ADOLESCENT GRIEF AND BEREAVEMENT
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FACTS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF GRIEF
Facts & Characteristics of Grief

Definitions

Loss: damage, trouble, or pain caused by losing someone or something important
Grief: deep and painful emotions experienced because of a loss
Mourning: the expression of those emotions of grief

Remember
• Grief is different for everyone.
• Grief is a high stressor.
• Grief takes a long time.
• Grief is an emotional roller coaster. A grieving person may have extreme emotional highs and lows.
• Grief returns on holidays, anniversaries, birthdays, and other special events.

Developmental Stages
Adolescents:
• Romanticize and dramatize death, as in literature (Romeo & Juliet), music, or films.
• Fantasize about own death and funeral.
• Challenge death by participating in daredevil activities such as drag racing or drug experimentation.

Physical Symptoms of Grief
Stomachaches  Fatigue
Nausea        Restlessness
Headaches     Nightmares
Inability to eat    Inability to sleep
Physical symptoms of the illness experienced by the loved one who has died
(If the mother died of a brain tumor, the child could experience migraine headaches)
Cognitive & Emotional Symptoms

- **Forgetfulness:** Children may forget school assignments, book reports, or backpacks at home.
  Help: Help the child establish routines or develop schedules. Remind them to write down important things.

- **Disorganization:** It may take a grieving child an hour to do what previously took 15 minutes.
  Help: Allow ample time to complete a task.

- **Inability to concentrate:** Do not be surprised to see children "daydreaming." It may be hard for them to stay focused, and their grades may go down for a while.
  Help: Be patient and refocus the child - breaking information into smaller segments and again allowing ample time to complete a task.

- **Inability to retain information:** Educators/parents can help children change their study habits by using some of the following study aids:
  Help: Outline reading materials
  - Highlight important facts
  - Complete homework in segments. Encourage children to work in 20-minute segments with 5-minute breaks.

- **Preoccupation with the event:** Children may appear to be "daydreaming" because their minds will wander back to what has happened. Even if they are doing something they enjoy, like watching a football game, they will find their mind going back to the painful event.
  Help: Sometimes working in small increments of time will help them to stay focused and on task.

- **Lack of interest or motivation:** Even if children are doing something they love, they may be thinking about what has happened to them. Caution grieving children to be careful to avoid a "why bother" attitude.
Help: Encourage children to use their experience to reach out to others in need.

- **Lowered tolerance level and increased impatience:** Grieving children may be impatient - especially if someone complains of something they think is trivial, i.e. a "bad hair day."

Help: Make other children more aware of what they say and how they say things around the grieving child - especially around holidays, birthdays, and anniversaries.

Remind the grieving child not to take grief out on other people.

**Symptoms of Severe Grief**

**Post Traumatic Stress Disorder**

PTSD is an emotional and psychological reaction to trauma caused by a painful and shocking experience. The stress resulting from this sudden shock may show up days, weeks, or even months later. In the days and weeks ahead, look for:

- Recurring recollections of the event that interfere with school and home life
- Recurring nightmares
- New problems not previously experienced in falling/staying asleep or sleeping too much
- Intense anxiety
- Avoidance of feelings
- Preoccupation with event
- Outbursts of irritability and anger at home and school
- Difficulty concentrating on things usually enjoyed
- Significant decrease in normal activities at home and school
- Detachment and withdrawal from friends
- Depression
(Facts & Characteristics on Grief cont'd)

Sudden vs. Expected Death

Sudden Death:
- Shock and disbelief last longer.
- Sudden death can be more confusing, bringing up many feelings to deal with all at once.
- There is no time to say goodbye.

Expected Death:
- Grieving each little death along the way - such as an ill mother not being able to help buy the all-important prom dress, or an ill father who cannot shoot a basketball with his son while other fathers continue to play with their sons.
- Anticipatory grief happens when students start to grieve even before a loved one has died.
- There is time to prepare for the death and plan for life without the deceased.

Longevity & Intensity

The intensity and longevity of one's grief depend primarily on the source of the loss. Because grief is different for everyone, the following factors also influence the level of intensity and longevity:

- A sudden death is different from an expected death.
- Relationships to the deceased are individual and unique.
- Support systems and resources vary.
- People cope differently.
- Responses may vary by gender.
Sayings not to say
When talking to a grieving child/student, here are some clichés to weigh carefully or avoid altogether:

• "It's part of God's plan." God planned to have a child's father shot in a bank robbery or a mother die in a car accident? This can leave a child angry, confused and disappointed in God.

• "She's in a better place." Meant to be reassuring, this can leave a child confused by unanswerable questions: Where is this place? What's it like there? Why doesn't anybody know anything about it? Or: I want to dies so I can go there too.

• "I know how you feel." No one ever knows exactly how another person feels. If you have had a similar experience, it might be good to share it with the child. Such as: "My dad died when I was about your age." You might even talk about what helped you, if such a case occurs.

• "He's at peace now." This is another example of a hollow, and perhaps even painful, statement that would be less then helpful if the child you're talking with had been at odds with the father who died.

A note of caution:
Be careful not to create a "saint" out of the deceased. While it's fine not to speak ill of the dead, you may do more harm than good by excessively and unrealistically praising that person. This can create uncomfortable feelings in a grieving adolescent. If the deceased was a sibling, there may have been some rivalry with old unresolved issues or even guilt from past disputes. The same process could be at work if the deceased was a parent with whom the child was at odds.

