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# Communicating With Grieving Teens

Open communication is extremely valuable to bereaved teens. In fact, allowing grieving persons to express their thoughts and feelings is the most important assistance you can offer them:

- Information reduces fear.
- Information can return a sense of control.
- Talking things out now can help prepare teens for future losses.

## **Barriers to effective communication**

- Our discomfort with death and grief
- Our fear of intense feelings
- Our desire to protect teens from the reality of death
- Our desire to “fix” things
- Our fear of “saying the wrong thing” or “making things worse”
- Our own grief

## **Techniques for successful communication**

- Create a safe, non-judgmental environment, free of interruptions.
- Listen, listen, listen. Don't interrupt, interpret their feelings, or offer advice.
- Do provide accurate information as needed. Identify and counter misconceptions about the death itself. Be honest and factual and use age-appropriate language.
- Use the name of the person who has died.
- General, simple words of condolence are always appropriate:
  - I am sorry for your pain.
  - I really miss (name of the deceased).
  - He (or she) was a special person.
  - I'm here if you need to talk, or cry, or just have quiet company.
  - I've never experienced this before, and I just don't know what to say.
- Ask open questions to get them talking:
  - What was your relationship with (the deceased) like?
  - Can you tell me what this has been like for you?
  - How are you doing?
  - How is your family doing?
  - Is there anything you can think of that I can do to help you?
- Accept and validate whatever feelings are expressed – do not argue with or minimize their feelings. If appropriate, suggest constructive outlets for strong feelings.
- Normalize their feelings and thoughts. Reassure the teen that difficulty concentrating, lack of enjoyment, anger, decreased energy, and so on are all normal parts of the grief process and will abate over time.
- Leave room for a conflicted or ambiguous relationship with the deceased – do not idealize the dead.

## What Not to Do:

- Don't avoid the issue. Avoidance causes the issues to go “underground,” resurfacing later in potentially harmful ways
- Don't try to “rescue” the teen from his or her feelings. Grief involves feelings that make us uncomfortable, but successfully resolving grief requires that we work through these feelings in our own way and at our own pace. Witness their pain without trying to change it, hurry it, make it better, or minimize it.
- Don't use euphemisms. It suggests to the teen that you can't handle the reality of death, and may cause them to worry that they have to protect you. Use the “d” words instead: dying, death, dead.
- Avoid clichés. Try to imagine what they would sound like to you if you were the one grieving.
- Don't lie to protect the family or community image. When the teen finds out the truth, they will have another loss to grieve for – their trust in you.
- Don't impose your own religious beliefs. Teens often go through spiritual crisis or existential questioning after a death. Be supportive, but let them find their own way.

## Other Things Adults Can Do To Help Grieving Teens

- Respect the teen's privacy.
- Model positive coping behaviors.
- Maintain regular routines and structure as much as possible – minimize disruptions.
- Maintain normal expectations of behavior and appropriate consequences for negative behavior – this helps teens maintain or regain a sense of consistency.
- Encourage the teen to eat healthy foods, to drink plenty of water, and to sleep – physical health affects emotional well-being.
- Encourage and facilitate age-appropriate activities:
  - Memory book
  - Journaling, letter writing
  - Artistic or musical expression
  - Physical outlets such as sports or other active recreation
  - Memorial rituals
- Give teens choices and options to help counter feelings of helplessness.
- Introduce grieving teens to others who have also been through difficult losses – peer support can be a powerful resource for adolescents.
- Reassure the teen that love for the deceased can be expressed through other emotions than sadness. Feeling joy and happiness about life events is often experienced by the teen as being somehow disloyal to the person who has died. Reassure the teen that it is okay for them to continue to enjoy their lives.
- Explore if school assignments can be modified to allow grieving teens to channel their emotions and energy into writing, drawing, or other expressive outlets – this may allow students to keep up with school while they work through their grief. Have a buddy who will help the teen with homework, or assign a tutor who can help the student. Step in if needed to advocate for the teen at school.
- Teens often benefit from having a safe way to physically express anger. You can give grieving teens appropriate things for them to unleash their anger on, such as telephone books or magazines to rip up, pillowcases full of clean cloths to wrestle with and hit, paper cups to smash, paper bags to blow up and pop, golf tees to hammer into thick Styrofoam, or clay to manipulate, pound, and smash.
- Be available over time. Many grieving people report that their support system rallies well at the time of the death but then vanishes two or three months later – long before their grieving is over.
- Be aware of “anniversary dates” which can reactivate grief; acknowledge these special days and assist the teen in making the connection between approaching “anniversary dates” and their renewed feelings of grief.
- Be patient. Grief takes time.