

Young People and Grief

understanding suicide and grief

'Lost and confused...I couldn't talk with my friends. I thought about my dad all the time. School stuff went down the drain.' Tony, 14

'Grief is a long process, but there is an end to the intense pain. You will never forget your sadness, or your loss, but the nauseating pain and the hallow empty feeling will pass.' Lisa, 20

'Don't bottle what you're struggling with inside, because in the long run it eats you up. Ask the hard questions running around in your head.' Paul, 16

'Life seemed dark at the time of loss. I had to find which direction the light of hope was in. It took time and I found it.' Shaun, 23

Adolescence is an important transitional phase. It is an exciting and complex stage of the life span. Behavioural, social, cognitive, emotional, physical and spiritual development and growth are in rapid process.

Understanding and grappling with issues related to identity, independence and peers takes on a natural urgency for young people during this time. Coming to an awareness and acceptance of one's changing body and mind and pushing the boundaries to experiment with dress, hairstyles, peer groups, drugs and alcohol are a part of working out belonging and values.

Grief is a universal experience and is a natural response to a loss. However, it can also be a difficult experience particularly during adolescence when these other changes are also occurring.

Grief is expressed in many ways. There is no wrong or right way to grieve. There is no specific timeline. Grief is a process that each person experiences in a unique way. The following factors influence how grief is experienced:

- What was the relationship with the person who died?
- What are the circumstances surrounding the death?
- How has emotional distress been managed in the past?
- What is the support network?

During adolescence, grief has the potential to accelerate or inhibit development. Young people can often feel overwhelmed and confused by the intensity and range of feelings they are experiencing. Their limited life experience may not prepare them to handle intense feelings in safe ways.

Many young people feel conflicted about seeking support from their parents as they are also striving for independence. They may feel alienated from peers and struggle to concentrate at school. These factors can create vulnerability, which may lead to isolation, confusion and increased risk-taking behaviour.

Support After Suicide

PO Box 271
Richmond VIC 3121

Phone: 9421 7640

Fax: 9421 7698

Email:
aftersuicide@jss.org.au

Web:
supportaftersuicide.org.au

A program of
Jesuit Social Services

Common grief responses

Behavioural

- tears, intolerance of others, mood changes, disjointed conversations, resentment, restlessness, erratic decision making

Social

- isolation, withdrawal, abusing drugs/alcohol, risk-taking behaviour

Cognitive

- confusion, sense of unreality, forgetfulness, racing mind, poor concentration

Emotional

- numbness, sadness, anxiety, guilt, fear, helplessness, mood changes

Physical

- change in appetite, change in sleeping, tiredness, headaches, colds, nausea

Spiritual

- why me?, loss of meaning, questioning faith, challenging beliefs, desolation, searching for understanding

Ways of supporting a bereaved young person

- don't put a limit on the process of healing. Be available some time down the track
- sit quietly with the young person while he/she talks, cries or is silent
- make opportunities to share memories or look at photos of the person who has died
- acknowledge and believe the young person's pain and distress whatever the loss - large or small.
- be aware of your own grief and/or feeling of helplessness
- reassure the person that grief is a normal response to loss and there is no wrong or right way to grieve
- don't panic in the absence or presence of strong emotional responses.

Living with the experience of grief

The following are some creative ways which may assist in living with the experience of grief:

- write a letter to the person who has died or make a card and add a message
- create images that express something of your experience – have a go at using clay or paints, do a drawing or make a collage
- make a CD of songs that are meaningful
- talk to people who have known the person who has died
- make a memory book about the person who has died. Include photos, poems, sketches, qualities, sayings, stories
- prepare for special days and holidays. Christmas, birthdays and anniversaries can be difficult times. Plan a visit to the cemetery, light a candle or maybe spend some time at the deceased person's favourite place
- keep a journal. Fill it with your thoughts and memories. Take time to reflect on your journey

Reading

- *Something I've never felt before: How teenagers cope with grief*, D. Zagdanski, 1994
- *Straight talk about death for teenagers*, E. Grollman, 1993
- *Teenage Stress. A guide for parents, a guide for teenagers*, C. Saunders, 1992
- *Living when a young friend commits suicide or even starts talking about it*, E. Grollman & M. Malikow, 1999
- *When a friend dies: A book for teens about grieving and healing*, M. Gootman, 1994
- *Helping Teens Cope with Death*, The Dougy Centre

Web sites—for young people

Kids Helpline www.kidshelp.com.au

Winston's Wish www.winstonswish.org.uk

Cruse Bereavement Service www.rd4u.org.uk

The Dougy Centre www.dougy.org