

What Does Grief Look Like In Adolescents?

Teenagers are usually well aware of concepts like death and bereavement, but the loss of a parent, sibling or friend is not something that an adolescent in today's world expects to face. When a loved one dies her/his physical health, family, psychological well-being, schoolwork, friendships, and plans for the future are usually affected. The following is a list of some of the ways that being bereaved may impact a teen's life in the weeks and months soon after the loss.

Physical Health

- Getting too much or too little sleep
- Eating too much or not enough
- Having digestive problems
- Gaining or losing weight rapidly
- Feeling tired or listless all the time
- Having nightmares or night terrors
- Experiencing general aches and pains
- A sudden increase or decrease in exercise patterns

The Family Environment

- Feeling smothered or overprotected by parents
- Taking over the role or responsibilities of the person that died
- Taking care of surviving family members. This can be either providing them with practical assistance, or maintaining a "stiff upper lip" so that family members won't feel added pressure to support the teen
- Worrying about the safety of family members to a greater degree than before
- Feeling as though their "stable base" is now gone
- Feeling a lack of support from family members
- Being unable to talk about the loss with family members



It is important to note that a teen's reactions to a particular loss can vary depending on the type of loss (e.g., a parent, a sibling, a friend, a member of the extended family, etc.) and the quality of her/his relationship with the deceased individual. The ways in which the loss affects others in the family also shapes an adolescent's response(s) to the death

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Changes in Psychological Well-Being

- Feeling confused and shocked
- Feeling uncomfortable in surroundings, “different” or “out of sorts”
- Feeling “forgotten” in grief in the case of the loss of a friend or a sibling
- Feeling anger towards self, the deceased, or others
- Feeling disappointed in others for not “being there”
- Feeling depressed and sad
- Feeling guilt for many different reasons (e.g., regretting an argument had prior to the death)
- Experiencing “survivor guilt” – feeling that s/he should have been the one to die instead of the deceased
- Exhibiting symptoms of diagnosable psychological illnesses) e.g., post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety disorders, depressive disorders, etc.)
- Feeling as though s/he is living on an „emotional roller coaster”
- Contemplating suicide
- Experiencing shifts in religion (either turning to a particular faith for support or rejecting these beliefs)
- Feeling scared or anxious, as if other loved ones might also die
- Feeling as if one/s own death is possible, especially in cases where it was a friend or sibling who died
- Being irritable or stressed out
- Trying to avoid remembering both bad and good memories shared with the deceased in order to prevent feeling sadness

Schoolwork

- Finding it difficult to concentrate on schoolwork
- Burying self in schoolwork
- Feeling that school is a “waste of time”
- A sudden increase or decrease in grades

Friendships

- Withdrawing socially
- Experiencing an abrupt change in friendships

Note: In some cases, students who are bereaved may actually experience an *improvement* in grades. This may indicate that the student is working harder at schoolwork to avoid acknowledging their feelings of grief. As a teacher or support provider, it is important to be aware that any sudden change in performance may be a sign of grief.