

When Adolescents Grieve

As a natural part of life, adolescents will have frequently encountered many situations that involve a feeling of “loss”. These losses may include separation from friends, separation of parents, and death of a loved one. Future losses like death of a friend, relative, or an acquaintance will trigger underlying feelings of unresolved grief. While many people grieve in various ways, adolescents can sometimes respond to death very intensely.

Beginning around the age of 9, just before the onset of adolescence, children begin to perceive death as being real, final, universal, and inevitable. They begin to show an interest in the biological aspects of death and may desire to know more details. Developmentally, the adolescent is essentially searching for explanations or answers regarding all aspects of life. Many “why” related questions are asked by the adolescent and many of these questions cannot be adequately answered.

Stages of Grief:

- Denial
- Anger
- Bargaining
- Sadness/Hopelessness
- Acceptance

It is important to remember that not everyone touched by death goes through the stages of grief in the order listed above, and not every person will go through every stage of grief.

Behaviors that may be exhibited:

- Crying/Sobbing
- Physical Complaints
- Anxiety
- Denial
- Guilt
- Fear

How adults can help:

- Show empathy/understanding
- Let them know they are not alone in their feelings
- Physically and verbally comfort students (hugs, encouraging words, etc)
- Referral to appropriate professionals when grieving lingers
- Admitting that we do not always know why certain things happen
- Keep the adolescent engaged and in familiar routine
- Remember that adolescents may sometimes respond by the way adults respond / they look to adults as a natural learning process when it comes to emotions and reactions

While death is a natural part of life, we must remember to continue providing hope and strengthening qualities of adversity and resiliency.

Additional resources can be found at: <http://grievingchildren.org/grief-resources/>