

PATHWAYS CENTER *for* GRIEF & LOSS

SUPPORTING ADOLESCENTS COPING WITH DEATH

After the death of a loved one, adolescents can experience a significant amount of stress. Many struggle to manage their grief, while simultaneously trying to continue to function at school, at home and with friends. Parents and guardians play an important role at this difficult time. As caring adults, you may want to protect your child from the pain of the loss but, in reality, your best gift to them is to support them in their pain -- rather than protect them from it.

Common Grief Responses in Teens:

- Physical changes in areas such as appetite, sleeping patterns or activity level
- Cognitive changes such as difficulty concentrating in school
- Changes in mood; may become more quickly irritated
- Increased anxiety that someone else may die
- Inability to relate to peers
- Overachievement or underachievement in school
- Will often “hold it together” and appear as if they are coping better than they are
- Frequent dreams about the person who died
- Increased questions about God and their spirituality
- May be reluctant to share their grief with their parents

Helpful Suggestions for Parents/Guardians:

- Openly talk with your teens and encourage them to talk to you when they are ready
- Support helpful, healthy ways of coping with their grief such as running, journaling, sports, etc.
- Be willing to listen but do not try to “fix” their grief
- Develop ways of talking that are affirming, caring and supporting
- Try to refrain from offering advice - it is usually *not* helpful
- Give honest answers to questions they may have
- Don’t prove you know more by telling them stories of your losses. Keep the focus on them.
- Understand their need to be with their friends and participate in activities so they can have relief from their grief
- Set firm boundaries and consequences for behavior
- Encourage participation in a teen peer support group to help them feel less alone
- Seek professional assistance if there are concerns about their ability to function, their safety, substance abuse, and/or other destructive behaviors