

## Six Basic Principles of Teen Grief

Adapted from: *Helping Teens Cope with Death (2004)* by The Dougy Center for Grieving Children

### 1. Grieving is the teen's natural reaction to a death.

Grief is a natural reaction to death and other losses. However, grieving does not feel natural because it can be difficult to control emotions, thoughts or physical feelings associated with a death. The sense of being out of control that is often a part of grief, may overwhelm or frighten some teens. Grieving is normal and healthy, yet may be an experience teens resist and reject. Helping teens accept the reality that they are grievers allows them to do their work and progress in their grief journey.

### 2. Each teen's grieving experience is unique.

Grieving is a different experience for each person. Teens grieve for different lengths of time and express a wide spectrum of emotions. Grief is best understood as a process in which bodily sensations, emotions, thoughts and behaviors surface in response to the death, its circumstances, the past relationship with the deceased and the realization of the future without the person. For example, sadness and crying may be an expression of grief for one teen, which another may respond with humor and laughter. While many theories and models of the grieving process provide a helpful framework, the path itself is individual, and often lonely. No book or grief therapist can predict or prescribe exactly what a teen will or should go through on the grief journey. Adults can best assist grieving teenagers by accompanying them on their journey in the role of listener and learner, and by allowing the teen to function as the teacher.

### 3. There are no "right" and "wrong" ways to grieve.

Sometimes, adults express strong opinions about "right" or "wrong" ways to grieve. But there is no correct way to grieve. Coping with a death does not follow a simple pattern or set of rules, nor is it a course to be evaluated or graded.

There are, however, "helpful" and "unhelpful" choices and behaviors associated with the grieving process. Some behaviors are constructive and encourage facing grief, such as talking with trusted friends, journaling, creating art and expressing emotion, rather than holding it inside. Other grief responses are destructive and can cause long-term complications and consequences. For example, some teens attempt to escape their pain through many of the same escape routes adults choose: alcohol and substance abuse, reckless sexual activity, antisocial behaviors, withdrawal from social activities, excessive sleeping, high risk-taking behaviors, and other methods that temporarily numb the pain of their loss.

#### **4. Every death is unique and is experienced differently.**

The ways teens grieve differs according to their personality and the particular relationship they had with the deceased. They typically react in different ways to the death of a parent, sibling, grandparent, child or friend. For many teens, peer relationships are primary. The death or loss of a boyfriend or girlfriend may seem to affect them more than the death of a sibling or grandparent.

Within a family, each person may mourn differently at different times. One may be talkative, another may tend to cry often, and a third may withdraw. This can generate a great deal of tension and misunderstanding within the already-stressed family. Each person's responses to death should be honored as their way of coping in that moment. Keep in mind that responses may change from day to day or even hour to hour.

#### **5. The grieving process is influenced by many issues.**

The impact of a death on a teen relates to a combination of factors, including:

- Social support systems available for the teen (family, friends and/or community)
- Circumstances of the death; how, where and when the person died
- Whether the young person unexpectedly found the body
- The nature of the relationship with the person who died – harmonious, abusive, conflictual, unfinished, communicative
- The teen's involvement in the dying process
- The emotional and developmental age of the teen
- The teen's previous experiences with death

#### **6. Grief is ongoing.**

Grief never ends, but it does change in character and intensity. Many grieverers have compared their grieving to the constantly shifting tides of the ocean; ranging from calm, low tides to raging high tides that change with the seasons and the years.

The "never-ending, but changing" aspect of grief may be one of the least understood. Most people are anxious for teens to have closure and "put the death behind them" so they can move on. But death leaves a vacuum in the lives of those left behind. Life is never the same again. This does not mean that life can never be joyful again, nor that the experience of loss cannot be transformed into something positive. But grief does not have a magical closure. People report pangs of grief 40, 50, even 60 years after a death. Grief is not a disease that can be cured, but rather a process we learn to incorporate into our lives.