

# Notes on some Frequently Asked Questions about bereaved teenagers

## Introduction

Rose Griffiths (University of Leicester School of Education) and Sacha Richardson (The Laura Centre) wrote these notes as part of a training pack. The full 'Teenage Grief' training pack can be freely downloaded from the Childhood Bereavement Network website. This training pack was designed to be used with the 'Teenage Grief' DVD, the DVD is available from most library services and Leeds Animation Workshop.

There are no definitive "right" answers to these questions, nor are these notes complete, we hope they may provide a useful starting place.

### **(a) What is "normal" for a bereaved teenager? How do I know when expert help is needed?**

- Adolescence is a time of rapid growth and change. Mood swings, angry outbursts, sullenness, risk taking and other challenging behaviour are all a normal part of being a teenager.
- Most grieving young people can be helped by friends and family listening, paying attention to them and respecting their feelings.
- Many bereaved young people benefit from meeting others who have been bereaved to share their experience.
- However, if grief continues to overwhelm them, or the young person remains unable to cope with day-to-day life, or you are aware that they may be suicidal, or their behaviour is causing danger to themselves or others, contact with a professional is advisable.
- Bereavement following suicide, murder or other traumatic death may be particularly difficult.
- If a young person's home situation is particularly chaotic or dysfunctional, this can be another indicator that more in-depth help is required.
- If not sure, seek advice rather than just leave it.
- Sources of help include your own doctor, a specialist bereavement service, a family social worker or a school counsellor.

### **(b) What should I do in the immediate aftermath of a death, to help a teenager or their carer? Should I say anything, or send a card?**

- This is a significant event in a young person's life and we need to acknowledge it. Just saying something like "I am very sorry to hear your father has died" is important. It helps the teenager to know that you are aware of the death.
- A card or note to a carer acknowledges this loss and may give you the opportunity to offer help.
- Talk to colleagues about who needs to know about the death and how you will share this information.

**(c) What helps bereaved teenagers to talk?**

- Everyone finds it easier to talk to someone they feel comfortable with, in a reasonably private setting, and when there is plenty of time.
- Often doing something together (a car journey, a shopping trip, a game of cards, or any practical activity), may provide ideal informal opportunities to talk.
- You cannot make a teenager talk about their grief if they do not want to, and they may resent being made to feel under pressure.
- There are many ways to express grief apart from talking (e.g. playing music, writing, sharing on the internet, or doing something that reminds you of the person who has died).

**(d) What can we do to stop young people blaming themselves or others unrealistically?**

- Straightforward reassurance is important. In many cases words such as "there is nothing anyone (or we) could have done to stop Dad dying" are helpful.
- Pay attention to what a teenager says or does, so that you can reassure them if they show signs of guilt or regret about things they have done.
- Sometimes there may have been angry disagreements between a young person and the deceased. It can help to put these into context with their whole relationship. "Mum knew you loved her. Having rows is part of growing up."
- Remind them of positive things they did for the person who died. For example, "Your sister loved going shopping with you".
- If a close family member or carer has a terminal illness it is important that teenagers are informed.

**(e) When a bereaved teenager is behaving badly, how should we respond?**

- Make sure that you do not label a young person “bad” because of particular behaviours. Noticing when, where and with whom a teenager behaves in a certain way will help you to find ways of responding appropriately.
- It is generally helpful to keep consistent boundaries. Knowing there are limits helps young people feel more secure.
- Whilst still keeping boundaries it is helpful to acknowledge feelings that may be being expressed. “I can see that you are very angry, it is OK to be angry, but not OK to swear at me”.
- It is quite common for anyone to be less capable and appear to go backwards for a time following a bereavement. Concentration and other abilities may not be at the level they were before, especially if a young person feels anxious or afraid.
- Addressing the needs of the teenager (for instance, for information, reassurance and security) may help to address the underlying cause of difficult behaviour.

**(f) For how long will a young person grieve?**

- A significant bereavement will be part of their experience for the rest of their life.
- Certain events, reminders or anniversaries are likely to trigger feelings and thoughts about the dead person.
- Getting on with life is really important to teenagers. This often involves spending time with their friends and doing things that mean they can temporarily forget what has happened. This does not mean they don't care or are not grieving.
- As time goes on they may re-visit a death with new awareness and understanding. This may trigger new feelings of grief.
- Studies have shown that teenagers are affected by bereavement for a long time. The Harvard Bereavement study reported that a significant proportion of children and young people showed more emotional distress two years after a death, than immediately following their bereavement.