Middle and high school-age children: Be careful not to talk down to these young adults. Let them know if you are available when they need anything. A teenager once said a friend of his father had told him, "I'm here for you" and that this was the best thing anyone could do for him.
General Guidelines to Help Children Cope With Grief and Loss

• Learn about your own feelings around the issues of grief and loss. Understand why you react as you do when the topic comes up.

• Educate yourself about the process of grief.

• Use the correct language. If it is a death, say the word “dead” or “died.”

• Avoid using clichés such as “...when you lost him” or “...it’s part of God’s plan.”

• If possible, set aside regular time for the student to come in and talk.

• Listen to the student. It isn’t necessary to talk or to come up with answers. Silence really can be golden!

• Don’t expect to give answers. If you can’t answer a question, it’s OK to say so. For example: “That’s a really good question. Let me think about it, and I’ll get back to you.”

• Accept and encourage the expression of feelings.

• Ask questions. “What are you feeling?” “What have you heard from your family and friends?” “What do you think has happened?”

• Be objective and accepting as the student shares thoughts and feelings with you.

• Encourage the student to read and educate himself/herself on the process of grief.

• Help the student find available resources.

• Invite the student to come back at any time that you are available to him/her.

• Be patient. The work of grief takes time.
• Watch for signals that warn of complications.

• grades dipping for more than 2 weeks
• withdrawal from school activities and/or friends
• spontaneous crying
• use of drugs or alcohol
• little or total lack of emotion regarding the loss
• super active without a sense of the loss
• prolonged inability to acknowledge the loss that has happened
• extreme reactions to grief that last longer than you feel comfortable
• change in health
• prolonged depression
• talking or writing about dying
ASSESSMENT
ASSESSING A STUDENT

It can be difficult to separate normal teen behavior from that of a grieving teen in trouble. Some of the indicators that let you know when a teen needs individual or group therapy are:

• Dramatic behavior changes
  A teen’s home, school, and social life are the arenas for observing behavior changes. Listen and take notes if comments are being expressed.

• Extraordinary pressure
  Get to know the teen and invite discussion regarding his or her activities at home or at school. Find out if keeping up with work is a problem or if the teen is feeling overwhelmed with what needs to be done. Ask if there is some time to spend alone or with friends.

• Isolation
  Is the teen spending too much time alone, canceling out on dates and parties, or dropping out of after-school activities?

• Depression
  Discuss the differences between bereavement depression and clinical depression. Encourage the teen to consider further help, if indicated. Supply information about the support group.

• Death wish
  Always take any talk of dying seriously and explore the teen’s thoughts and feelings on the matter. Listen carefully to messages from the teen indicating there is a death wish. When a
loved one has dies, it isn't uncommon to make statements such as, "I just wish I could go to sleep and not wake up in the morning," or "I don't care if I get in a car crash." These are passive death wishes - something or someone causing a death.

On the other hand, if a student starts talking about when, where and how to do "it," or if there is a history of depression or suicidal behavior, this is a much more serious matter and needs immediate attention. Get prompt professional help.

• Anger
Anger can often create problems at home, at school or with friendships. Anger needs to be expressed, but in appropriate ways. Unspoken anger can become depression. If the angry teen is creating problems, and normal ways of expression are not helping, this teen may need further counseling for anger management.

• Guilt
Feelings of guilt often leave the teen isolated and alone, with an absence of self-esteem. The shame that accompanies guilt takes the form of deep, dark secrets - a very heavy weight to carry around.

• Substance Abuse
Have information about the perils of substance abuse available. There are times when teens use drugs or alcohol to try to take away the pain. Look for denial, anger and guilt with teens you suspect are using drugs or alcohol.
• **Skipping school or dropping grades**
  A normal part of grief is not caring about anything and a lack of motivation or interest. Help the teen understand that these intense feelings of grief are temporary, and that the more they skip school or don't do their homework, the harder it will be to catch up. Teens who are staying away from school may not know that, if this continues, they could be brought before a judge and sent to a probation home or juvenile detention center.

• **Acting out sexually**
  The pain of grief is so great and the emptiness so profound, it is not uncommon to look for a warm body to fill the void. This closeness is only a temporary fix that usually leads to regret, shame, and fear of disease and pregnancy. If a girl is thinking that sex will make her feel better, help her understand her displaced needs and what she may get herself into. If a boy is showing the same tendency, help him understand that the issue goes beyond contraception; what is involved is his own need to address his grief in a way that will bring him real relief.
GROUP GUIDELINES
By sharing feelings with one another, teens find out they are not alone and that others are also struggling to rebuild shattered lives. Grief support groups help teens feel understood, accepted, and supported.

How do you start a group?

Decide on the format that will work best. There are three possibilities:

• **Open-ended.** Using this format, new students can arrive at any time, and group introductions will need to be made often. The advantage is that teens have more time to work on their grief, especially after sudden, violent or traumatic deaths.

• **Time-limited.** These groups work best in the school setting. School schedules often do not allow the flexibility for an on-going group. Teens may also be more comfortable knowing there is a beginning and an end to the group. The number of sessions is usually 8-12, but shorter groups could be offered along with the opportunity for teens to request an additional session or sessions.

• **Walk-in.** This format frees the teen from any commitment and fits into the busy routine of school life. The difficulty is not knowing who or how many kids will attend.
How do you select the group members?

Group leaders have to decide on the parameters of the group. Is this going to be limited to teens who have had a parent die, or will it be more general? If there are enough teens to do a group focusing on parent loss, this type of focused group may work best.

