

Hope & Healing: How Teachers can Help Teens Deal with Suicide Grief *Terri Erbacher, PhD*

The teen years are already tumultuous, and the bereaved teen needs special attention. Under ordinary circumstances, teenagers go through many changes in their body image, behavior, attachments and feelings. While people of all ages struggle with loss, teenagers face particularly painful adjustments following the death of a peer, friend, or loved one.

Do teens grieve like adults?

Teens grieve deeply but often work very hard to hide their feelings. Fearing the vulnerability that comes with expression, they look for distractions rather than stay with the grief process long enough to find real relief. Feelings can be turned off quickly, much like flipping a light switch. Teens can act as if nothing has happened while they are breaking up inside. You may observe teens who take on the role of caregiver to family members or friends, in effect denying their own grief.

Gender makes no distinctions when it comes to experiencing grief, but the outward signs may be different. Young men of this age may have a particularly hard time when they have been taught that showing emotion is something that girls do - but macho guys don't.

Do grief support groups work?

Yes, by sharing feelings with one another, teens find out they are not alone and that others are also struggling to rebuild shattered lives. Grief groups help teens feel understood, accepted and supported.

Common Grief Symptoms/Behaviors a teen may experience:

Emotional Effects

Shock & Disbelief
Anger & Irritability
Depression/Sadness
Despair or Helplessness
Terror/Fear
Guilt or Self-Blame
Anxiousness or Worry
Loss of pleasure in activities
Confusion

Physical Effects

Fatigue
Insomnia or Disturbed Sleep
Stomach/Headaches
Decreased Appetite
Hyperarousal or Easily Startled

Cognitive Effects

Difficulty Concentrating
Trouble Making Decisions
Trouble Remembering
Impaired Self-Esteem
Intrusive Thoughts or Memories
Nightmares

Social/Behavioral Effects

Social Withdrawal or Isolation
Increased Relationship Conflict
Refusal to go to School or Activities
Crying Easily
Change in Daily Patterns
Regression in Behavior
Risk Taking Behaviors (substance use)
Aggression or Oppositional Behaviors

If adults are open, honest and loving, experiencing the loss of someone loved can be a chance for young people to learn about both the joy and pain that comes from caring deeply.

Some things teachers can do:

How adults respond when someone loved dies has a major effect on the way teens react
Be available if a teen approaches you to talk, but realize many teens may not come to you
Teens often need caring adults to confirm that it is okay to be sad
Remind teens that there is no “right” way to grieve and they may feel varied emotions
Listen without judgment and share your own feelings and concerns honestly
It is okay to tell a teen that you don’t know answers to some difficult questions
Try to re-establish a routine, with appropriate expectations, as soon as possible
Try not to take anger or irritability personally as it may be directed toward adults
Remember that telling teens to “be strong” discourages them from sharing feelings
Help teens understand that the hurt they feel now won’t last forever
Help teens realize that ignoring their own grief may make them feel *more* alone and sad
Emphasize the importance of them seeking help when needed
Help teens realize the importance of looking out for each other
Help the child find a grief group if they are interested as to not help them feel so alone
Be gentle and compassionate in all of your helping efforts

When should a referral to professionals be made?

Some of the indicators that let you know when a teen needs more support are:

- **Dramatic behavior changes at home, school or socially**
- **Feeling extraordinary pressure, overwhelmed, or burdensome**
- **Teen is beginning to isolate themselves from peers and school**
- **Depression that lasts more than 2 weeks after the death of a loved one**
- **Talk about dying or wishing they were dead**
- **Extreme anger that causes problems at home, school or with friendships**
- **Feelings of guilt that leave the teen feeling isolated and alone**
- **Substance abuse – teens sometimes turn to drugs or alcohol to rid pain**
- **Acting out or risk taking behaviors (acting out sexually, driving fast)**
- **Skipping school or dropping grades**

If a child mentions suicide, do take it seriously. Do not leave the child alone at any time. Get them help immediately by having them escorted to the guidance department.

*****Remember that the NUMBER ONE protective factor in the life of a child is a caring adult who listens to a child without judgment. This is often a teacher!*****

Source: Erbacher, T.A. (2013). *Lending a Helping Hand: Suicide in Schools: Empowering School Districts*. Booklet published by the Delaware County Intermediate Unit, Morton, PA.