



UBHC
UNIVERSITY BEHAVIORAL HEALTHCARE

Traumatic Loss Coalitions for Youth

HELPING TEENS

Cope With the Sudden Death of a Peer

A sudden death is shocking and unbelievable to most adults. However, most adults have learned coping skills as they have grown and matured that they can draw on to help them cope with the news. When a peer dies suddenly and unexpectedly, teenagers can be greatly affected on several different levels.

Adolescent friendships are extremely important and can take on as much meaning as a family relationship. The closer the relationship, the more difficult it is to bear the thought of losing a friend and confidant and having to go on without them. They may experience feelings of guilt or have rescue fantasies and may feel that they could have or should have been able to stop the death. For example they may say “I should have never asked her to pick me up for the movies. If I just drove myself she would have never gotten into that accident.”

The death of a peer that was not a close friend can also be difficult for a teenager. The decedent may have been someone the teen looked up to or emulated, or the person may have shown them some special attention or kindness. In addition, when a peer dies there is a disruption in the belief that death only happens to the very old. Teenagers often believe they are immune to death. When a young person dies, the teen comes face to face with their own mortality and the mortality of those they care about.

Sudden and unexpected death disrupts the way teenagers see the world. Most youth see threat as minimal and they believe that bad things happen to other people. Subsequently they see the world as a safe and meaningful place and feel a sense of control over their environment. When a shocking event like a sudden death happens, these assumptions are shattered and adolescents can feel out of control, unsafe and that the world has lost its meaning.

Developmentally, teens are in the process of emotionally separating from their families and are more apt to turn to other teens for solace. Many teenagers have little experience with death and may be confused or afraid of the strong emotions that are evoked. They may not know what to do to support each other or how to ask for help themselves. Teenage boys especially may have difficulty displaying strong emotions of fear or sadness and they may feel that it is babyish to cry. Some teens may not be able to verbally express their pain and confusion, or they may express these feelings in less adaptive ways such as angry outbursts,

getting into fights, using alcohol and drugs, or engaging in risk taking behaviors. To complicate matters, caring adults may be worried about the teenager but not know what to do to help someone who refuses their offers to talk about their grief. It may also be more difficult to feel as empathic when a teen is expressing their grief in angry or aggressive ways.

Teenage friendships are often fraught with disagreements. Disruptions in relationships followed by reconciliations are common as teenagers continue to learn the nuances of conflict resolution and building strong trusting friendships and romantic relationships.

When a sudden death of a peer occurs during a time when the relationship is experiencing difficulty a teenager can be left with many feelings of guilt and remorse and may have more difficulty grieving the death.

When there are multiple deaths such as in a car crash or a natural disaster, teenagers are faced with an even larger task in their grieving. Multiple losses can deeply impact whole communities. These losses can have farther reaching effects into other communities as well, especially with the presence of social networking sites. Teenagers may become emotionally overwhelmed with the enormity of processing so much loss and being closely connected to the grief of so many others. They may believe that their community, their friends, their team or their school may never recover from the tragedy of losing several young people. They may begin to believe that if it happened once, it can happen again and they may become fearful of further loss. Teens that have lost several friends may feel pressure to attend all of the services and may feel guilty if they understandably cannot handle that kind of emotional overload.

Parents and school personnel can be most helpful in guiding teenagers through the shoals of loss and grief and in mitigating the emotional effects of these events. Below are some strategies in helping teens cope with the tragedy of the sudden death of a peer.