Teachers, coaches, counselors, and parents are all sources for referrals for students. You may even want to advertise the group within the schools.

Teens will tell you that they just want to talk and not have any activities. For some grief groups, this is true, but you need some ideas to fall back on if a particular group is silent and non-responsive.

The following chapters (WK 1, WK 2, WK 3, & WK 4) include activities to help the students become more open and responsive.
WEEK 1
WEEK ONE

• INTRODUCTION OF GROUP LEADER (SW INTERN) AND EXPLANATION OF THE GROUP AS WELL AS GROUP RULES.

• INTRODUCTION OF GROUP PARTICIPANTS.

• WORD ASSOCIATION GAME - “WHEN I SAY THE WORD GRIEF, WHAT IS THE FIRST WORD THAT COMES TO MIND?” WRITE ANSWERS ON BLACKBOARD OR WHATEVER RESOURCES ARE AVAILABLE.

• “MY STORY” HANDOUT. THIS WILL ALLOW PARTICIPANTS TO SHARE WHAT LOSS THEY WILL BE WORKING ON.

• “QUESTIONS” HANDOUT. THIS IS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR PARTICIPANTS TO WRITE DOWN ANY QUESTIONS THEY HAVE ABOUT LOSS. THEY DO NOT NEED TO WRITE THEIR NAME. READ QUESTIONS AND HAVE A GROUP DISCUSSION REGARDING THEM.

• PARTICIPANTS CAN TAKE HOME AND KEEP HANDOUT TITLED “AFTER A TRAGEDY: WHAT KIDS CAN DO.”
MY STORY

The person who died in my life is ______________________
and was ______ years old. The date of the death was
_______________. He/she was my _____________.
The cause of death was _________________________.
I found out about the death when _________________________.
What I remember about the funeral is _________________________.
My first feeling was _____________ because ________________

Now I feel ________________
What makes me most angry is ________________________
I worry about ________________________
The hardest thing about school is ________________________
My friends help me by ________________________
The advice the adults in my life give me is ________________________
What I miss most about my loved one is ________________
What I miss the least is ____________________________________________.

What helps me the most is ____________________________________________.

What helps me the least is ____________________________________________.

Using the boxes below, write the name of your loved one (one letter in each box). Then using the letters, write a characteristic that your loved one had. For example, “L” – loving:

☐ ____________________________________________

☐ ____________________________________________

☐ ____________________________________________

☐ ____________________________________________

☐ ____________________________________________

☐ ____________________________________________

☐ ____________________________________________

☐ ____________________________________________
ARE THERE SOME QUESTIONS YOU HAVE BEEN WANTING TO ASK, BUT MIGHT BE SCARED OR AFRAID TO ASK? LIST THEM HERE AND THE GROUP CAN DISCUSS THEM. YOU DO NOT NEED TO WRITE YOUR NAME.

1. __________________________________________
   __________________________________________

2. __________________________________________
   __________________________________________

3. __________________________________________
   __________________________________________

4. __________________________________________
   __________________________________________

5. __________________________________________
   __________________________________________
After a Tragedy: What Kids Can Do

By Helen Fitzgerald, CT
Training Director, American Hospice Foundation
April, 2003

After a terrible tragedy, many people experience an intense emotional reaction that may not show up for weeks or even months afterwards. Mental health clinicians call this reaction: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). If you have suffered a traumatic loss, you may not feel numb right afterwards. But later, many confusing and debilitating feelings may come up and you may not link it to the tragic event. Even if you were not on the scene of the tragedy, you may still be traumatized. You may be terrified it could happen again. You may not be able to sleep by yourself and need lights on to chase away the darkness.

If you are experiencing some of the following symptoms, tell your parents and/or school counselor and get help immediately:

- Recurring nightmares of the event.
- Flashbacks and hallucinations.
- Intense anxiety whenever you hear of a similar event.
- Avoidance of any feelings or thoughts concerning the tragedy.
- Avoidance of any activities or situations that would remind you of the tragedy.
- Preoccupation with the tragedy many months after it occurred.
- Lack of recall; blank spots in your memory.
- A significant decrease in your interest in normal activities either at home or at school.
- Depression combined with increased feelings of sadness, loneliness and hopelessness.
- Detachment and withdrawal from your friends and family.
- Feelings of "survivor guilt." Feeling you should have died or perhaps taking chances and doing some self-destructive or self-defeating behavior.
- Inability to experience emotions, to feel happy or to love someone.
- Avoidance of close relationships out of fear that you will be left alone again.
- Being overwhelmed with emotions-tense, angry, scared and out of control.
- Feeling like you have no future, are unable to date, to marry or have a career.
- Problems with increased use of alcohol or drugs.
- New problems not previously experienced, in falling or staying asleep, or sleeping too much.
- Irritability or outbursts of anger directed at your family, friends, or teachers.
- Difficulty in concentrating on things you usually enjoy such as reading
and listening to music.
• Easily startled, jumping at any unusual or loud noise.
• Physical symptoms such as cold sweat, rapid heartbeat, or shortness of breath whenever you are reminded of the tragedy.
• Recurring recollections of the death/trauma that are disrupting your home, school or leisure time.

