

TALKING TO ADOLESCENTS ABOUT DEATH

For many adults, talking about death is difficult. When we speak to our own teenagers about the death of a peer, family member or teacher, it can be even harder.

HOW AND WHAT TO TELL THEM?

It's best to tell the truth.

Provide accurate information about the death and the circumstances surrounding it. Be as truthful as possible about the facts. Remember, teens cognitively understand the nature of death as adults do. Respect their knowledge and developmental stage. You don't have to give all the details, but ask the adolescents if they have any questions. If they do, answer the questions to the best of your ability.

WHAT KIND OF REACTIONS CAN I EXPECT FROM A TEEN?

Everyone responds to death differently.

Some teens may be visibly upset, while others may appear to have little or no reaction. Still others may act out, laugh or act inappropriately. Often intense anger may be expressed before sadness. Remember any initial response to death, especially to a traumatic loss is normal.

Adolescents move quickly in and out of grief.

Adolescents are striving to meet their developmental tasks, i.e. forming friendships, dating, developing interests, meeting academic expectations and making plans for the future while simultaneously working through their grief. Thus, adolescents can act moody and morose one moment and carefree and spontaneous the next.

If a classmate or teacher dies, adolescents will be particularly vulnerable to feelings of fear and guilt.

Adolescents who may have had a fight with the deceased student or teacher might feel a sense of responsibility and guilt about the death. They also may feel survivor's guilt, wondering why they are still alive. You can help by listening to their fears and normalizing their reactions. It's important to acknowledge their fears before reassuring them; otherwise adolescents will find it difficult to believe you.

Remember that any death can awaken feelings about a past loss.

Both teens and adults who have experienced any death prior to this can feel the impact of that loss again. Sometimes feelings surface that may be about the past loss not the recent death or, perhaps, it can be the combination of both.

Adolescents may display a wide range of symptoms.

Adolescents will display a wide range of symptoms, i.e. headaches, stomach aches, a variety of fears about their health, their parents' health, or have difficulty eating, sleeping or concentrating. Some teens may become easily agitated or angry. You may also observe a decreased interest in school or activities, a drop in grades or school attendance or an increase in risk taking behaviors. If these symptoms are extremely severe or persist over an extended period of time then the adolescent should be evaluated for depression. In the short term however, these symptoms are a normal part of the grief process and it should abate. It is important to pay close attention to the severity, intensity and duration of the symptoms.

WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP?

Be Attentive

Answer their questions as best as you can. Don't tell them not to cry. Tell them that people feel many different things. Denial or disbelief, numbness, anger and sadness are all normal feelings. Tell them they may feel sad, and then feel happy again. That's normal too. It's okay to have moments of happiness, even when someone just died. Understand many teens may not have a need to talk about it. Avoid making judgments around the circumstances of death, i.e. suicide, drunk driving or drug overdose, etc.

Stay Present

When you think about it, the hardest thing we ever do in life is to sit with another person in pain and just provide comfort through our presence. By not rushing to make the pain go away, you allow healing to begin.

Provide structure

It's important to provide a sense of continuity and stability during a time of disruption and/or crisis. Recognize that some teens may need to return quickly to a normal routine while others may need more time to grieve.