

Responding to Teen Grief

By Linda Goldman, FT, LCPC, NBCC

Teen years can be turbulent ones under the best of circumstances, and the addition of the death of a parent, friend, sibling, or peer can be unsettling even for the most well-adjusted adolescent. Common grief symptoms, such as intense mood swings, can become very frightening and unpredictable. Kevin was enraged when he heard the doctor say calmly that his friend Tony was dead. "Why couldn't you save him?" he screamed, as he pounded his fist against the wall.

Many teens feel isolated in their grief at the very time in their lives when they want to fit into a group and not feel different.

His intense anger and rage at the medical profession for not being able to keep his friend Tony alive was only equal to the tears he continually shed over the loss.

Guilt weighs heavily on many young people; either wishing their friend who is suffering with cancer would experience a quick death, or feeling devastated for having those feelings. Survivor guilt is

often experienced when one person may live through an accident, and another may not. Amy was driving a car with her best friend Mary when a drunken driver

lost control. He smashed head first into their car killing Mary instantly and leaving Amy with several broken ribs. Amy ran into the street shouting, "She's dead! She's dead! Why her? Why wasn't it me?"

Many teens feel isolated in their grief at the very time in their lives when they want to fit into a group and not feel different.

Jon didn't want to talk to friends about his girlfriend's death. "My friends will just think I'm weird. They won't understand," he said. "Anyway, everyone tells me I need to be strong. Guys don't cry. Move on. It's driving me crazy." These feelings of isolation and inability to

communicate and express feelings are key issues when addressing teen grief.

Ross Gray's study of bereaved teens reports in *The School Counselor* that: "Forty percent of the teens questioned

report that the most helpful person in dealing with their loss was a peer. This was true for teenagers who were involved in support groups and for those who were not. Support group participants in this study were much more likely to report that they felt peers understood them after their loss than did other bereaved teenagers (76% versus 8%)."

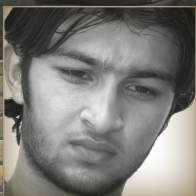
Most teens have a need to tell and retell their story. They need a safe, non-judgmental environment to express themselves. They also may choose their own way to express grief, as they are often not willing or able to express feelings to family members and may choose peers instead.

One grandmother was concerned about her fifteen-year-old grandson Tommy whose mom suddenly died in a car crash. "I don't see him grieve," she explained. Soon after, she told me that he takes a nap on his mother's bed every day. This is a common sign of grief, wanting to connect at a specific place with the person who died. I reassured the grandmother that it was typical for a teen not to verbalize grief to family and that Tommy was creating his own way to be with his mother.

SUPPORTING THE GRIEVING TEEN AT SCHOOL

Often adults say nothing to grieving teens, fearing they will say the wrong thing and cause the student to become more upset, or assuming they will "get over" their grief and "move on." These clichés show a lack of education and understanding of the grief process.

Grief is ongoing and unpredictable. Each grieving student will maintain an ever-present, evolving, internal relationship with the loved one who has died. Teachers need to provide a safe space for the grieving child to express his or her feelings when they are ready, perhaps through writing, poetry, individual conversations, or music.



The school system can begin to respond to a student's grief by implementing some practical steps to facilitate the grief process for the student. Trainings for educators, students, and parents can lay the important foundation of knowing the common signs of grief. This knowledge creates an understanding of developmental, age appropriate signals and helps to reduce anxiety by normalizing grief symptoms.

1 Be aware of common signs of teen grief:

- ◆ Isolation
- ◆ Inability to concentrate
- ◆ Bullying or becoming the class clown
- ◆ Poor grades
- ◆ Stopping social life and activities
- ◆ Acting out behaviors/drugs, alcohol, permissiveness
- ◆ Change in eating or sleeping patterns
- ◆ Expressing feelings of guilt and over-responsibility
- ◆ Worrying excessively about health issues or death of themselves and their family
- ◆ Idealizing person who died
- ◆ Needing to tell and retell their story over and over again
- ◆ Talking about funeral and giving possessions away

2 Provide educational interventions for the grieving teen:

- ◆ Allow student to leave the room without needing to ask permission.
- ◆ Allow student to choose a safe person to go to if they become overwhelmed with grief feelings.
- ◆ Provide a classmate who will serve as a buddy to help grieving students with homework.
- ◆ Allow grieving student to call home if they feel the need during the class day.
- ◆ Provide academic progress reports at more frequent intervals.

- ◆ Create thorough lines of communication so that the entire faculty knows that this is a grieving student.
- ◆ Allow visits to nurse as a reality check if student is overly concerned about their own health.
- ◆ Modify assignments with an awareness of the difficulty that most grieving students have in concentrating for some time.
- ◆ Create ways the grieving student can actively commemorate the death of a friend or peer.
- ◆ Provide resources and support groups for the grieving student within the school.

3 Create support groups within the school for the grieving teen:

Teen support groups are key tools in working with grieving adolescents. So often, teens are unwilling or uncomfortable going to a therapist or a community-based support group. Providing a grief support group within the school day is a great service. These groups allow young people to be validated by peers, become recognized as identified mourners, and given permission to work through their grieving process in a safe and healing environment.

4 Provide resources for teens and professionals:

See our Book Shelf Department on page 22 of this issue for a list of resources compiled by Linda Goldman.

CONCLUSION

An underlying framework of all grief work is remembering that every person is unique and so is their grief. This is especially true of teenagers. So often caring adults may attempt to prescribe to adolescents how they should think and feel, instead of allowing them to share with peers, parents, teachers, and counselors where they are in their grief process. The essence of working with young people is to create a protected environment where grief can be expressed without judgment. This "safe haven for grief work" is the thread that binds all of the resources, supports, and interventions used by parents, educators, and other caring professionals to assist the grieving teen. *

About the Author



Linda Goldman is a Fellow in Thanatology: Death, Dying, and Bereavement (FT) with an MS degree in counseling and Master's Equivalency in early childhood education. She is a Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor (LCPC) and a National Certified Counselor (NBCC). She currently has a private grief therapy practice in Maryland where she works with children, teenagers, families with prenatal loss, and grieving adults. Linda is the author of *Life and Loss: A Guide to Help Grieving Children; Children Also Grieve*; and *Great Answers to Difficult Questions About Death*. Visit her website at www.childrensgrief.net