

**Dr. Lori Rappaport**  
12625 High Bluff Drive #201 \* San Diego, CA 92130  
Phone (858) 481-2188 Fax (858) 400-5204  
www.lorirappaportphd.com

## **TEENAGERS AND GRIEF**

Teens grieve differently than adults. They move in and out of strong emotions and often grieve for a longer period of time. Their behavior may range from cold and withdrawn to clingy, to appearing as though they are doing fine. They are often not able to express in words, how they are feeling or what they need.

Initially, following a loss, teenagers seek out their friends. This is particularly true after the loss of a friend. They feel most understood by and connected to their peers. At times, parents may feel their teen is avoiding their emotions, because they do not want to discuss what has happened or how they are feeling. Teens need time to process their feelings, and to understand the scope of the loss and how it impacts their life. There is no escaping the loss, so there is no rush to push teens to process their feelings before they are ready. Denial can be a helpful coping mechanism, as it sometimes acts as a filter, letting in small amounts of information at a time.

Many factors influence a teens experience of grief: their personality, their relationship to the person who died, how the person died (sudden or expected death), the age of the person who died, if they witnessed the death, how they were told about the death, past experiences with loss and death, their culture, and what support is available to them.

Teens want and need to be included in important decisions. They do not want to be treated like a child. Honesty is important, and they do much better with information than ambiguity. In the absence of information, their fantasies are far worse than reality. Adults should recognize that teens have less coping ability and life experience to handle grief. They have no framework upon which to place their thoughts and emotions.

### **What Does Grief Look Like in Teens?**

- **Anger** – They may lash out at those closest to them because they feel out of control
- **Withdrawal**- They may pull away from family, drop out of activities, or cancel plans.
- **Impatience**- They become impatient and easily irritated with others, especially over trivial things.
- **Difficulty relating with peers**- often feel like they no longer fit in, as they can't relate to what their friends are concerned with. They find their friends can't understand the magnitude of their loss.
- **Lack of focus**- They find it difficult to concentrate, especially in class and on homework.
- **Guilt**- They feel guilt because of something they believe they did or did not do that might have prevented the death. They feel guilty about something they did or said to the deceased. They feel guilty for wanting to feel normal again—for desiring to engage in pleasurable activities.

- **Lack of motivation or interest-** They find themselves not caring about anything.
- **Loneliness-** They feel different from their peers, which makes them feel isolated.
- **Overwhelming sadness-** They feel extremely emotional and sometimes paralyzed from the pain.
- **Drop in grades-** they are unmotivated or unable to focus on their work.

### **Warning Signs in Teens**

*It is difficult at times to separate out normal teen behavior from a grieving teen that is in trouble. The following are some signs which should be taken seriously and indicate a referral to a professional might be helpful:*

- **Dramatic behavior changes.** Pay attention to behavior at home, school and in their social life. These three areas are central to their daily life.
- **Extraordinary pressure.** Are they feeling overwhelmed at school? Are they unable to keep up with homework? Are they feeling pressure from family to be a certain way?
- **Isolation.** Are they spending too much time alone? Do they cancel on friends, avoid parties and stop after school activities? Are they more withdrawn from the family?
- **Suicide.** Any talk of dying should be taken seriously. Sometimes when someone has died, it isn't uncommon to make statements such as "I just wish I could go to sleep and not wake up in the morning," or "I don't care if I get in a car accident" or "I want to die so I can be with " the loved one. However, if a child talks actively about when, where and how to kill themselves, or if there is a history of depression or suicidal behavior, it is a more serious situation and needs immediate attention.
- **Anger/Depression.** In teens, depression is often manifested by anger. They may be irritable, lack patience and tolerance, and be short tempered. Anger needs to be expressed, but in appropriate ways. Unspoken anger can become depression. Sometimes they may not understand where the anger is coming from, and may need assistance figuring it out.
- **Substance abuse.** Just as with adults, there are times when teens use drugs or alcohol to try to take away the pain. Look for denial, anger and guilt with teens you suspect are using drugs or alcohol. When seeking out assistance, find a therapist who specializes in grief and substance abuse.
- **Skipping school or dropping grades.** A normal part of grief is not caring about anything and a lack of motivation or interest. Parents need to work closely with teachers and counselors to be sure expectations are reasonable and accommodations are made as necessary.
- **Acting out sexually.** The pain of grief is so great and the emptiness so profound, it is not uncommon to look someone to fill the void. This closeness is usually only a temporary fix that may lead to regret, shame, and fear of disease and pregnancy.

## **Supporting Teens Who Are Grieving**

- Assure them you are strong enough to allow them to express their feelings. Too often teens “shelve” their grief because they do not want to add to your pain.
- Listen to them and reflect back their feelings. Allow them to vent. Don’t try to solve their problems. You can’t fix this so don’t try. Let them feel their feelings.
- Get back into a routine as soon as possible.
- Reach out to them no matter how they are behaving. While it may be difficult to see past the behavior, remember that behavior is taking the place of their words and pain.
- Be consistent at home with rules and schedules, but be flexible when needed.
- Don’t ask directly how they are doing. Teens do not do well being put on the spot. Most find it easier to talk about their feelings when it isn’t face to face. Instead take a walk, engage in an activity together, and allow the conversation to unfold indirectly.
- Gauge how much information they can handle, if they are asking about the circumstances of the death.
- Protect their health. Make sure they are getting appropriate sleep, exercise and nutrition.
- Find ways to honor and remember your loved one together.
- Encourage them to talk about the person they have lost. This is an important part of healing.
- Be an advocate for them with school. Talk to their teachers and counselor, help them access support.
- Maintain important family traditions, especially ones connected to holidays and life events.
- Stay close and be accountable if they need that reassurance. This is particularly important following the loss of a parent.
- Provide helpful books—discuss them or read them together.