

DEATH: HELPING TEENAGERS



Barnardos
No child gets left behind



INTRODUCTION

This booklet explores some of the issues for teenagers when they are dealing with a death. It may be read in conjunction with Barnardos' booklet 'Death: Helping Children Understand'.

Death is an inevitable part of life and grief is a universal human process. We cannot shield young people from the reality of death or the pain of loss. What we can do is accompany them on their journey through grief with informed support, information and encouragement.

TEENAGE DEVELOPMENT

Teenagers are in a time of transition between childhood and adulthood. It is a time of great physical and emotional change, which can often feel to a young person like bereavement itself – loss of a familiar body, change of voice, more responsibility, etc. An important factor for teenagers at this time is the search for independence and personal identity as well as the need to feel in charge of their own life. However, teenagers generally have a mature understanding of death, realising that it is inevitable and universal.

COMMON REACTIONS TO DEATH

The death of anyone to whom the teenager was attached means having to cope not only with all of the above normal adolescent changes but also the additional challenges of bereavement. It is often difficult to separate grief reactions from normal teenage behaviour.

- ▶▶ Emotions felt can include shock, disbelief, despair, depression, loneliness, guilt and anxiety. Mostly these are temporary and usually diminish over time with support from adults and friends.
- ▶▶ The young person may return to more childlike behaviour in an attempt to regain some security. This is more common among the younger teenager.
- ▶▶ Some young people take on a more adult behaviour by appearing in control and claiming to be able to manage alone.
- ▶▶ Previously placid teenagers may become aggressive and hostile. Those closest to them may feel the brunt of their anger.

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- ▶▶ Stormy relationships with parents or siblings before the death can trigger strong feelings of guilt.
 - ▶▶ Teenagers may be critical of parents' handling of the bereavement.
 - ▶▶ They may also feel responsible for assuming a parental role in the family and may feel resentful of this.
 - ▶▶ Many teenagers talk about the death in an intellectual way rather than as a deeply personal experience.
 - ▶▶ Having had such a close encounter with death, some young people may engage in risk taking behaviour, for example, driving too fast and drinking too much.
 - ▶▶ Alcohol and drugs may also be used as a means of dulling the pain of loss.
 - ▶▶ A teenager may feel quite depressed as they try to come to terms with the finality of the death.

WHAT MIGHT HELP?

Share Information

- ▶▶ When it becomes clear that a person is seriously ill and unlikely to recover it is important to share this information with the teenager. Medical terms and the circumstances need to be explained.
- ▶▶ Encourage them to create their own special way of saying goodbye to their loved one, for example, a letter, a poem, a song or special reading at the funeral service.
- ▶▶ When discussing changes that may occur in the family, ask and include, if possible, the wishes and ideas of the young person.

Offer Support

Encourage the teenager to talk about their thoughts and feelings about the death, their memories of the person and about the current situation. The surviving parent/ carer does not need to hide their expression of grief such as crying. If you are able to cry and talk about your feeling of loss it can give the young person the message that expressions of grief can be understood and supported by others.

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- ▶▶▶ Be available and present to the teenager even though at times they may rubbish your attempts to be supportive of them.
 - ▶▶▶ Be mindful also of not burdening them with the difficulties you are facing and try to get support for yourself from other adults.
 - ▶▶▶ Acknowledge peer friendships and the general support that young people give each other.
 - ▶▶▶ Sometimes, depending on the circumstances of the death and what might be happening in the family, a young person may need additional support such as counselling. Many teenagers are reluctant to go to counselling, feeling it labels them as 'different' or unable to cope. However when they attend, they often find it very helpful. Young people can attend counselling on a short-term basis.
 - ▶▶▶ Teenagers need information and support. While death is shocking and upsetting it is important that they be reassured that they will survive this grief, as will the adults around them. However, overwhelming feelings of grief or complete absence of feeling or emotion requires professional help.

Contact with School

- ▶▶▶ Schools can provide the continuity and security that a grieving student may need in a world which otherwise seems turned upside down.
- ▶▶▶ Contact between parent/carers and school staff ensures that key school personnel have appropriate information.
- ▶▶▶ Help the teenager to anticipate the possible reactions of peers and talk to them about how they would like to cope with these situations.
- ▶▶▶ Expect inconsistency and unreliability in the bereaved student's participation in class, with friends and with homework.
- ▶▶▶ Some teenagers who appear to be coping well may still be in shock and active grieving may take months to appear.



SUICIDE AND TRAUMATIC DEATH

In the aftermath of a death a teenager may show feelings of shock, sadness, loneliness, anger and guilt and any or all of these feelings may be intense.