Keep a journal and record and date your symptoms. You can use it to document your most private feelings and also to track how you are feeling over time. If you feel any of the above symptoms right away, it is a normal part of your grief. But if they persist, do get some guidance. It is of utmost importance to find people you can talk to. Talking about how you feel may help you feel better. Talk about what you saw, what you heard, what you smelled and what you feared. Don't hide your feelings or they may come back at a later time to haunt you.

Here are some other things you can do to help yourself:

• Talk about the event as much as you are able to and urge your friends to do the same. Ask a counselor to set up informal talk groups. Every time you go over the event, it loses some power and the hold it has on you.

• Have patience with yourself, the healing may take a long time.

• Learn to meditate, lose yourself in some music, take walks, visit a peaceful place such as a park, church or library.

• Take care of your physical needs. Eat healthy foods, keep up with your exercise program and get enough rest.

• Stay involved with your family, friends and school. Keep up a regular schedule and stick to old routines, as best as you can.

• Have patience with your parents; they are not going to let you out of their sight. Time will help them relax their need to control.
WEEK 2
WEEK TWO

• DISCUSS FACTS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF GRIEF (TYPICAL SYMPTOMS OF GRIEF)

• DISCUSS AREAS OF HIGH DANGER FOR BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS OR RELAPSE IF SUBSTANCE ABUSE IS A FACTOR.

• SPEND TIME ON ANGER AND GUILT. DISCUSS WAYS TO EXPRESS ANGER APPROPRIATELY AND WAYS TO GET RELIEF FROM GUILT. "ANGRY ALTERNATIVES"

• "SIX FEELINGS" HANDOUT AND/OR DISCUSSION.

• "WHAT HELPS ME" HANDOUT AND/OR DISCUSSION.

• "WHAT WAS HARD ABOUT RETURNING TO SCHOOL" HANDOUT AND/OR DISCUSSION.
ANGRY ALTERNATIVES

WHEN YOU ARE ANGRY, HERE ARE SOME THINGS TO DO INSTEAD OF HURTING YOURSELF OR OTHERS:

Rip up an old magazine and throw it about. Then play “basketball” as you clean up.

Pound a pillow or mattress.

Run around the outside of your house 4 times.

Go into your closet, close the door, and yell as loud as you can.

Get out a tape recorder and yell your anger to it.

Do a “mad” dance.

Draw a “mad” picture and share it with an adult.

Count to 10, slowly and loudly.

Talk to someone about your mad feelings.

Throw a Nerf ball against the wall.

Do something funny.

Play some soothing music.

Cuddle up with a blanket or a favorite childhood toy.

Clean your room.
LIST SIX FEELINGS YOU HAVE HAD SINCE YOUR LOVED ONE DIED.

1. __________________________________________

2. __________________________________________

3. __________________________________________

4. __________________________________________

5. __________________________________________

6. __________________________________________
WHAT HELPS YOU WHEN YOU ARE FEELING SAD, SCARED, OR LONELY?

1. 

2. 

3. 

4. 

5. 

WHAT WAS HARD ABOUT RETURNING TO SCHOOL?

1. 

2. 

3. 

4. 
WEEK 3
WEEK THREE

• FOCUS ON CREATIVITY AND CONCRETIZING THE LOSS

• WRITE ABOUT (OR DRAW) A FUNNY OR GOOD MEMORY OF YOUR LOVED ONE

• COLLAGE ACTIVITY (HAVE STUDENTS BRING PICTURES, MAGAZINES, ETC. TO USE ON THIS ACTIVITY. TELL STUDENTS OF ACTIVITY THE WEEK PRIOR SO THEY CAN BEGIN TO COLLECT MATERIAL FOR THE PROJECT. HAVE STUDENTS GLUE MATERIALS THAT STUDENTS BROUGHT IN ONTO THEIR INDIVIDUAL PIECE OF CARDBOARD OR OTHER MATERIAL.)

(OFFER CREATIVE ACTIVITIES COULD INCLUDE WRITING POEMS, SONGS, DRAWING PICTURES, ETC. SAMPLES OF POEMS ON GRIEF ARE INCLUDED)
What is a good or funny memory of your loved one that makes you smile? (Write or draw.)
Creativity is an outward and healthy means for a student to grieve their loss. Here are some examples of poems written by individuals who have lost a loved one:

**I Still Miss You**  
*By Damaris Calderon*

It's been some time, since you've been gone
I thought by now, I would be strong
I think of you, and shed my tears
I wonder who, will still my fears
Your memories remain, inside my heart
My soul it seems, to be torn apart
You told me secrets, I hold so dear
I only wish, you would be near

I still miss and love you, can't you see
I wish to hold, and talk with thee
So many things, I could not say
And now you've gone, so far away.

You taught me to, in God believe
You said He would always take care of me
So take me hand, and guide me there
And save a place, one day to share

**Goodbye**  
*By Tammy Marie Denue*

I always took for granted, what I thought I'd never lose.
Because I never thought it would happen, until I heard the dreaded news.

They say you were chosen for his garden,
His preciously hand picked bouquet.
"God really needed him, That's why he couldn't stay."

Saying goodbye is never easy. It's the hardest thing to do.
But what hurts me even more, is not the chance to say it to you.

So today, Jesus, as you are listening in your home above, Would you go and find my dad, And give him all my love.

**Most Precious Dear Loving Mother**  
*By Wanda S. Collier*

I need to publish this poem,
For all the world to read
I know there are many out there,
Who feel this kind of grief.

Perhaps they ask those questions of guilt,
The ones with which we now must deal
Hoping we get all the right answers,
The ones that will help our hearts to heal.

