

A Separate Look At Teen Grief

Sandy Priebe does extensive work with grieving teens in Alpena, Michigan. We asked her to pretend she was having a cup of coffee with you and share her thoughts.

Teens have two grief behaviors, instant and delayed. Instant grief is seen in the break-up of a love relationship, not being picked for the team, a family divorce, death of a classmate, death of a grandparent. All these losses are directly related to the primary framework in which the emerging adult identity is connected. Teens will display great outward emotion to these losses, and some even go so far as to attempt suicide.

If a classmate dies, teens will be very open. They will display a lot of emotion because they feel safe with their peers. They will mourn, grieve and memorialize as a group. They will pragmatically tell their parents their wishes should their own death occur. Teens deal with death in a business-like, bottom-line manner. They are still discovering self and need additional years to think about religious import and deep questions. These usually crop up in late-night talk sessions after age 20.

If a teen has a parent or sibling die, grief will often be delayed. Nature has programed the teen to survive major trauma so intellectual and emotional growth can continue. This delayed grief will stay dormant until the teen enters the early to mid 20's. A death of neighbor, pet, co-worker or even a news event can trigger these dormant emotions. When the person is mature and secure in their emotional development, feelings and grief can take place without personal destruction.

If a parent or sibling dies, have a card or flowers sent from your class. Explain that this communicates that the class is aware of the loss and will help remove the awkwardness students feel when the person returns. Remember that teens may well hate someone coming up and saying they are sorry. The teen wants to, above all, be *normal*. They are protective of their insulating shell and terrified of having that penetrated without their consent. If students write cards individually, be sure to explain who is absent so their missing name will not be taken as not caring.

Tell students who are friends that it is important to go to the funeral home. Tell them it is not necessary to say anything. Just showing up is important and a handshake or hug will say it all. They need not stay long or look at the body.

As their teacher, I suggest you treat your grieving teen students as you would a deer in the forest. Go gently, or it may leap and run away. Don't pry or give up-lifting advice. Let them know you are there for them, that they can talk to you at any time. Allow them the wisdom of what is in their best emotional interest.

Offer help with assignments if you feel they need it. Send a personal note, just from you, and visit the family at home or at the funeral home. And - if you are a teacher who becomes close to her students, you may be the person chosen as a sharing listener. If that is the case, you will have the unique privilege of listening, supporting and sharing. In any case, you'll find your major task will simply be to listen and be there.

It should be noted, too, that teens who have suffered a loss are at a higher risk of pregnancy. The need to be secure, to share, to break away from a sad household, all place them at higher risk. Our society limits intimacy between people. The role model of intimacy for teens is mostly media image and the model largely sexual. Both males and females who experience major losses seek out intimacy. One chaplain worked with boys who were arrested. She found 90% of them were grievers.

When grief strikes a teen, it is often a double whammy since adolescence itself can be a grief experience. It is the loss of a childhood, loss of comfort and the gradual leaving of a familiar household. Teachers have tremendous impact on teens, and supporting one during grief is extremely special.