

TEENAGERS AND GRIEF

Grief is a person's response to the loss of a loved one. When teens experience the death of a loved one, they go through the same stages of grief as other bereaved people. But teenagers' developmental level and their prior experiences make their grief different from younger children or adults.

The main job of teenagers is to find out who they are and what their place in the world will be. They are seeking their identity and their independence. The death of an important person in their life can interfere with this job. While seeking their independence, teens need the security of parents and family being there as a safety net. That security is threatened when a person in their life dies. The teen's place in the family also changes and the struggle for, "who am I?" changes and is intensified.

Identity is also worked out by teens in peer groups. Teens don't want to be marked as different and may suppress their feelings to appear to fit into their group. Their peers also feel awkward and don't know what to say to their grieving friend. Their lack of experience with death may cause everyone to say nothing and avoid the entire situation. This can further isolate the grieving teenager, especially if the family members are too overwhelmed with their own grief to assist the teen in expressing his or her emotions.

We can help teens by encouraging them to express their feelings of pain, sadness, anger, and guilt; by helping them to understand the grieving process; by giving them permission not to grieve all of the time, i.e., to go out and be with their friends. We can also help them find an adult to talk with or a peer support group. The most important way we can help teenagers who are grieving is to offer them a listening heart.

Linda Withbroe, *Haven Herald*, January 1995