I held her hand and spoke softly,
As she slowly faded away
The things I prayed she needed,
To once again hear me say.
Most precious, dear loving, Mother
We'll be together again some day.

I told her I will always remember, the many times she pulled me through
That I couldn't have made it without her
I prayed she would know I was speaking the truth.

I didn't want to give her up
I needed her here, with me still
But I wouldn't try to hold her back
For the Father, had spoken His Will.

Her eyes were closed for sometime now
Her breathing, so shallow
I could feel the weight, in my chest
As I spoke the last words to her
I could only watch, as she took her last breath.

My tears are still flowing
The heartache refuses to go away
But I know we'll be united in Heaven
And never more to stray.

I held her hand and spoke softly
As she slowly faded away
Most precious, dear loving, Mother
We'll be together, again someday.
WEEK 4
WEEK FOUR

• WRITING A LETTER TO THE LOVED ONE TO SAY "GOODBYE" OR TO ADDRESS SOME "UNFINISHED BUSINESS." (ALSO, WRITING ON HELIUM BALLOONS AND THEN RELEASING THEM IS ALSO A WAY TO SAY "GOODBYE."

• "MY FUTURE LOOKS LIKE" HANDOUT AND/OR DISCUSSION.

• "ADVICE FOR OTHERS" HANDOUT.

• FUTURE RESOURCES FOR THE STUDENT. (IF THEY SHOULD NEED TO TALK TO SOMEBODY AGAIN, WHERE CAN THEY GO?)

• DEBRIEF THE EXPERIENCE

• TALK ABOUT TERMINATING THE GROUP AND SAYING GOODBYE
THERE ARE A FEW THINGS I STILL NEED TO TELL YOU. HERE IS A LETTER TO YOU.

DEAR__________________________,
MY FUTURE LOOKS LIKE...

SIX MONTHS FROM NOW:

__________________________

__________________________

__________________________

__________________________

ONE YEAR FROM NOW:

__________________________

__________________________

__________________________

__________________________

FIVE YEARS FROM NOW:

__________________________

__________________________

__________________________

__________________________
ADVICE I HAVE FOR OTHERS WHO HAVE HAD A LOVED ONE DIE

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

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____________________________________________________________________
REFERRALS AND RESOURCES
MAKING REFERRALS AND OFFERING RESOURCES

Develop a list of mental health centers and know what services they offer. Put together a list of private therapists who specialize in adolescents, grief, substance abuse and depression. Update the list yearly.

Following is a list of books for adolescents that they might be interested in.

Also, some helpful informational articles for the intern are included.

*Working with teens is both challenging and rewarding - challenging because you need to break into their world and develop a trusting relationship; rewarding because of the pleasure you will have in being a confidante to their secrets and concerns, seeing smiles and cheery greetings gradually replace those frowns and stares. Becoming a part of a teen's life as he or she struggles with life-shattering grief is a privilege to be exercised with care, but a privilege all the same.*
The following books are appropriate for children in Middle School - High School:

**Father Figure**, by Richard Peck
(When their mom commits suicide, two boys are sent to live with their father.)

**Say Goodnight, Gracie**, by Julie Reece Deever
(A 17 year old girl copes with the death of her best friend.)

**Tears of a Tiger**, by Sharon M. Draper
(Teenagers cope with guilt and depression when a friend is killed in a drunk driving accident.)

**After the Rain**, by Norma Fox Mazer
(After discovering her grandfather is dying, Rachel gets to know him better, and finds the experience bittersweet.)

**A Begonia for Miss Applebaum**, by Paul Zindel
(A story about coping with impending death.)

**Death Be Not Proud**, by John Gunther
(A father's memoir of his son's last few months.)

**Face at the Edge of the World**, by Eve Bunting
(After the suicide of a best friend, a teen deals with hurt, anger and betrayal.)

**Mick Harte Was Here**, by Barbara Park
(A young teen recalls her younger brother and his death in a bicycle accident.)

**Remembering the Good Times**, by Richard Peck
(Three friends are inseparable until one of them commits suicide.)
Two Moons in August, by Martha Brooks
(A teen deals with the death of her mother and the resulting despondency of her father and sister.)

The Grieving Teen: A Guide for Teenagers and Their Friends, by Helen Fitzgerald
(Provides detailed, comprehensive advice for adolescents facing loss from a death of any kind. Cross-referenced with easy access to important help for the teen population.)

Straight Talk About Death for Teenagers, by Earl A. Grollman
(A wonderful book for teenagers who have experienced a death of someone they love, this book includes a journal section to record memories, feelings, and hopes.)
Reaching Out to Grieving Students

Educators who understand the grief process and its manifestations in children can provide the continuity, security, and support that grieving students so desperately need.

A child is shot, students are killed in an automobile accident, a teacher collapses and dies after trying to break up a school brawl. "Counselors have been called in and are available to students and teachers," reporters write. End of story.

But the true stories of losses don't end with the arrival of counseling teams for these highly visible and traumatic deaths. The real struggles surface in the weeks, months, and even years of recovery from these traumas and the equally painful, but not so newsworthy, losses that school-age children experience.

Each year, millions of children and adolescents grieve the death of a loved one—a parent, grandparent, sibling, aunt, uncle, or friend. Young people also grieve other important losses, ranging from the death of a pet to the breakup of a family. As one 8-year-old confided:

"About two years ago, I had three losses in my immediate family in the same year. First, my rabbit died; then, two weeks later, my grandfather died; then, six weeks later, my grandmother died."

