

Bereaved Teenagers

Responses to Grief

Most adults have strong memories of their teenage years, usually because they are emotional times. They can be very happy times, when lifelong friendships are formed and you feel camaraderie with others of the same age. You will have shared passions and dislikes and may experience your first love.

For both boys and girls, hormones may start to run riot leaving them feeling as though they are on an emotional rollercoaster. They are often surrounded by adults who find it difficult to cope with the effects of this; they may be dealing with a child who was chatty and sociable and is suddenly sullen and uncommunicative. Or, a child who once followed all the rules but has now decided to make up their own such as not going to school and staying out late. Imagine then throwing into this hotbed of emotions one of life's most stressful experiences, the death of someone close.

In our experience, teenagers who have experienced the death of someone close to them often say that they felt isolated from what was going on. Adults would assume that they were grown up and therefore should be able to cope better than, say, a younger brother or sister, so they may be left feeling unsupported. The death of a significant person can make a teenager feel very insecure at a time when they are starting to think about becoming more independent.

You may notice some of the following behaviours:

- going back to behaving like a younger child
- being disruptive in school
- becoming angry easily
- seeming detached and not bothered about anything
- becoming withdrawn, then may spend a lot of time alone in their bedroom
- isolating themselves from the family; they may spend a lot of time with friends
- taking on the role of the person who died
- depression



Bereaved Teenagers ...continued

Offering Support

Teenagers will often turn to their peers for support rather than their parent(s) because they may have very strong bonds with them. This can be difficult for a grieving parent who may want to offer and receive support. It is important to remember that this is normal and teenagers turn to their peers for support for all kinds of emotional issues.

However, their friends may not have the emotional maturity to deal with it all the time and your support will still be important.

They are old enough to be sensitive to your feelings and may not want to upset you or they may feel embarrassed by your tears. Try and find a way of making this more comfortable for them by reassuring them that your tears are normal and that it will not happen every time they want to talk.

- Keep in touch with your child's school; sometimes this is the place where teenagers act out their distress through disruptive behaviour. It is important that the school understands that the behaviours may be a cry for help.
- Be open and honest and allow them the opportunity to ask you questions even if they do not seem talkative.
- Allow them to take part in decision making for example about funeral arrangements or what to do on birthdays or anniversaries. At the same time ensure that you remain the parent, teenagers may feel they have to take on the role of the person who died.
- Offer them the opportunity to talk to a professional bereavement counsellor.
- They may find it helpful to read articles or books such as 'The Grieving Teen' by Helen Fitzgerald, (Simon and Schuster 2000, ISBN: 0684868040).
- CRUSE - Website for teenagers - www.rd4u.org.uk

If you have any concerns that they may be depressed, talk to your GP or suggest that your child does.

