

## **DEALING WITH DEATH**

### **DISCUSSION GUIDE**

#### **On PBS (Check local listings)**

**A half hour special from *In the Mix*, the award winning weekly PBS series**

We're constantly surrounded by death in the media, in the news, and in our own lives. Yet it's often a taboo subject in families, schools, and communities, so teens who lose loved ones-- whether to illness, suicide, or violence-- are left to face their pain alone. With this special, *In the Mix* breaks the silence and encourages young people to express their thoughts and experiences surrounding the issue, driving home the message that our lives become more fulfilling when we feel free to think and talk honestly about death.

#### **How to Use this Program:**

Studies conducted by RMC Research on previous *In the Mix* specials have shown that these programs engage the interest of teenagers, deliver information, catalyze discussion on critical issues, as well as promote analytical thinking and a greater sense of self-efficacy among teens. The aim is to encourage thought and allow teens to generate their own creative solutions.

In this guide, we have outlined specific questions based on the program's content, with answers. These questions can be used to open up more analytical discussion about related concepts. Also included are in-class activities and longer-term projects that are presented in bold type. We suggest showing the entire program to the group and then running individual segments followed by discussion.

#### **Did you know?**

- By the end of high school, 20% of today's young people will have experienced the death of a parent
- Of 1,000 high school juniors and seniors, 90% have experienced the death of a loved one.
- One in every 1,500 secondary school students dies each year.

#### **In the Mix Awards**

- 2000 Prix Jeunesse Web Prize competition: 2<sup>nd</sup> Place.
- 2000 Young Adult Library Services Association's "Top Ten Videos" list for, "School Violence: Answers From The Inside 1999"
- 1999 Young Adult Library Services Association's for "Depression: On the Edge"
- 1999 Academy of Television Arts and Sciences Honor Roll of Quality Youth Programming
- 1999 National Mental Health Association
- 1997 International Prix Danube for Children's Television
- 1997 New York Emmy for Children's Programming
- 1996 Finalist, The New York Festivals
- 1994 National Emmy for Community Service Programming

This guide to ***Dealing With Death*** contains four major sections which include questions, discussion topics, and activities, as well as a list of resources.

## **SECTION ONE FOCUSING IN ON A TABOO SUBJECT**

Teens participating in video production programs create their own documentaries about grief, death, and new ways to look at life.

### 1. Question:

John and his friends made their video, "One Time Or Another" because they wanted to address the images of death they see in their daily lives. How did the experience of making the video change their attitudes towards death and grieving?

*they realized what it means when you hear gunshots or other signs of violence; understand that there's a person behind every memorial; understand that there's no way to prepare for the loss of someone you love; realized that they're vulnerable to death too; gained motivation to live life to the fullest; helped them accept death*

Further Discussion:

What other images of death do you see in your daily lives? On TV and in movies? In newspapers? In music?

### 2. Question:

In the video, Stephanie talks about what she went through after her mother died of AIDS. Why did she find it hard to grieve?

*many adults don't know how to help young people deal with death; she was embarrassed to have people see her in pain; she didn't want anyone to pity her*

### 3. Question:

In "RIP Teens Coping With Death", Lynette and Kris relate their experiences with the death of their fathers. What personal problems did they have in the aftermath of loss?

*Lynette was afraid to be by herself and to go to school; Kris stopped caring about things and would get into fights*

How did they overcome these problems and deal with their grief?

*Lynette plays sports like martial arts, softball, and volleyball relieves her stress; playing softball like her dad helps her feel close to him; Kris realized that his behavior wasn't going to bring his father back so he decided to focus on life*

**Further Discussion:**

What are some words that describe someone's reaction to the death of someone close to them? How can some of these words contradict each other (for example, "sad" and "angry")? What are some words to describe someone's attitude towards their own death? What can happen to these feelings if someone doesn't have a way of expressing or dealing with them?

**Related Activity:**

As a class, brainstorm a list of expressions and euphemisms that are used when people talk about death. Try to include both the formal and informal, for instance: "Passed away", "Kicked the bucket", "Is with the Angels", etc. Lead a discussion on why, when, and in reference to whom these might be used. How might they be confusing or create problems? How might they keep people from facing the reality of death?

**4. Question:**

According to Rubin and Jamal, who made "RIP Teens Coping With Death", what is the one thing they want people to know when watching their video?