A once talkative 4th grader exhibits a fairly common response to the death of her mother from multiple sclerosis. She diligently completes her work, but rarely interacts with her classmates. Equally common is a former student who, six months after his father's death from cancer, has falling grades, a belligerent attitude, and a dismal attendance record.

Keen and Complex Emotions

Because they spend so much time interacting with students, teachers, administrators, school counselors, and school nurses play a vital role in helping students understand and survive the grieving experience. As a first step, these professionals need to understand grief and its manifestations in children.

For youngsters no less than adults, grief is a keen and complex emotional experience that includes fear, anger, relief, despair, peace, guilt, numbness, agitation, and sorrow. Children, in particular, may feel abandonment and a loss of security and control in their lives. Each person grieves differently, and this is especially true for children. In The Grieving Child: A Parent's Guide (1992), the American Hospice Foundation's Director of Training, Helen Fitzgerald, notes:

"Children haven't had the experiences life has to offer, nor are they cognitively able to understand death as we do. Thus they grieve without the same level of comprehension of what is happening to them, for they have not had the experience of the finality that accompanies someone's death."

Like adults, children don't work through their grief on a predictable timetable. As Fitzgerald points out, young people may grieve intensely, but sporadically. A major loss in early childhood can reverberate through the years as the person progresses through life's milestones—first date, graduation, marriage, and parenthood.

Grief is a keen and complex emotional experience that includes fear, anger, relief, despair, peace, guilt, numbness, agitation, and sorrow.

Teachers are role models for students, especially for older students. But like many people in our society, teachers often feel uncomfortable discussing death and loss. This reluctance can adversely affect the children in their charge, who look to their teachers for truth, knowledge, and support. At times of death loss, it is particularly important that teachers, administrators, and counselors be emotionally available to their students.

In her training sessions, Fitzgerald asks teachers to develop a "Death History Information Sheet" to get in touch with their own feelings and attitudes about loss. She asks teachers questions such as: "What was your age at the time of your first death experience?" "What feelings do you remember?" "How did adults respond?" and "What changes would you make if you could re-experience that event?"
The Ages of Grief

Teachers need to understand how students of different ages respond to grief and how to manage the classroom while addressing these students' needs. In the me-centered world of the early years, children may feel responsible for a loved one's illness or death. They may think that their misbehavior or a "bad" thought caused the crisis. Reality has not yet replaced this magical thinking, and young children see unpleasant events like death as avoidable or reversible. They may believe that they can do something to bring back a loved one.

In addition to acting-out behaviors like tantrums, grieving children may have physical symptoms, such as eating or sleeping problems or bladder or bowel disturbances. They may also exhibit fears and separation anxiety. Teachers should be vigilant because children's play and art may reflect the confusion and emotion they are feeling.

From mid-primary years to adolescence, children begin to understand that death is real, yet it still seems remote. They can portray their grief in drawings and in play and they may pose lots of questions. Still, they generally will not contemplate the death of a family member or their own mortality until shocked by that reality. The shock that older children in this age range experience often gives way to intense sadness. They may regress to immature behavior or act out. Or, they may behave too well. Indeed, behavior that is too good from a child who has suffered a loss can be an important sign of emotional difficulties.

Adolescents are particularly vulnerable to loss. In the best of times, the early teen years are marked by rapid change and many losses. This period is a time of intense feelings when anger is commonly manifested in tantrums, defiance, or withdrawal. For young teens, peer reaction is especially important, they rarely seek help from parents or family. Consequently, when a parent dies, especially if the death is sudden, there may be unfinished business because of the tensions between the teenager and the parent. It is not uncommon for grief to affect the adolescent's school behavior and even lead to inappropriate coping mechanisms like substance abuse, impulsive-compulsive behavior, promiscuity, and car accidents.

Front Line Training for Teachers

In an overburdened school system, guidance counselors and school psychologists cannot devote enough time to every student in pain. One way to ease this burden is to provide grief training for those on the front line—the teachers. Teachers are uniquely positioned to guide grieving students and their classmates. They can help students acknowledge loss by giving them permission to cry or show sadness. They can provide the continuity and security of a safe place that a grieving student may desperately need. A firm hand that establishes boundaries may be comforting, and consistency can be a sign of normalcy in a student's off-balance life. Teachers are also objective observers of children's behavior, and grief training can make teachers more alert to extreme grief-related responses that may require professional help.

One such grief training program is Kids Grieve Too, developed by Hospice of Washington (D.C.) for teachers, administrators, and school counselors. Marlene Brown-Tumlin, the bereavement coordinator, offers the program in several schools in the Washington metropolitan area to help these staff members detect grief and address related problems before they escalate into serious disciplinary actions or poor classroom performance. The program delves into the grieving process and specific classroom interventions. The training also helps teachers make appropriate referrals for students who need more help.

After grief training, teachers are more apt to recognize grief as the root cause.
Prepare classmates of a student who has suffered a loss by talking about what they can do to help.

- Be alert for signs of distress and inappropriate behavior. You are responsible for all the students in your classroom, and order is important to them, as it is particularly important to the grieving student. Be firm if the student is disruptive, but also provide quiet moments when the student can talk about feelings he or she is experiencing.

- Refer students who need additional help to individual or group counseling. Local hospices offer bereavement support groups for young people, and some even set up groups at schools.