**(g) Should staff share their own feelings with teenagers? How can staff support each other?**

- Young people learn from others. Often it is through adults talking about their thoughts and feelings that teenagers make sense of their own experience.
- In supporting a young person we need to focus on their experience rather than our own. However it is important to acknowledge your own feelings, especially where they also recognise a teenager's loss e.g. "I felt so sad when I heard about your brother's death".
- Talking about your own experience of loss can be very helpful.
- All staff that work with a bereaved teenager need to be informed as quickly and clearly as possible about a death.
- In supporting staff it is important to respect individual differences. Some may need the opportunity to talk; others may prefer to cope by getting involved in other activities or focussing on the needs of the young people. It is valuable to acknowledge the impact a bereavement may have on the staff.
- Some time at staff meetings can be given to acknowledge the impact of a death and to address any issues and questions that have arisen.

**(h) Are there any significant times or events where we need to be especially thoughtful about a bereaved teenager's experience?**

- Birthdays, religious festivals, visits or meetings with people that have a particular connection to the deceased may all trigger strong feelings of loss. All these occasions also provide opportunities to remember the person who has died and honour the importance of their relationship.
- Openly acknowledging the anniversary is helpful. Sometimes the young person may tell you about a significant date, at others it may be valuable for a key member of staff to make records so that they are aware of important dates.

- Having acknowledged someone's absence it can be helpful to give a clear message that it is OK for teenagers to have fun and carry on normal activities. For instance, "Happy Birthday Joe, you must miss your mum today, but I bet she would really want you to enjoy your birthday".
- Some aspects of the school curriculum may need to be handled sensitively, for example, in science, the topic of rotting and decomposition (where someone has been buried), or in English, history or RE, stories or beliefs about loss and death. It is important not to avoid these subjects, but to be aware that they may have a different impact on a bereaved young person.
- School parents' evenings, reports, exam results and even routine letters home may be hard for a teenager who has lost a parent.

**(i) How might other young people react when one of their peers is bereaved?**

- They may react in a whole host of ways; some common reactions are fear, disbelief, denial, anger and sympathy.
- Being given clear information about the death and how to support the bereaved person will help them.
- Teenagers sometimes use 'difference' as a cue to bully. The bereaved young person's own behaviour may add to the perceived difference. For example they may exhibit angry and aggressive behaviour that triggers reprisals.
- Bullying often comes about from fear and lack of understanding or knowledge. Teenagers find it frightening to think that someone so significant can die. They may bully as a reaction to their own uncomfortable feelings.

**(j) How will a death affect a teenager for whom this is just another difficult thing in their life that they have to deal with?**

- For some young people, home situations and relationships can be complicated and confusing. When a death occurs they may struggle to identify for whom they are grieving and what their relationship to that person was.
- Occasionally a death may bring relief from a difficult or abusive relationship, but once someone has died it feels like there is no chance to put things right. This may result in mixed feelings of guilt, confusion, regret, anger and new hope for the future.

- The combination of difficult feelings and circumstances may lead to a young person “acting out” their internal distress. They may be more likely to get into trouble or take risks (for example, with drugs or alcohol).
- Sometimes grieving goes on hold until other issues are dealt with, or a death may be a catalyst to deal with other problems.
- Teenagers might need help to unravel the complexities in their life and then support with bereavement when the time is right. They will need to feel reasonably safe and supported to be able to process their feelings around a death.

**(k) Should we talk about heaven?**

- For many young people and families it is natural and important to talk about heaven or another form of after life. Equally other families believe there is no life after death. The teenager’s belief may not be the same as their family’s, and may change over time. It is important to acknowledge and respect this part of a teenager’s reality.
- When there is a death this can challenge beliefs or raise issues that have not seemed so important before.
- In a secular setting, it may be appropriate to reflect on a range of beliefs, e.g. “Some people believe ... , other people think...” or to encourage the young person to talk about their own beliefs.
- Remember each family and individual has their own interpretation of religious or other belief. Where this is important, consult the young person.