*that they're not alone in dealing with the death of someone they love*

**Related Activity:**

Divide the class into groups and assign each group a different type of popular media (such as music, TV, movies, comic books, etc.). Each group should find examples of how death is represented in their assigned medium and write up commentary about each example. Is death represented realistically? Are there similarities and differences among the examples for this medium? How might these examples influence someone's view of death and dying?

**SECTION TWO****ON HER OWN TERMS**

Laura, 19, has been living with cystic fibrosis since birth. She talks about how her terminal illness affects how she and her friends view death.

**1. Question:**

Laura says that she thinks differently about death than other people her own age. Why do you think that is?

*She knows how she's going to die; she thinks about what her final infection will be like; she has watched many of her friends already die of the same disease*

**2. Question:**

Does Laura feel sorry for herself? Why or why not?

*No; she thinks more about her friends who didn't get to be 19 like her and weren't able to go to the prom, graduate high school, or go on to college; she realizes that she is fortunate to experience the things she does*

3. Question:

Regarding her friends who do not have CF, Laura feels that she helps them as much as they help her. Why?

*She sees her life as a way to help others get through tough experiences; her friends appreciate their day-to-day lives much more because Laura helps them realize the gift they have*

Further Discussion:

What were your reactions to "meeting" Laura? Did you feel bad for her? Does her attitude towards life and death differ from yours? How do you think you would behave in her situation?

Further Discussion:

Do you know, or have you ever known, someone who is living with a terminal illness? Are you able to talk to them openly about their death? Do they seem angry or defeated? Do they accept their situation?

Related Activity:

Arrange for the class to spend a day volunteering at a hospital ward, nursing home, or other location where they might meet individuals who are facing death. Ask students to create an essay, poem, or piece of artwork that reflects their experience and the people they encountered. Share as a class.

## **SECTION THREE**

### **EXPRESS YOURSELF**

Leah and Julia published their personal essays and poems about death in a newspaper, while Michael and Reynold use art, photography, and writing to explore their feelings about fatal violence in their neighborhood.

1. Question:

How did the writing program help Julia and Leah explore their feelings about death?

*Putting your experiences on paper forces you to relive them and brings out emotions; everyone else had painful moments in their lives so they realized their feelings were normal; death is often a taboo subject in families and writing helps if you have nobody else to talk about it with*

2. Question:

Julia wrote about what she went through when her father died suddenly. Do you have to experience the loss of someone you love in order to think or write about death?

*No; Leah wrote about how others might feel and about her own questions surrounding death*

Further Discussion:

Julia mentions that one of the reasons why she wanted to participate in the writing program was because even though death is talked about often in the media, you don't usually hear the reaction from teens because teens hide their feelings about it. Do you agree? Why or why not? What other reasons would keep the media from focusing on teen reactions to death?

Related Activity:

Explore poetry and/or song lyrics relating to death and dying. Ask students to read aloud various selections and conduct a brief discussion on the writer's intent and their own reactions. Students will then write a poem themselves. Share as a class or compile into a book.

Suggested poems include:

**"Funeral Blues" by W.H. Auden**

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,  
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,  
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum  
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.

Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead  
Scribbling on the sky the message He Is Dead,  
Put crêpe bows round the white necks of the public  
doves,

Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.

He was my North, my South, my East and West,  
My working week and my Sunday rest,  
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;  
I thought that love would last for ever: I was wrong.

The stars are not wanted now: put out every one;  
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;  
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood.  
For nothing now can ever come to any good.

**"Otherwise" by Jane Kenyon**

I got out of bed  
on two strong legs.  
It might have been  
otherwise. I ate  
cereal, sweet  
milk, ripe, flawless  
peach. It might  
have been otherwise.  
I took the dog uphill  
to the birch wood.  
All morning I did  
the work I love.

At noon I lay down  
with my mate. It might  
have been otherwise.  
We ate dinner together  
at a table with silver  
candlesticks. It might  
have been otherwise.  
I slept in a bed  
in a room with paintings  
on the walls, and  
planned another day  
just like this day.  
But one day, I know,  
it will be otherwise.

### 3. Question:

Reynold and Michael took photographs of RIP murals in their neighborhood. How did the project help them explore how they feel about death?

*it's easy to see the murals without thinking about them; by taking photographs and discussing them, it was easier for the participants to really pay attention to what the mural represents*

Further Discussion:

Why do you think that the more we hear about death, the less we think about it? Why would Reynold and Michael, who are confronted with reminders of death on a regular basis, need a photography project to help them deal with their feelings?

