can be greatly affected by grief following the break-up of relationships, parents' separation or the death of someone close to them.
- They can become withdrawn, depressed and moody.
- They will probably want to get support and spend time with their friends more than their family or other adults. However they still need to know that you are there for them to talk to if they need.
- Young people often show sadness through acting out and angry behaviour which covers up their underlying feeling.
- Some may turn to using drugs or alcohol, driving too fast or doing dangerous things. These young people need lots of support.
- Others just need to do active and noisy things such as go for a run, dance to loud music or play sport with friends to deal with their strong feelings.
- Still others seek comfort in music, writing poetry, walking alone or being in a quiet place to deal with their grief.
- If your teenager is facing a big loss such as the death of a friend, parent or loved grandparent it may help if he has a task to do at the funeral service or can do something special to remember that person by.
- When grieving is associated with a traumatic experience, reactions to the shock of the trauma may dominate and the grief process may not begin properly for a few weeks.

### How young people show their grief

Some of the ways they show grief may be:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Early stages:</b> disbelief, helplessness, confusion, preoccupation and sometimes a sense of presence of the deceased. Often accompanied by frequent crying.</li><li>• physical pain such as stomach aches or headaches</li><li>• sleeping problems, bad dreams</li><li>• eating problems, eating too much or too little</li><li>• being destructive</li><li>• acting like a younger child</li><li>• not being able to concentrate for long</li><li>• problems with school work</li><li>• being easily upset</li><li>• being "mean" to others</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• acting more like an adult</li><li>• showing fears</li><li>• anger or aggression to friends, parents</li><li>• angry outbursts</li><li>• being unhappy and blaming themselves, or others</li><li>• tendency to think the person who has gone is perfect</li><li>• crying and giggling without obvious reason</li><li>• not wanting to separate, clinginess, wanting to be near adults</li><li>• "switching off", acting as if they haven't taken in what has happened</li><li>• running away, avoiding school, stealing</li></ul>
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### Special Note

Professional help is needed if a child:

- seems to be preoccupied with dying
- is unable to concentrate and is withdrawn at school months later
- is crying, sad or depressed much of the time
- talks of not wanting to live or being better off dead
- is not wanting to join in or be with peers months later.

## What parents can do

- Provide a safe environment where your child feels able to express feelings in whatever way he can. Help him to find ways to show his feelings through writing a letter, a story, a poem, painting or drawing.
- Give clear and truthful information to young people in a way that they can understand. Young people may not seem sad when you think they should be. This isn't a lack of being sensitive; it is just the stage they are at.
- Allow children time to talk, ask questions and share worries with a caring adult. They might be very confused and need to ask lots of questions. If you can't talk about it, find another adult who is close to your child who can. If young people can't talk to you about the loss, they might feel that it is not safe to talk about it and so continue to have muddled and scary feelings. You may have to answer the same question over and over as your child learns to understand what has happened.
- If your teenager has had a loss and is acting angrily or withdrawing try to make times available for him to talk, without pushing for answers. If it continues, talk to a health professional about it.
- Try to open the way if a child feels unable to talk about his feelings. Say something like "*Some things are really hard to talk about, but talking can help. If you ever want to talk about what has happened, let me know*".
- Be honest. Parents sometimes lie to children because they want to protect them. If you don't tell them what has happened, you may prevent them from dealing with the loss and grieving. This can cause problems when they have other losses in their lives.
- Stick to as many of the family routines as you can. Too many changes will add further stress. Doing the same things as usual helps children to feel safe.
- Keep some rules about what your child/ren are allowed to do. If you think they are taking advantage of the situation you will start to feel angry and that won't help.
- Share your own grief - don't hide your sadness. Young people will feel more normal about their own feelings and feel comforted to know that the feelings they have are in line with those of the rest of the family. If you are really distressed it may not be wise to share feelings with children because it is important that they know that you are in control and can keep them safe.
- Ceremonies such as funerals can be important ways for children as well as adults to help make sense of the big changes in their lives. Sharing emotions can help people feel connected to others.
- Get support for yourself. Talk with your partner or a friend. Seek personal grief counselling if you need to.
- Remember that children grieve in bursts. They have their own individual reactions, and they feel loss just as much as adults but may show it differently.
- Allow times for extra closeness and comfort.
- If your family has a spiritual belief this can be a support to children and parents.

**Note:** Children's grief can affect adults personally, especially if they are grieving themselves or if it is a reminder of a past loss. If this happens you need to deal with this. Talking with a supportive person, either a friend or a professional with an understanding of the grieving process, can make a difference.

- Young people grieve in bursts - they may not show their grief in the same way as adults.
- Keep to family routines as much as you can to give security.
- Be honest, trustworthy and reliable.
- Give your grieving child special times with you to talk about feelings.
- The biggest need for children and teenagers who have a loss is that they are supported and cared for and have someone to talk to about it.
- If your child or teenager seems to not be managing, seek help. From: \* School Counsellor \* Your doctor  
\*Lifeline Australia: 131 114 [www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au) \* Kids Helpline: 1800 55 1800 [www.kidshelp.com.au](http://www.kidshelp.com.au)  
\*Parentline 132 289