Helping Teens Cope with Dying, Death and Grief
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Teens are fully equipped to deal with dying, death and grief. They will, however, experience them differently than children and adults. The teen years are a powerful time of changes, as teens are engaged in the development of their identity, body, spirituality and emotions.

During this time, teens are separating from their parents and learning to live independently. They are balancing their need for parental support and their desire for social freedom. Death and grief can be huge challenges to teens during this transitional time. With the help of supportive family members and friends, most teens navigate this time of growth successfully.
Dying and Death

When someone is very ill
Give your teen information about the person’s illness and what to expect as soon as possible. Teens will use information about the present situation to think ahead and plan for events in the future. For example, when she is told that her grandmother will not recover from a recent stroke and has a certain amount of time to live, your daughter will begin to feel the sadness of grief and start to think about and prepare for her life without that person. To support her in this process, you could suggest that she might want to write or talk about the things that her grandmother taught her.

Teens and their friends
While teens undoubtedly get a great deal of support and approval from their friends and peers, this does not mean that they are being properly supported emotionally. Teens are figuring out how to live, as individuals and in relationships. This means they are testing out many different ways of living, thinking, feeling and acting.
As an adult who has passed through those difficult and exciting years, you can offer a more mature example of how to face a crisis and experience emotions. It is important to let teens support and care for each other, but they may not have all their needs met in their social circle. Their peers may not necessarily encourage the most effective and helpful coping methods. Gently and consistently check in with your teen to see how they are doing. Don’t be afraid to share your own ideas and thoughts about living through painful experiences.

Teens are between

It is good to remember that teens will react and respond to life and relationships with a mixture of adult and childlike coping. Teens are often expected to cope as adults. They can feel pressure to act and grieve in an “organized” adult manner. They may be able to do so part of the time, but it is helpful to remember that they are just learning these coping strategies. Expecting and allowing for more childlike coping will help your teen feel free to move back and forth.
Teens as caregivers

Teens are capable of caring for others in pain, and often step into the role of parent or caregiver. During the dying process and then during grief, teens can be effective helpers. Help your teen find ways of helping the person who is ill, using their interests or skills. Teens often want to be helpful but may not know exactly what to do or how to offer help. For example, if your son is known for his tidiness, you might suggest that he help his dying father organize his office space or workshop.

Helping can be a wonderful learning experience for a teen. It can also be a way of avoiding strong emotions. Keeping busy with tasks allows little time for grief. Parents and guardians should try to make sure that teens are reminded and given the opportunity to grieve and be cared for themselves.
When Someone has Died

When a family member, friend or loved one dies, developing teens can find the adjustment painful and disorienting. Illness and death demand that a teen grapple with mortality, vulnerability and fragility. Given the large amount of changes happening and the emotional demands of being a teen, this can be hard for teens to manage.

Teens are moving away from the self-centredness of their younger years. They are beginning to see and understand the effect that a loss will have on others as well as themselves. However, this ability comes and goes. At times, they may sympathize with the dying person and other family members for the losses that they face. At other times, their only concern will be their own needs, suffering or sadness.

Rituals

Prepare your teen for family rituals. Teens may want to play a central role in planning how they take part in the funeral or other rituals. They may want to use their own interests and strengths to take part. For example, if your daughter is interested in creative and artistic projects she may want to make a memory book for the event or interview close family members or friends for stories that could be included in the service.
Grieving teens

Hiding and showing feelings
As they come to understand themselves, teens learn how to reflect on their thoughts and feelings. The intensity of thoughts and feelings during grief can easily overwhelm a teen. To cope with this, many teens act “as if nothing has happened”. This is a way for them to feel safe, secure and organized while they are figuring things out inside. This is normal and is nothing to be concerned about.

Periods of silence and acting like “nothing has happened” may be followed by periods of sadness, crying and talking. Sometimes these expressions are dramatic. Teens tend to bounce back and forth between holding their emotions inside and suddenly spilling them out.

Teens may also withhold their feelings to protect family members. Teens may mistakenly believe that if they are “strong” and “OK”, their grieving parents and siblings will not be further stressed by their sadness and emotional turmoil. Teens and children are both capable of suppressing their feelings so as not to further upset the family. Parents may also do this, so that everyone in the family is protecting everyone else.
Give teens space to figure things out inside. Let them express themselves freely and without judgement. This will help them feel safe to explore the powerful feelings and thoughts connected with grief. Being available and reaching out to them from time to time will help them know that uncertainty, hurt and confusion are normal parts of being human. You may wish to remind your teen that sharing feelings tends to make a family healthier than hiding feelings. Sharing sadness connects our hearts and makes us feel less alone.

Modelling healthy grief and communication is the best thing you can do for a young person. Listen to their thoughts and ideas about grief without judgement. They are working things out as best they can.
School and stress

Illness, death and grief can create stress that impacts your teen’s ability to concentrate or succeed in school and other areas. Grades at school or athletic activities may be affected. This can be a major concern for teens who are applying to get into university or college. It might be helpful to offer to help your daughter study for upcoming exams or to proofread her assignments. Some schools will make special arrangements for marks. You might ask if she’s able to talk with friends about what’s happening. Explore whether she has any concerns or questions about how this person’s illness and death will affect her future.

Make sure that the school knows about the death. At this age it is very important that your teen’s friends, teachers and school staff acknowledge the death and offer their condolences. This kind of support can be very comforting.
Some teens may need extra help

Even though it can be intense, shocking and confusing, most teens will move successfully through their grief. There are some teens, however, who will cope with their pain in ways that may be troubling or frightening. Watch for these warning signs:

• Symptoms of depression such as trouble sleeping, restlessness and chronic low self-esteem
• Academic failure or indifference to school-related activities when your teen would usually be more engaged
• Breakdown of relationships with family members or friends
• Behaviours such as drug and alcohol abuse, self-harm or cutting, risk-taking, fighting and sexual experimentation
• Denying pain while at the same time acting overly strong or mature

Teens are often suspicious about counselling, as it exposes their vulnerability. There are many options for a wary teenager who is struggling with loss, including school counsellors, adult mentors, church groups, chaplains, drama or art therapists, and private therapists. Many teens may just need a little more time and attention from caring adults like you.
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