Fitzgerald notes that school support groups can be particularly helpful in high schools. Teenagers are more receptive to group sessions in familiar territory and often are unwilling to commit themselves to sessions away from school. In addition, school-based support groups save parents the trouble of transporting their children to and from the group.

Fitzgerald recommends scheduling school groups once a week at different times so that they don’t affect any one class period. She also acknowledges a major difficulty with school support groups. They usually coincide with the school year and therefore may end at a critical point in a child’s healing.

Hospice Educators in California

Even if a school system is unwilling or unable to undertake in-depth grief training for employees, community bereavement programs, such as local hospices, may provide occasional or ongoing support. Although such training will be less intensive, it can yield substantial dividends.

The Hospice of the North Coast in San Diego County is one example. In response to a survey showing that community members greatly desired more information on grief, hospice staff developed an outreach program for local primary and secondary schools. They begin with 25-minute in-service programs at regularly scheduled staff meetings at the school. Presenters outline what school personnel can expect from grieving children and how they can help, as well as how hospice services can be helpful.

What Grieving Children Need to Do

- Grief thoughts and feelings are constant and ever changing, inundating bereaved children’s lives like waves on the ocean. These thoughts and feelings may arrive without warning and children feel “imponderable” for their enormity in a school setting. How can teachers help? By recognizing that these children often need to do the following:

  - They need to acknowledge a parent or sibling who died by using his or her name or by sharing a memory.
  - They need to tell their story over and over again.
  - They need to use tools such as drawing, writing, role-playing, and re-enactment to safely express feelings and thoughts about their loss.
  - They need to be allowed to go to a safe place outside the classroom where overwhelming feelings arise, without asking why in front of classmates.
  - They need to call their surviving parent during the school day or visit the school nurse for reassurance that they and their family are okay. Such reality checks counteract children’s preoccupation with their own health and the health of their loved ones.
  - They need physical ways (like memory books) to reexperience and share memories in a safe way.

staff offers interactive classroom sessions and support groups for grieving children.

The impact of the hospice’s training program has been dramatic and immediate. In less than four months, district teachers and counselors referred more than 50 students for counseling. Scrambling to meet the overwhelming demand for support groups, the hospice staff was forced to place students on a waiting list. Laura Behm, the hospice’s children’s program coordinator, observes that teachers in the sessions are looking for answers to a host of questions. For example, one teacher had a student who had lost a parent four months earlier and was still crying in the classroom. The teacher didn’t know what to say. She was afraid to discuss the death and make the child feel worse. At the training session she learned how to address the issue directly and how to create a supportive environment in which the class could participate.

The hospice training sessions help bridge what Behm calls “the discomfort zone”—that awkward place where a teacher struggles to find the right words. At the end of the training, teachers reported a new confidence in talking with both grieving students and parents. They gained new insights, practical classroom strategies, and useful materials.

One testimonial came from the 8-year-old who had lost his rabbit and grandparents. After a classroom session on dealing with a loss, he was moved to write a thank-you letter.

I appreciated you sharing the story about the kid who lost his grandparent...I was glad to know that I really wasn’t going crazy, that everyone feels like that when someone dies. Our family didn’t have counseling (sic) or anything, so I had no idea whether I had a weird problem or not. I learned that the best way to get a problem to go away is to talk it out with someone.

Understanding the grief process, recognizing grief that may be progressing dangerously out of control, and knowing how to reach out through gestures and conversation are skills that every educator should possess. In most communities, the training and technical assistance to help educators acquire or hone these skills are readily available. Helping our young people deal with their losses can be as crucial to a happy, productive future as any English, history, or science lesson can be.

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Resources

Grief at School: A Guide for Teachers and Counselors by the American Hospice Foundation. To obtain a sample booklet and order form, send $3 and a stamped, self-addressed envelope to the foundation at 1130 Connecticut Ave. N W., Suite 700, Washington, DC 20036-4101; (202) 234-0204. Information on Grief at School training is available as well.

Books for Adults:


Helping Children Cope with Grief by Alan Wolfelt (Muncie, Ind.: Accelerated Development Inc., 1985).


Children’s Books:


THE GRIEVING TEEN

BY HELEN FITZGERALD, CT
TRAINING DIRECTOR, AMERICAN HOSPICE FOUNDATION
OCTOBER, 2000

Teen years are already tumultuous years, and the bereaved teen needs special attention. Under ordinary circumstances, teenagers go through many changes in their body image, behavior, attachment, and feelings. As they break away from their parents to develop their own identities, conflicts often arise within the significant family system. Life becomes even more complex when a father, mother or other significant person dies - a shattering experience faced by one child in every ten before the age of eighteen. While people in all age groups struggle with such losses, teenagers face particularly painful adjustments following the death of a loved one.

DO TEENS GRIEVE LIKE ADULTS?
Teens grieve deeply but often work very hard to hide their feelings. Fearing the vulnerability that comes with expression, they look for distractions rather than stay with the grief process long enough to find real relief. Feelings can be turned off quickly, much like flipping a light switch. Teens can act as if nothing has happened while they are breaking up inside. You may observe teens who take on the role of caregiver to family members or friends, in effect denying their own grief.

Gender makes no distinctions when it comes to experiencing grief, but the outward signs may be different. Young men of this age may have a particularly hard time when they have been taught that showing emotion is something that girls do - but mach guys don't.

