

## Supporting Teens After a Loss or Death

### How Teachers can Play a Pivotal Role in the Healing Process

Every human processes grief differently and depending on a person's age and capacity for resilience, they will rebuild their life in their own time and their own way after a major death or loss.

One thing we cannot do, no matter how much we want to, is take the pain of loss away. However, teachers, a vital part of a grieving young person's support network, provide a significant contribution to the journey of healing.

For teens who are developmentally already experiencing the confusion, angst and stress of coping with life changes a major loss experience can have long-term, detrimental effects.

It is important for teachers to note that the end of a valued friendship or relationship, or the divorce or separation of a teen's parents, can also feel as painful as a death, and teens can struggle with grief and confusion as their social connections are unstabilised.

These traumatic experiences can impact the entire person: the way they think and learn, feel about themselves and others and the way they make sense of the world.

If the loss is sudden or unexpected, it can come with a huge degree of shock that stuns the psyche and body as the survival instincts struggle. Not only do a person's brain and instinctual human biological drives hijack their logical processing capability, they reduce spaces for new learning. That means academic learning can be derailed no matter how hard a teen may strive to stay on track.

On a practical level, when it comes to lessons and homework, teachers can cut grieving teens some slack by offering negotiated deadlines for assignments and class work.

On a larger scale, one of the most powerful ways a teacher can support a grieving teen is by acting as a 'lighthouse,' or a positive adult ally. For the young person, talking with 'safe people' about their feelings can be helpful and 'lighthouses' are incredibly valuable.



Teachers should take care not to offer advice on how to grieve, but merely validate that it is normal to feel sad, vulnerable, angry and confused as well as to struggle with sleep, concentration or a poor appetite.

Often, well-meaning adults talk too much or offer ultimately unhelpful platitudes. Statements like 'time will heal,' 'I know how you feel,' or 'they are with God now,' may feel like the right thing to say, however, that is about them and not the person grieving.

Teachers supporting a grieving teen can learn to be comfortable with silence, make time to be beside them and listen and ask, "How can I best help you right now?" Patience is essential as it can take a long time before a grieving teen is able to function in the same way they did before their loss.

To provide temporary relief and improve a teen's sleep, I have often encouraged physical activity such as running, punching a boxing bag or bike riding to help 'discharge' feelings. Teachers can use this technique by incorporating sport and activities into their daily schedules.


Students can also be encouraged to express grief by using art, craft, music or writing to create something in memory of the person or people who've died. The school community can even facilitate a collective expression of grief with a memorial, tree planting, artwork, photo display or perhaps even a song to be performed at the funeral. Many schools have encouraged students to be part of a quilt making or knitting to create a gift for the family of the deceased person.

For ongoing support, schools can create a 'safe space' for adolescents such as a room, chapel or quiet space in the library. This can be a place for students to escape to if they have a meltdown, as many teens find themselves grieving in the school toilets.

Teachers are part of a circle of people with the opportunity to most closely monitor those teens who are suffering, and it is important they keep a close eye on those students who were a sibling or close friend of the person they are grieving. A teacher is also able to recommend that professional help is sought if a suicide or sudden death from crime or accident is involved. If a school uses a grief counsellor, teachers can make sure they support the counsellor by being available to their students.

A teacher's wisdom, understanding and compassion is crucial to a grieving teen.

*"Teachers play a compelling role in a student's future and their ability to move forward."*

A healthy grieving process that acknowledges the journey of accepting the loss, allowing the human psyche to express the irrational emotions and feelings, while rebuilding a teen's life expectations without that special person is possible. This allows loved ones to turn back toward life while being grateful for its gifts. 



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