

Name

**Helping Your Grieving Adolescent**

***Adapted from the Grief Letter (Summer 1996) by Sherry Williams White***

Parenting teenagers is a tough job under the best of circumstances. But when a teenager is grieving as well, there is additional stress on the situation.

Because adolescence is a time for breaking away from the family and relying on peer support, the family's need to pull together for support puts the teen and the family at opposite ends of the spectrum. In addition, the teen very often feels a need to protect his or her parents and will attempt to do this by shutting themselves off and not talking about the death.

Teens very often try to ignore their grief reactions, but grief always wins out. It will surface through appropriate or inappropriate means that may or may not be healthy. Grief also adds to the physical and emotional swings that are already common in adolescence. So, what can you do?

First, it's important to provide an environment that the adolescent perceives as safe. They need to know that they can trust themselves as having grief reactions that are normal. They also need to know that their peers and adults will be supportive and that their parents will be their safety net.

You can help by maintaining routines with a daily sense of continuity and permanence. Discipline needs to be reasonable and caring but consistent. You need to reassure teens and let them know that someone is in control and will save them from serious harm. It is important to share written materials about normal grief responses and to let them know about what grieving people need.

In addition, you can provide "emotional coaching" for your teens by modeling appropriate emotional reactions to loss. You can provide helpful ways of expressing emotion, including the use of music to soothe and comfort. Buy the teen a journal and encourage them to write poetry, keep a diary, or write letters to the person who has died. If they are artistic, you can encourage them to do drawings or paintings to express their emotions and feelings. All these activities are healthy and helpful ways that grief can be expressed.

It's important to facilitate an ongoing connection with the person who died. Tell stories about that person. Help the adolescent create a photo album of him or her with the person who died. They may want to include some of their peers in creating a video about the person that died and use it for a memorial presentation at school and they can give a gift to the family of the person who died.

Support visiting the grave site if that is meaningful for the teen. Make sure that your adolescent has a memento of the person who died ... a favorite hobby or sports item, a piece of jewelry, a book by which to stay connected. Provide opportunities for the person who died to be remembered in discussion or prayer at special times or events, particularly the holidays.

Encourage your teen to participate in normal activities. Reinforce the fact that their having a good time does not diminish their love for the person who died and it is not disrespectful.

Your teen will deal with their grief in their own way in their own time. Let them know that you support, accept and love them now and you will continue to do so with all the normal living, loving and learning they have yet to do.