

# GriefWork: Guides for Survival and Growth



## For Teenagers—Facing the Death of Someone Close

**A** star quarterback on his high school football team, Marqee was an easygoing, likeable fellow. Though he was only a sophomore, college scouts already were praising his unusual athletic ability. But a fatal motorcycle accident abruptly ended his bright future. Marqee's death stunned his classmates and friends. At first it seemed like a bad dream; then came sadness, questions, loneliness, regrets, fear, anger, and more disbelief. The challenging world of their teenage lives had been invaded by the shadow of death, reminding each of them that life is both precious and uncertain.



**I**t's hard to face the death of someone close; it takes courage. Your life has changed and it will never again be the same. When a loved one or friend dies, you naturally react in your own unique way. Remember, whatever you're feeling, it's OK.

### **ACCEPT YOUR FEELINGS**

At the beginning you might experience shock, disbelief and numbness. This initial reaction is nature's way of softening the blow until you are more able to handle what you don't want to believe. Soon you are likely to feel a range of emotions such as sadness, anger, loneliness, fear, and perhaps more numbness and disbelief. Given the circumstances of the death and your relationship with the person who died, you might also experience relief, peace or gratitude. At times you may not feel anything at all.

Nagging thoughts sometimes accompany the difficult emotions: "Why did this have to happen,

and why now?" or "It could have been me." You also may have strong feelings of injustice and unfairness. Quite likely, the death of your loved one or friend will bring you face-to-face with your own mortality—the fact that each moment of life is a gift, and that one day, hopefully far into the future, you too will die.

All of your thoughts and feelings are normal. It's called grief. Grief is nature's way of helping us cope, heal and grow after a death. Grief is not a weakness; it's a necessity, it's the price you pay for caring and loving. The only way out of your grief is through it. Be patient with yourself. Eventually the hurt, sadness and other difficult feelings will lessen and soften. You *will* feel better, and you will grow and learn, but it will take time, perhaps lots of it.

### **REMEMBER YOUR RIGHTS**

You have a right to experience all of your feelings, you have a right to cry, and you have the



right to talk about your pain and grief and hopes. When you don't feel like talking, you have the right to be quiet. When you don't want to be around people, you have the right to solitude.

If a well-meaning family member or friend makes a misguided remark, like: "Be strong and keep a stiff upper lip," or "Now you have to be the man (or woman) of the house," don't buy into it. Just be yourself, and grieve in a way that feels right to you. Of course, this doesn't include activities that are hurtful, destructive or against the law; they won't help you with your grief and they could get you into trouble.



Trust your inner sense of what is truly best for you; don't allow others to push you into doing things that you're not ready for.

### **DRAW ON YOUR EXPERIENCE**

As a teenager, your direct experience with death is probably limited. But you are no stranger to grief, because other losses also cause grief, although the intensity of the grief may not be as strong.

You have experienced many changes, and changes bring losses. Think about some difficult changes you have come through. These might include transitions such as a family separation or divorce, moving to a new home or school, death of a pet, loss of a dream, the demanding changes of your body growing into physical and sexual maturity, changes in friendships, or a break-up with a special girlfriend or boyfriend.

You've been through a lot in your life. You've seen many changes and endured your share of disappointments and losses. Though these losses may have been more minor than the death you are now dealing with, you've grieved before and you've learned a lot. In responding to your present grief, you will naturally draw upon the strength, skill and wisdom you've gained from past experiences. Don't sell yourself short; you've got a lot going for you.

### **GRIEF DURING THE TEEN YEARS CAN BE EXTRA CHALLENGING**

Let's face it: Being a teenager is a major challenge! Add to it the death of someone close, and life can become very complicated and demanding. In addition, the deaths teens experience are frequently sudden and unexpected, making the grieving process more complex. When death is violent and there are a large number of mourners, such as a whole school, the effect can be traumatic and overwhelming.

You are also forming your own identity and establishing independence from your parents—a process that can strain family relationships. If a parent dies when you are pushing away from your family or during a time of conflict, you may have feelings of guilt or resentment that you need to talk about with a trusted adult friend or counselor.

Remember, even if you had a troubled relationship with a parent or someone else who died, *you are not responsible for their death.* Your words, thoughts and wishes did not cause the death. We are each responsible for our own behavior, our own emotions, our own choices.

### **REMINDERS CAN BE DIFFICULT**

Even after a long time, holidays, birthdays and anniversaries can be painful reminders of the absence of your loved one or friend. This is true for special school and family events, too. A variety of other bittersweet memories are also likely to crop up: a dream, a yearbook picture, homecoming, a visit to a favorite hangout, or a phone call from a friend who has not heard about the death.

Running into reminders is like opening a wound that has just begun to heal. When it happens, take some deep breaths and be with your feelings and memories. With time the opened wound will heal and eventually the reminders will lose much of their sting.

### **KNOW WHEN TO REACH OUT FOR HELP**

We need one another. George Bernard Shaw put it this way: "We are all dependent on one another, every soul of us on earth." So never hesitate to ask for a helping hand. When in doubt, reach out.

If you become so depressed that the thought of suicide keeps coming to mind, talk to a trusted family member, a school counselor, a mature friend, or a religious leader you feel comfortable with and trust. Do so right away.

According to grief specialist Alan Wolfelt, if you are experiencing difficulties such as the following, it's time to reach out for help immediately:

- ✓ Consistently occurring problems such as difficulty sleeping at night, depression, hopelessness, negative thinking, physical problems, or feeling bad about yourself.
- ✓ Lack of interest in school and lower grades.
- ✓ Weakened relationships with family and friends.
- ✓ Risk-taking behaviors such as drug and alcohol abuse, fighting, and sexual experimentation.
- ✓ Denying pain while acting overly strong or mature.