- ▶▶ In the event of a particularly traumatic/sudden death, such as suicide, murder, or road traffic accident, you should be extra vigilant about the teenagers' grief reaction.
- ▶▶ Notice any marked changes in behaviour such as becoming very withdrawn or isolated from others, staying in their bedroom or sleeping excessively. This may be a young person's way of trying to deny or block out the situation. If concerned, seek professional help. The first point of contact is your family G.P.
- ▶▶ There is seldom one cause for someone taking their own life. Often suicide is not a desire to die but is seen as a way out of a problem or crisis that is felt to be unsolvable. Death by suicide can cause great pain for the people left behind.
- ▶▶ Feelings of rage are also common following suicide or trauma.
- ▶▶ There may also be strong feelings of abandonment linked to the dead person's apparent deliberate wish to die.
- ▶▶ Feeling guilty and responsible are very common responses after suicide.
- ▶▶ A teenager may have questions like 'How could he have done it to me/us?', 'Why?' or 'How could I have not noticed she was feeling so bad?' These are normal responses but can be very troubling for teenagers to deal with.
- ▶▶ Speaking about the deceased and how they died is often difficult following a suicide but not talking about it can deprive teenagers of adult support and guidance.
- ▶▶ It is hard to make sense of suicide when you don't know the facts and you might find it difficult to ask questions. Talking and telling the family's own story of the deceased person and their death helps family members to stay connected to one another and can counter community intrusion or speculation.
- ▶▶ Sometimes teenagers are overwhelmed by the facts of a suicidal death. They may repeatedly re-enact an actual or imagined picture of the person's death in their own mind. These images are distressing and professional help is often necessary to help manage the intrusive and frightening impact of them.
- ▶▶ Using chat rooms and websites may help teenagers share their grief and their questions. However, information or advice from peers, no matter how well intentioned, may not always be accurate.
- ▶▶ It can be very helpful to teenagers if parents/carers talk to them about the information they receive on social networking sites such as Bebo and Facebook. This will give the young person an opportunity to explore and make sense of what they are hearing, reading and seeing.

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- ▶▶▶ When a suicide occurs, people connected to the deceased are often more vulnerable to thoughts and feelings about suicide. A teenager may worry that they too might take their own life. They may need support to manage these distressing thoughts and feelings.
 - ▶▶▶ One way to help with this is for a young person to be open with someone they trust about the feelings of great pain and grief that they are experiencing.
 - ▶▶▶ If you are worried that a teenager may be at risk of self harm or suicide, let them know that you are concerned about them and talk to them about your worries. Talking does not increase the risk but does reassure the young person of your care and concern.
 - ▶▶▶ Let the teenager know that you will help them and make a plan together to get help by contacting your local G.P. and accessing your local adolescent mental health service.
 - ▶▶▶ In a crisis, your G.P. out of hour's service or the accident and emergency unit in your local hospital should be used.
 - ▶▶▶ Express confidence in the teenager's ability to get through the pain they are feeling and encourage hope for their future.

FINALLY

Involving teenagers, talking to them and allowing them to express their thoughts and feelings concerning death will help them to understand and work through their fears. Parents and carers need support too. You can ask for the support you need either from family, friends, relatives or by contacting the professional services available.



Specific Objectives of Barnardos Bereavement Counselling for Children

1. To provide information, advice, counselling and therapy to bereaved children and their families.
2. To provide information, advice and training to parents, carers, volunteers and professional staff who are in direct contact with children who experience childhood bereavement.
3. To develop family and group work suitable for bereaved families or specific groups of children as appropriate to their needs.
4. To provide resource materials relevant to working with bereaved children.
5. To promote research in the area of childhood bereavement.

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Barnardos Bereavement Counselling for Children is one of a number of Barnardos services. It is a national service with offices in Dublin and Cork.

Barnardos supports children whose well-being is under threat, by working with them, their families and communities and by campaigning for the rights of children. Barnardos was established in Ireland in 1962 and is Ireland's leading independent children's charity.

USEFUL CONTACTS

Barnardos Bereavement Helpline T: 01 4732110 (Monday–Friday 10am–12noon)

Bereavement Counselling Service T: 01 8391766

Samaritans T: 1850 60 90 90

Parentline T: 1890 92 72 77

Console T: 1800 20 18 90 www.console.ie

Teenline T: 1800 83 36 34 www.teenline.ie

www.headstrong

www.spunout.ie

This booklet draws on the work and experience of staff, both past and present, of Barnardos Bereavement Counselling for Children

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