WHO DO TEENS TRUST AND TALK TO?
Teens often trust only their peers, believing that no one else can understand how they feel and how they react to life's problems. Relationships with friends can be deep and meaningful, sharing conflicts occurring at home and details of their love lives.
HOW CAN ADULTS GAIN THE TRUST OF TEENS?
To gain the trust of teens, adults must become good, nonjudgmental listeners. Let teenagers know that you are interested in them, in their views, in their ideas and thoughts. Let them know that you like and care for them. Support their ideas or gently offer your thoughts of how to ease their pain.

DOES PEER COUNSELING WORK?
Because teens are most open to fellow teens, one approach to providing help is through peers. And it works. Peer counseling is now an elective course in many schools for teens. Peer counselors are trained to look at all kinds of life problems on a personal level and then at ways to help their peers. They are introduced to different situations that may occur, and speakers are brought in to teach them about specific topics.

Because teens are willing to listen to other teens, peer counseling can play an important role in establishing communication with distressed classmates and friends, as well as steering them to professional help if it is needed. Peer counselors learn about depression, grief, communicating with parents and other adults, suicidal ideation, etc. At the same time, they learn their limitations and are assured of the support and expertise of their peer counseling teachers for consultation.

WHAT ACTIVITIES WORK WITH TEENS?
- Writing or drawing spontaneously on mural paper taped to the wall
- Creating a collage using pictures and words cut from magazines
- Constructing a book that can be used as a journal or a memory book
- Writing a poem, eulogy or song
- Launching a balloon after writing messages to the person who died
- Going on a field trip to a funeral home, cemetery, etc.
INFORMATION FOR PARENTS & TEACHERS
FOR PARENTS AND TEACHERS:

**TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT GRIEF**

* Model calm and control for the child
* Tell the child the truth
* Limit the amount of information to the main facts (children will only take in the amount they can handle)
* Reassure the child of his/her safety at home and at school
* Provide constructive and positive outlets for expression:
  
  **Drawing**
  
  **Writing** – cards, letters, poems, stories
  
  **Discussion**
* Maintain daily routines, but be flexible
* Spend extra time with the child
* Allow the child to comfort you
* Be a good listener
* Focus on your children. Watch for any unusual behavior or physical symptoms
* Reassure them of your love and their safety
* Make time to talk and monitor what they are thinking and feeling
* Stay physically close to your children. This will reassure them and allow you time to observe their behavior. Extra hugs and cuddling are in order.
* Protect their health – Make sure children are getting appropriate sleep, exercise, & nutrition
* Find out what resources your school has available
GUIDELINES FOR PARENTS TO HELP THEIR CHILDREN THROUGH GRIEF

* As soon as possible after the death, set time aside to talk with your child.

* Give your child the facts in a simple manner – be careful not to go into too much detail. Your child will ask more questions as they come up in her/her mind.

* If you can’t answer your child’s questions, it’s OK to say, “I don’t know how to answer that, but perhaps we can find someone to help us.”

* Use the correct language – say the word “dead” etc. Do not use phrases such as: “He’s sleeping,” or “God took her,” or “He went away,” etc.

* Ask your child questions to better understand what he or she may be thinking or feeling. “What are you feeling?” “What have you heard from your friends?” “What do you think happened?” etc.

* Explain your feelings to your child, especially if you are crying. Give children permission to cry. We are their role models and it’s appropriate for children to see our sadness and for us to share our feelings with them.

* Use the given name of the deceased when of him or her.

* Understand the age and level of comprehension of your child. Speak to that level.

* Talk about feelings, such as: sad, angry, feeling responsible, scared, tearful, depressed, worried, etc.

* Read an age-appropriate book on childhood grief so you have a better understanding of what your child may be experiencing. (See recommended books list.)

* Read an age-appropriate book on death to your child. Take time to discuss what you have read and relate it to what is happening to you.

* Talk about the viewing and funeral. Explain what happens at these events and find out if your child wants to attend.

* Think about ways your child can say “good-bye” to the person who has died.

* Invite your child to come back to you if he or she has more questions or has heard rumors – tell your child you will help get the correct information.

* Talk about memories, good ones and ones not so good.
* Watch out for “bad dreams.” Are they occurring often? Talk about the dreams.

* Watch for behavioral changes in your child both at home or at school.

* Friends, family, schoolmates, etc, frequently find solace and comfort in doing something in the name of the person who died – a memorial

* You might see some of the following behavior:
  *
  * Tearfulness
  * Irritability
  * Cling to you
  * Whining
  * Somatic complaints
  * Temporary drop in grades
  * More pronounced fears, e.g, of dying or of you dying, of the dark, etc.
  * Regression in behavior
  * Aggressive behavior

These are normal emotions. If, however, you ever feel the reactions are more extreme or lasting longer than you think they should be, never hesitate to consult a professional.

* Offer your child loving, touching support.
The following books are recommended as resources for parents:

**Why Do People Die? Helping Your Child Learn with Love and Illustrations**, by Cynthia MacGregor
(Explains death, its effect on the living, and some of the beliefs, customs, and associated rituals.)

(Provides practical advice for surviving parents and others charged with the care of grieving children. Also useful for adults with unresolved childhood grief.)

(This easy-to-read workbook approach helps grieving children.)

(This is a book for parents and professionals to use in helping children deal with complicated grief.)

**Talking About Death: A Dialogue Between Parent and Child**, by Earl Grollman
(This book serves as a guide to parents to start a dialogue with their child about death. Includes a parent guide and resources.)
Information obtained from American Hospice Foundation (www.americanhospice.org).