### **SUGGESTIONS FOR YOUR JOURNEY OF HEALING**

As you move into and through your grief, the following suggestions may ease your way:

- ◆ **Don't try to escape your pain.** Avoid activities that numb your feelings, such as watching an excess of television, talking too much on the phone, or constantly listening to music. And don't use alcohol, food, sex or drugs as a way of pushing away your pain or not caring. Take time to be quiet . . . to be by yourself, to remember, to feel, to learn, to say good-bye.
- ◆ **Share your grief with those who understand.** Find at least one person you trust and respect, someone who will listen and understand, and pour out your heart. Do this as often as needed during your time of grief and healing.
- ◆ **Take care of yourself physically.** Rest when you feel the need, eat nutritiously, and take in adequate water and other fluids. Get a moderate amount of exercise: Shoot some hoops, jog around the neighborhood, or take a walk in the park or woods. Your journey toward healing will be much smoother if you treat your body kindly and listen to its enormous wisdom.
- ◆ **Breathe freely, naturally.** During stressful times we tend to tighten the muscles in our

stomachs. This restricts breathing, de-energizes, and produces more stress. You can promote healing and well-being by occasionally taking several long, deep breaths, letting your lower belly expand as you do so. After each long in-breath, allow your breath to flow out slowly, naturally, smoothly. In addition, as you go through the day notice your breathing. Avoid tensing the muscles of your belly. Breathe with a soft belly.

- ◆ **Let yourself cry.** Tears are one of nature's ways of cleansing and healing. Sobbing releases tension and sorrow and promotes relaxation. Kansas State University colleagues David Balk, Carolyn Wilken and Joyce Powell offer this advice: "If you have difficulty crying in front of others, try taking a shower. You can cry in a shower; no one sees, hears or can tell by your face later." Crying is a gift; receive it.
- ◆ **Consider joining a peer support group.** A grief support group provides a safe place for sharing pain, struggles, fond memories and hopes with others your age who have also experienced the death of someone close. Your school counselor, a local hospice or mental health center, or a church or synagogue may be able to help you find or start a grief support group for teenagers.
- ◆ **Give those around you a break.** It's a tall order when you are in so much pain, but do your best to be understanding of those around you. If it was a family death, your parents and siblings will be struggling and are likely to be on their own emotional roller coaster. So be patient, and be a good listener. Hold a hand, prepare a meal, help out with a younger brother or sister. Gestures of loving kindness promote relief and healing for those close to you as well as for yourself. Be understanding if friends withdraw or act awkward, not knowing what to say or do.
- ◆ **Forgive and let go.** Life is a school and in the learning process we all make mistakes; we say and do things we later regret. Even in the best of relationships, there are usually memories that need healing. Forgiving does not excuse wrong or hurtful behavior, but it does free you from self-defeating blame, resentment and guilt.

Forgiveness also brings peace of mind, freedom of spirit, and an opportunity for fresh starts. As necessary, forgive yourself repeatedly and extend the same kindness to others.

- ◆ **If spirituality is important to you, draw on this resource.** Your relationship with God or a higher power can assist and comfort you as you confront the mystery of death. In prayer or in the quiet of nature, it may help to pour out your frustrations and longings, asking for comfort and guidance. Then trustfully, receptively, patiently listen to the silent whispers of your soul. A spiritually oriented adult whom you respect can be helpful in these matters.
- ◆ **Appreciate the bright spots.** As you reminisce and talk you are likely to find yourself smiling or breaking into a belly laugh. This is good and healthy and is in no way disrespectful to the one who has died. Another bright spot is that while grief is painful, it's also growth producing. Among its positive outcomes, adolescents frequently report a deeper appreciation of life, greater expressions of caring for loved ones, strengthened emotional bonds with others, and more inner strength.
- ◆ **Offer a gesture of special remembrance.** Think of something you'd like to do in honor of your loved one or friend who died. It might be planting a small tree or some flowers in her honor, visiting his parents or guardian, writing a poem of gratitude, offering a helping hand to another, or taking a few moments for prayer or a time of remembrance. Let it be something that feels right to you and comes from the heart.

### **A NOTE TO PARENTS, GUARDIANS AND TEACHERS**

Give space and privacy to the teenagers in your life. By your actions, let them know, "I'm here for you." Respect them, listen well, let them teach you about their grief and how you can help.

When appropriate, allow them the opportunity to join in creating funeral plans or memorial services. As needed, inform the school. An informed teacher can excuse a student and provide privacy and personal support. Remember that grieving in a

healthy manner is important for teens. It sets a positive pattern for the future.

During this time of loss and mourning teenagers probably will not need much advice, but they will need you. They'll need your presence, your acceptance, your listening ear, your patience, your reassurance, your guidance. They don't need you to be a tower of strength, and they don't need you to have all the answers. But they do need you to be who you are, to be with them heart to heart, one human being with another. And yes, each in their own way, they need your healthy expressions of affection. We never outgrow that need.

### **TREASURING YOUR MEMORIES**

Earl Grollman, author of *Straight Talk About Death for Teenagers*, offers these words of reassurance: "The life that has touched yours goes on forever. Remembering can transform bitter pain into memories of a life shared. Time cannot steal the treasures you carry in your heart. What you once enjoyed, you can never lose. All that you loved becomes a part of you."

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