

Helping your Teenager Manage Grief

In light of the recent tragic death of one of our students, we thought it would be appropriate to re-publish the following article, which originally appeared in the March edition of The Fountain newsletter. We hope you find this information useful.

The loss of a parent, sibling, friend or relative is difficult at any age, and particularly devastating for a teen. Grief is a normal human emotion that we all inevitably experience in our life. It has been wisely said that grief is the price we pay for love. Yet, as we all love differently, we grieve differently. There are no rules, set patterns or timeframes, but there are things to know and to look out for especially if your child is experiencing a devastating loss for the first time.

It is also important to note that grief is not only experienced as a result of a death. It is normal to grieve any major loss, and this can include family breakdown, a relationship break-up, the loss of a pet, the family home and even a change of school.

Grieving is an internal process. We mourn publicly by attending funerals and partaking in certain ceremonies and rituals, and these are very important and help facilitate grief, but they are not grieving. Because grief is an internal process, we may not always notice or recognise that a person is grieving. Grief also inevitably brings strong and often intense emotions. These feelings are normal and healthy but can be uncomfortable, unfamiliar, even scary and very hard to sit with.

There are many factors which impact the intensity and progress of the grieving process, but we hope the following general guide will be helpful:

- As a general rule teenagers feel all emotions more intensely. Hormonal fluctuations and brain development can certainly amplify feelings and this includes those of sadness and loss.
- Talk to your teenager about grief. Teach them about the grieving process and the strong and uncomfortable feelings that accompany loss. Teach them that grief is a journey that is different for everyone. Teach them that it will pass with time and reassure them that they will be OK
- Teenagers can often feel very alone in their grief. They are striving for independence and so might not want to appear to need help or support from their parents. As a result, they may be more likely to seek support or comfort from their friends, or even through social media or the internet.
- Adolescence is naturally a time of questioning. At a time of loss teens may well question what they believe and ask challenging questions about their faith, their spirituality, the meaning of life or why bad things happen to good people. Listen to their questions. You don't have to know the answers. It's OK to say, 'I don't know', or 'I ask myself the same questions'.
- Pay attention to their moods and look for opportunities to listen and to check in and gently ask, 'Are you OK?' Let them know that you are there for them and that you care. When they want to talk to you, give them your undivided attention. This gives them the message that they, and what they are feeling, are important to you. But don't force it.
- Resist the urge to "cheer them up", give advice or solve the problem. If they have decided to talk to you, listen for the feelings they are trying to express. Respond in a way that shows you are really trying to understand what they are telling you.
- A young person's grief may be hidden under bad behaviour. They may be grumpy, slam doors or snap at you. They may resort to drinking alcohol or using other drugs.

It's OK to set reasonable limits on their behaviour. Be firm and clear about your expectations and be reassured that your child will feel safer when they know how far they can go.

- Don't be afraid of strong emotional reactions; even anger or rage. Validate their feelings. Let them know that you get it. Reassure them that strong emotions are a normal reaction to stressful situations. Help them with strategies. Go for a walk together. Hang up the punching bag for them. Encourage them to participate in their normal activities such as sport, dancing or other extra-curricular. Talk to them about self-care and encourage them to maintain a regular bed time, a good diet, some exercise and to spend some time with their friends doing things they enjoy.
- Don't be afraid to see them crying and don't be afraid to let them see you cry. Tears of grief contain hormones which calm and induce sleep. They are a normal reaction to a sad and stressful event.
- Your child may or may not want to participate in activities associated with major loss, for example attend the funeral service. It's OK to gently encourage, but do not force them to do anything they feel uncomfortable with. Maybe help them create their own "service" or special way of remembering or saying goodbye at home.
- Finally, let other significant adults in the life of your child, like teachers and coaches know when they have experienced a significant loss, so they too can make allowances for your child's moods and behaviours. They too may be available to listen to and support them. There are many things we can do in a school to make allowances for students who are experiencing a difficult time in their life. It helps if we know.

There are some very good resources on the internet, also. We have listed some of these below:

<https://headspace.org.au/assets/Uploads/Resource-library/Young-people/Grief-web.pdf>

<https://www.webmd.com/balance/helping-teens-who-are-grieving>

<https://www.youthbeyondblue.com/understand-what's-going-on/grief-and-loss>

If you have questions or continued to be worried about your child, for any reason, do not hesitate to contact us at school:

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