**(l) What do you say if a parent has died not from illness but from suicide, murder, drug abuse or a preventable accident?**

- We need to acknowledge this loss like any other. We naturally want to protect people from difficult and traumatic events but pretending that they have not happened does not help in the long run.
- Sometimes it may be appropriate for a teenager to learn the whole story about a death piece by piece. It takes time for the reality of a sudden death to sink in. Giving more, and repeated information about the death can help, whilst being sensitive to what the young person can cope with at any one time.
- There are occasions when certain details about a death are public knowledge and the young person may be surrounded by people

talking about a death. In these cases it is important to give the teenager the best information possible.

- Sometimes we may doubt a young person's story about a death because it shocks us or does not seem to make sense. Initially accept their version of events and if unsure find a way to check. This may be complicated because different rumours spread around communities following traumatic death.
- If there is a great deal of anger in the family about a death, then some understanding of who or what the anger is directed at helps a young person to know that they are not being blamed.
- Traumatic death may be an area where professional support is especially useful for staff, young people and their families.

**(m) How can we help bereaved teenagers to feel more secure?**

- Though they may not ask for it, bereaved young people do need comfort and reassurance. In particular, the first time they do something after a death may be the hardest, for example, coming back to school, or doing something they would normally have done with the deceased.
- Wherever possible give them some control and choice, for example, asking whether they want to come in at the beginning of school or after break-time on the first day.
- At school, college or work it can help to have a nominated person that a teenager can go and see if they are feeling overwhelmed.
- Continuity is helpful, and the chance to do things that are familiar. Often a priority for teenagers is to spend time with their friends.
- Encourage the young person to take part in activities (like sport or music or having a bath) which are relaxing, soothing or allow them to let off steam.

**(n) How do you help a teenager while they are adjusting to a new home or carer?**

- Be sensitive to the impact of the change; pay close attention to how the young person is responding.
- Acknowledge the reality of the change by talking about differences. For example, "It must be very different now that you are sharing a room with Chris,..."

- Where possible allow the young person some choice. Even being given small choices (“Which duvet cover do you want?”) helps to give a sense of some personal control.
- Find out about familiar routines and keep as many as possible.
- Allow the young person to take their time to adjust; allow them to express negative feelings about the change, including towards new carers in their lives.
- This situation may be one where a professional setting – school, youth club or work – may provide valuable continuity and familiarity.

**(o) Where could we raise issues about death and bereavement in the secondary school curriculum?**

- Sometimes a school may need to find ways to respond to a death within its community. One way may be to use particular subjects as a forum to explore relevant issues. It is important to provide opportunities for pupils to explore their feelings, as well as address their needs for information and reassurance. For example art or English are ideal subjects to creatively express feelings and memories. Science could be used to provide information about an illness that led to a death.
- The topic of death and bereavement is so important that it should be included in the curriculum as a matter of course. This may help young people who have been bereaved in the past and prepare them for future losses.
- Ideally this would be addressed when teachers are planning their work for a coming term or year. For example in Citizenship, PSHE and RE, customs and rituals surrounding death could be explored with classroom discussion. History and Geography may provide an insight into different human experiences of death and change.
- Examples of lessons linked to particular subjects in all key stages are available on the schools’ section of the Winston’s Wish website. The Childhood Bereavement Trust website includes a booklist, including for example ‘Childhood Bereavement: Developing the Curriculum and pastoral support’ by Nina Job and Gill Frances (2004).

**(p) If a parent who died was estranged from the one who is now looking after a young person, what issues might arise?**

- There may be family conflict, including issues about custody of the young person.
- The teenager may have to cope with a lot of further changes. These might include moving house, changing school/college/work, losing or gaining contact with relatives or friends and having a new main carer.
- This is a potentially difficult situation for everyone. It will make a great difference if people can see the young person's needs as a priority when considering practical arrangements.
- Where there was little contact with the parent who died it may take longer for the death to fully register. This may be a death and relationship that the young person will need to re-visit as they get older.
- The surviving parent or carer may need to contain their own negative feelings about the deceased, to allow the teenager to freely mourn their loss.
- In a situation where the parent who died had a difficult relationship with the young person, grieving will be more complicated. The teenager has lost the chance for things to be better, and memories may be painful rather than comforting.