

Adolescent Grief

by Tara Clark

Grief is a normal, natural process by which we adjust to living with any significant loss. It is a total response to the crisis of losing anything precious.

Grief is a regular feature of living but not well understood. Many people in the middle of grief worry about being normal.

Nature has provided us with a built-in psychological mechanism by which we adjust to our losses. It is similar to the healing process by which our skin closes over a cut. With caring support, we do not go mad or collapse, instead we come out stronger, more mature people.

How is teenage grief different from adult grief?

Adolescents do grieve somewhat differently to adults. We now know that human brain development continues until our mid twenties. Because teenagers have had less time to learn, and fewer experiences, than fully grown adults, they have not had sufficient time to develop all of the adult's coping skills. There are several distinct ways that grief in teenagers may be different from adults.

Lack of development:

Teenagers may need more support and time to understand their grief as for many this will be their first experience of grief or loss. Teenagers may need more support to tolerate emotional pain and help to develop healthy ways of coping (talking, journaling, exercise, self-care), as well as support to avoid maladaptive coping (e.g., substance abuse, high risk behaviour). Teenagers may need more help to verbalise their feelings, especially younger teens. In addition, those teenagers who have experienced childhood trauma/abuse may have more difficulty than other teens, and these students may need extra support to understand their grief, tolerate emotional pain, and verbalise their feelings.

Fear of being different:

In a teen's mind, few fates are worse than being different. Adolescents fear being 'different' from their peers with regard to having a bereavement in their family. Grieving teens are isolated by difference, afraid of classmates' pity, but hungry for understanding. Unlike adults who may obtain solace and comfort from the condolences of their friends, teens can dread this process, and frequently their peers feel equally uncomfortable at the prospect of having to speak to a bereaved friend.

Mastery over feelings:

Teenagers, even when they are not in the midst of grief, are trying to gain control over their feelings. When grieving, some teenagers may resist and feel uncomfortable with such intense feelings. They may avoid invitations to openly express their emotions. Some teens may touch on grief on an intermittent basis for many years in an approach-avoidance cycle. With regard to painful feelings, some teens may dive into and away from their grief in an attempt to keep their feelings under control.

Desire for independence:

Adolescents are naturally inclined to want privacy and independence. This urge for autonomy can make teenagers appear aloof and, on the surface, as if they are coping admirably with their grief. This 'mask' can mean teenagers miss out on the emotional support they need. Many teens benefit from sensitive enquiries about how they are dealing with their grief and loss.

Typical grief reactions in adolescents

There is no right or wrong way to react to loss, and it varies tremendously. Sadness, confusion, and anxiety are common. Many grieving adolescents worry that they will be judged by their peers and teachers for their post-loss behaviour. For example, a teen who's grieving may think, "If I laugh, will people think I don't care about the person who died?" or "If I look sad, will people think I am not coping?"

Common symptoms of grief:

- ✓ Poor concentration
- ✓ Anger, irritability
- ✓ Problems with sleeping or eating
- ✓ Resentfulness
- ✓ Guilt – normal teenage hostility toward a parent can lead to guilt after parent's death
- ✓ Increased separation anxiety
- ✓ Anxiety and panic
- ✓ Tiredness, exhaustion and disorganisation
- ✓ Numbness
- ✓ Depression
- ✓ Nightmares
- ✓ Avoidance and withdrawal
- ✓ Absent-mindedness
- ✓ Peer relationship problems
- ✓ Feeling disconnected and remote from others
- ✓ Substance abuse
- ✓ High-risk behaviours (e.g., staying out late, increased sexual activity)
- ✓ Decrease in academic performance and school attendance

How can schools support grieving adolescents?

Symptoms of grief can have negative consequences on classroom behaviour and academic achievement. Work performance often suffers due to the concentration drop. Supporting staff understanding of grief is helpful. Understanding that grief is a long-term, natural process, and that each person grieves uniquely, is pivotal. This process can take weeks, months or years depending on the meaning of the loss.

What to do:

- Support attendance at school as the adolescent feels able. Focus on maintaining peer connections and social support networks primarily
- Expect a deterioration in academic functioning
- Help the student manage their anxiety around school work
- Put extra support in place as appropriate
- Support all staff in their understanding of grief
- Learn to be there with the adolescent's grief, not try to solve it

- Be sensitive, allow the pain, and let the person experience the pain and face the reality of their loss
- Be a good listener; accept silence
- Be non-judgmental
- Welcome the expression of any and all feelings
- Be ready to hear the story over and over again
- Remember that the process of mourning takes time. Mourning done well now prevents problems further down the track
- Keep in touch, and don't forget the loss. Your support might be needed well beyond the initial period
- Attend to practical things
- Allow flexibility in regard to school work
- Accept their current capacity and trust in their natural ability to heal with support and time.

What not to do:

- Avoid the grief
- Tell the person not to think about it
- Urge the person to think of others who are worse off
- Be afraid of the person's anger
- Urge the person to forget the past and get on with the future
- Use euphemisms (e.g., time will heal, it will be alright)
- Minimise the loss
- Expect normal school performance prematurely
- Ignore the grief or expect the person to "get over it by now"
- Put pressure on the person to be coping differently

Helpful Resources:

www.skylight.org.nz

If you'd like help supporting an adolescent or group of adolescents in their grieving process, contact Psychology Associates, Ph: (03) 4777 120, Email: office@psychologyassociates.co.nz.