Related Activity:

Michael drew a picture of how he felt when his friend was shot and killed. As a class, conduct an art-related activity that will help students express how they feel about death. Ask them to focus either on the death of someone close to them, or on their own mortality. Ideas include:

- Writing or drawing spontaneously on poster boards or mural paper taped to the wall
- Creating a collage using pictures and words cut from old magazines
- Constructing a "memory book" or journal using a blank notebook and decorated with photographs and magazine cutouts.

### 1. Question:

Reynold was shot with a bullet that is still in his arm. How has his "brush with death" changed him?

*he appreciates his life more; he made a promise to God to change his violent behavior; he wants to help young kids in his neighborhood so they don't end up like him*

## SECTION FOUR

### SOLACE AND SUPPORT

Young people struggling with the loss of someone they love find help through bereavement support groups.

1. Question:

What problems did Dante experience after his father committed suicide?

*he became depressed and felt like he should have done more to help his father; he became angry at everything; he didn't want to get up in the morning; he didn't want to move or do anything; he was too ashamed to talk about his feelings with anyone*

2. Question:

Why do Dante and other teens dealing with grief have trouble discussing it with others?

*many people are afraid it will make them feel different from everyone else; they feel like nobody would understand; they feel like people will make fun of them; they're afraid they will only be identified through their loss and not for themselves*

Further Discussion:

What types of reactions do people have when the subject of death is brought up? Why do they have these reactions? What can you say to someone to make them feel more comfortable talking about death and dying?

3. Question:

What do Dante and the other teens get out of their support groups?

*they hear how people are going through similar experiences; they're able to give and receive comfort; they share ideas; they are able to form connections between their different experiences; seeing others bring out their emotions allows them to bring out their own feelings*

4. Question:

How do activities like the Memorial Wall and the balloon letters help the members of the support group?

*the wall is a permanent memorial that they have created with their own thoughts and images; it's a good alternative for people who don't have a gravesite to visit when they want to remember their loved one; the balloon letter provides a way for someone to communicate privately with the person they lost*

**Related Activity:**

Ask students to think about someone in their life who has died; it can be a person or even a pet. (If students can think of neither, ask them to choose someone famous, now dead, who they admire.) Students will write a letter to them using the following thoughts as a guide:

- How you felt when they died
- What you miss about them
- What you want them to know about your current life
- What you wanted to say to them when they were alive but never got the chance
- How you will remember them
- How they will always remain a part of you

As a class, decide how the letters might be shared, such as read anonymously, mailed to themselves, sent up in balloons (use biodegradable balloons with no string), etc. Be sure to respect someone's wishes to keep their letter and not have it shared.

**Related Activity:**

Create a memorial for the loved ones lost by the class. Ideas include:

- A painted mural in the school or community
- A Website
- An album, with one page for each student, to remain in the school library
- A rock garden where each student is given a stone on which to paint their memorial

**Related Activity:**

Divide the class into groups and ask each group to find one resource that can help young people deal with grief, death, and dying. Assign different groups different types of resources, such as local, regional, national, online, etc. Students should gather details such as the resource's mission and history, programs, and contact information. Students might also write up their comments of how and who the resource can help. Share the results as a whole class and compile the information into a resource for the school and community in the form of a booklet, bulletin board, or Web page.

**RESOURCES****Organizations**

Covenant House

1-800-999-9999

[www.covenanthouse.org](http://www.covenanthouse.org)



Growth House

[www.growthhouse.org](http://www.growthhouse.org)

415-255-9045

Compassionate Friends

[www.compassionatefriends.org](http://www.compassionatefriends.org)

P. O. Box 3696

Oak Brook IL

60522-3696

877-969-0010

**Online:**

www.GriefNet.org

Urban Health Chronicles

[www.arthurasheinstitute.org/HAS/UHC.html](http://www.arthurasheinstitute.org/HAS/UHC.html)

[www.Death-Dying.com](http://www.Death-Dying.com)

Teenage Grief (T.A.G.)

<http://www.smartlink.net/~tag/>

[www.americanhospice.org](http://www.americanhospice.org)

[www.counselingforloss.com](http://www.counselingforloss.com)

[www.allkidsgrieve.org](http://www.allkidsgrieve.org)

[www.npr.org/programs/death](http://www.npr.org/programs/death)

For information about **In the Mix**, including show descriptions and schedules, visit our home on the World Wide Web at [www.IntheMix.org](http://www.IntheMix.org), or e-mail us at [InTheMix@pbs.org](mailto:InTheMix@pbs.org).

***Dealing With Death*** carries one-year off-air taping rights and performance rights. Check your local PBS listings for airtimes.

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