

PATHWAYS CENTER for GRIEF & LOSS

GUIDELINES FOR FAMILIES: HELPING ADOLESCENTS COPE FOLLOWING A LOVED ONE'S DEATH

- Coping with the death of a loved one is a complex and highly individual process in each adolescent, involving their need to mourn the loss as well as their need to successfully navigate the usual developmental tasks of their age group.
- Active participation in rituals such as the wake and funeral/memorial service can bring feelings of mastery and control, and reduce feelings of helplessness in teens.
- Some factors which can help teens cope with a parent's death are:
 - Having a good relationship with the parent who died
 - Feeling accepted by peers and important adults (teachers, relatives)
 - Having an open, positive relationship with the surviving parent
 - The ability to express their thoughts and feelings about the deceased parent and have them validated by others
- For most adolescents, typical symptoms of distress before -- as well as after -- a loved one's death include lower grades in school, sleep problems, irritability or anger, and sadness.
- In the days or weeks immediately after the death of a parent, the acute grief of the surviving parent may make it seem as if no one is "in charge" in the family; as a result, many teens feel easily overwhelmed by the surviving parent's emotional dependence and outward displays of grief.
- It is fairly common for younger teens to become argumentative, oppositional and more demanding of the surviving parent.
- For most adolescents, keeping (and perhaps wearing) clothing of the deceased, or having a significant item to keep (a watch or other jewelry, sports equipment or trophies, tools) is highly valued as a way to "feel closer" to the deceased and maintain a sense of the person's presence.

*Adapted with permission from Christ, GH, Siegel, K and Christ, AE.
Adolescent Grief. JAMA 2002; 288: 1269-1278.*



Prepared by Pathways Center for Grief & Loss, 4075 Old Harrisburg Pike, Mount Joy, PA 17552
Phone: (717) 391-2413 or (800) 924-7610 ♦ info@pathwaysthroughgrief.org
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