
HELPING TEENS WHEN LOSS OCCURS

BY LINK ELMORE

Your phone rings and the church secretary tells you the news. There's been a death in one of the new families that just joined the church. The pastor is away for the day and will be back tonight but asked that a deacon be contacted. "Can you go by the house and be with the family until he arrives?" she asks.

This very scenario was discussed at the recent deacons' retreat. "Of course," you say, "I'll go right away." Before you hang up, the secretary reminds you that this family has two teenagers, ages 13 and 15. The retreat leader hadn't covered how to talk to teenagers about grief and loss. What do they need from you at this time?

Learning to grieve well is one of the chief tasks of adolescence. Teens who learn this will become adults who better manage the inevitable losses that life brings. Unfortunately, most adults — much less teenagers — don't really know what grief is.

What is grief?

Grief is that collection of feelings, behaviors and thoughts experienced as a natural result of loss or an unmet desire. *Death isn't the only loss that causes grief.* Parental divorce or estrangement, moving away from a hometown, the end of a romantic relationship, and abortion or fetal miscarriage are all examples of losses that teens experience and, therefore, potential occasions for grief.

By virtue of their being between childhood and adulthood, teens may not yet have learned effective ways of managing the intense emotions they are feeling. Grief naturally will reflect a teenager's pre-adult level of maturity while also giving them the opportunity to grow emotionally. Loss can be a portal through which we pass from one stage of maturity to another. As a family ministry deacon or youth

minister responding to a young person during a time of loss, you can encourage this passage as you care for them. This is true not only in the immediate days after the loss but in the weeks, months and years that follow, as well.

Suggestions to help teens grieve

Helping a young person through this process is a privileged task. If you are fortunate enough to be in such a position, here are a few things to keep in mind:

- *Practice presence, listening and observation skills.* Your presence and companionship through the loss is most often more reassuring than your spoken words.
- When giving information, *be honest, keep it simple, and be as complete* as they can understand. Teens have legitimate questions. Without factual answers, they may construct their own explanations, which may or may not be accurate or helpful to their grieving and maturing.
- *Avoid euphemisms:* "Grandpa is just sleeping," "Daddy went away on a long trip," "God needed mommy in heaven." Early teens, in particular, retain some concrete thinking from childhood and may process such explanations literally. Euphemisms too often are an effort to communicate about a painful subject without speaking directly and can be a sign of an adult's own grief and discomfort with the topic. Using this type of language distances us from reality and therefore from each other. That's *not* what you're there to do.
- *Give teens permission to grieve.* Lead by example. Teenagers will take their cues from the adults they trust and want to emulate. If

they learn that adults shouldn't cry, then they won't either (or will feel guilty and childish for doing so).

- *Provide a place for "safe" grieving*, both physically and relationally, by protecting teens from those who would ridicule their vulnerability or instruct them to "act like an adult."
- *Mourn the loss but celebrate the life*. Look at photos. Tell stories. Remember together.
- *Find or create a ritual*: Attend a funeral service, plant a tree, collect money for a charity, draw a picture, take a trip, write a goodbye letter. Rituals contain a vocabulary for dealing with grief that often is too big for mere words.
- *Seek assistance from professionals* such as a school counselor, youth minister or social worker.
- *Play with teens*. Not all youth will be comfortable sitting and talking. They may prefer some activity — throwing around a football, taking a walk together, tossing a flying disc. This can be especially helpful as other adults in their family are preoccupied during this time. Teens may or may not open up verbally while playing, but giving them this outlet can benefit them enormously.
- *Pray with teens*. Model "conversation with God" through your prayers. Encourage them to create their own prayers, if not aloud with you then alone or with someone else they trust.
- *Admit what you don't know*. Don't worry about being a master theologian. If you can't explain why a loss occurred or how the afterlife works, don't try. "I don't know" is a perfectly acceptable answer to questions.
- *Be sincere*. Don't be afraid to admit your

own doubt, fear, anger, mixed feelings or resentment. Teenagers are particularly adept at sniffing out insincerity. Covering up your own feelings in order to "spare" them usually backfires. Plus, it models to them that these feelings are not appropriate; they are, and teens need to know it's OK to express them.

As the deacon on call, you pull up to the home and see that the 13-year-old son is outside, by himself, holding a basketball that he isn't shooting. The other family members are gathered inside, and you may think you should go inside first. Resist that impulse, go over and introduce yourself to the teenager first. And as you do, remember that you take with you the two most effective tools for ministering to anyone in grief — God's love and your compassion.

For Further Reading

- *When Children Grieve: For Adults to Help Children Deal with Death, Divorce, Pet Loss, Moving, and Other Losses* by John W. James and Russell Friedman with Dr. Leslie Landon Matthews; HarperCollins Publishers, 2001.
- *Helping Children Grieve When Someone They Love Dies* by Theresa Huntley; Augsburg Fortress, 1991.
- *And God Cried, Too: A Kid's Book of Healing and Hope* by Marc Gellman; Harper Trophy, 2002.

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