- Remember that grief is as individual as the person experiencing it. Teenagers will not always grieve the same as adults. Their expressions of grief will depend on many things including their personality, their relationship with the deceased, the extent and quality of their support network, and their prior experiences with death. Don't expect teens to grieve in a proscribed way. Watch and listen to the clues of how they are experiencing and expressing the loss
- Some youth will want to talk and will seek out opportunities to tell the story of their friend's death in an effort to come to terms with it and make some meaning out of it
- Some youth may not want to talk at all and will become irritated when they are invited to. Let the teen know that you understand and respect their wish not to talk. Continue to model your own verbal expressions of grief without the expectation that they will do the same. You can say things like "I thought about ____ today when I made dinner. I know this was his favorite. I really miss him
- Encourage teens to try other ways of expressing their emotions. For example some teens may like to write poetry, short stories or music, some like to dance, sing, play musical instruments, engage in sports and some will want to get involved in volunteer or prevention and advocacy activities in honor of their friend

- If you are a parent, let your teen know that you care and are there for them always but also encourage them to identify other caring adults they would feel comfortable reaching out to including those outside of the family. Explain that during hard times it is often very helpful to have many people around them who can help
- Teens will often gravitate toward their peers to help them during difficult times. Do not take it personally. Be vigilant though, and intervene with understanding and compassion if they are engaging in maladaptive behaviors including using alcohol or drugs or engaging in risk-taking activities to cope with their feelings
- Your teenager may not want you to accompany them to the wake or funeral. Allow them to go with their peers. Also let them know that you will be there but you will stay in the background just in case they need assistance
- Your teen may express thoughts that they should have been able to prevent their friend's death; for example by going to the mall with them so they wouldn't have been in the car with the other kids when it crashed. Explain if they could have predicted that this was going to happen, you have no doubt that they would have done everything they could to prevent it. However, things sometimes happen and we have no way of predicting them. This was not their fault.
- If the teen seems to be feeling guilty about having relationship problems with the deceased prior to the death tell them that you are sorry that they didn't get the chance to make up with their friend. Explain that all relationships have their ups and downs. Friends fight and friends make up. There was no way to predict that their friend was going to die, but you know that if both of them knew this was going to happen, they would have certainly wanted to fix their relationship.
- Help the teen know they may experience a wide range of emotions. Explain that this is normal and that grief can sometimes make you feel sad, angry, confused, scared and like everything is out of control and that it will never be the same again.
- Adults may want teens to "move on" from the death and sadness and may indirectly try to rush the teen through the grief process. It is better to walk alongside the youth through the process and bear witness to the grief while reassuring them that the pain will change in intensity. Explain that they may always grieve for their friend but they will at some point little by little begin to feel joy in life again.
- If there have been multiple losses such as in a car crash or a natural disaster, the teen may feel the need to attend every wake or funeral even though there are indications that they are emotionally drained and overwhelmed. Give the teen permission to not attend every service and assure them that this does not in any way indicate how much they cared about their friends. Show them the many ways they were a good and caring friend when their friends were alive. Help them to plan other ways of honoring their friends' lives and supporting the families over the next days, weeks, and months without pushing their body and emotions to the limit right now.

- Some events such as those with multiple losses attract mass media attention. Frightening, dramatic and sad images are often repetitively displayed in newsprint, on television or radio. Watching these kinds of scenes may fixate the images of a violent or accidental death and increase the teen's feelings of vulnerability. It is important to talk to the teen about limiting their exposure to upsetting media coverage as it may be difficult to get the images of the deaths out of their head.

Signs that the teen may need additional assistance

- Symptoms of chronic depression, sleeping difficulties, restlessness, anxiety, and unremitting feelings of guilt and responsibility
- Difficulty concentrating, academic failure or indifference to school-related activities
- Irritability, angry outbursts, physical fighting
- Risk-taking behaviors such as drug and alcohol abuse, sexual experimentation, driving too fast
- Somatic complaints such as headaches, stomachaches, fatigue
- Withdrawal from friends and family
- Nightmares
- Inability to stop thinking about the event
- Worrying excessively about something bad happening to them or someone they love
- Suicidal thoughts, plans or actions (these reactions need immediate attention by a mental health professional)

Resources

Most times the time and attention of caring adults can effectively assist teens who are grieving the loss of a friend. Teens who are experiencing some of the signs listed above can benefit from more formalized counseling that can be provided by school counselors and psychotherapists. These resources can be found by contacting school administrators, pediatricians and adolescent medicine doctors, local psychiatric screening centers, and other community mental health centers.

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