



THE ADOLESCENT MOURNER

Each year thousands of teenagers experience the death of someone they love. Those of us who have parented know that adolescence is the age of transition that bridges the gap between childhood and adulthood. Teens are neither children nor adults! Sometimes their behavior is childlike and sometimes exceptionally mature. **It is the age of opposites and extremes.**

ADOLESCENCE IS THE AGE OF DEVELOPMENTAL CHANGES.

During adolescence, teens begin the process of separating from family. Adolescents strive for independence while they are still dependent on their family for physical and psychological needs. They long for freedom to try their wings, yet they need supervision. It is a time of trial and error, successes and failures. **Teens do not want to admit to needing adults, but they need the continual support of caring adults.** The death of a family member during this time interrupts this normal developmental stage. Teens need to be comforted, nurtured and encouraged to mourn. They need recognition and validation of their emotions.

A teenager's physical development does not always equal their emotional maturity.

Although a boy is 6'3" with a deep voice, he may act like a child half his size. Most teens feel clumsy and unattractive as they get used to their changing bodies. They can be very critical of themselves and feel extremely insecure. The death of a parent or sibling can be a devastating experience at this time.

Academic pressure from well meaning adults can also be a part of the bereaved teen's world. "Your mother would want you to go to college." The young person may be unable to concentrate and totally incapable of thinking of anything but the loss of his mother. Certainly, we know adults have trouble maintaining a status quo in their jobs, and would have difficulty learning new skills during the months following a loss. **How can we expect an adolescent to be able to study a foreign language or comprehend physics during their bereavement?**

THE DEATHS TEENS EXPERIENCE TEND TO BE SUDDEN AND PREMATURE.

A parent may die of a sudden heart attack, a sibling may be killed in an auto accident, a friend may commit suicide...**the very nature of a sudden, traumatic death results in a prolonged sense of unreality.** A young person is thrown into a world of "this can't be happening" when such a death occurs.

Most adolescents are extremely close to boyfriends, girlfriends and best friends. If the death of such a friend occurs, these teens are usually not recognized as significant by parents and society. The attention is focused on the immediate family members.

MANY ADOLESCENTS LACK A SUPPORT SYSTEM.

We may assume teenagers have supportive friends and family when in reality, this may not be true. **Teens are usually expected to act “grown up” and support other members of their family instead of being given permission to grieve.** “Your mother will certainly lean on you now that your father is gone.” Adults tend to encourage “maturity” during this difficult time when a normal teen response may be regressive behavior! Knowing they are expected to “be strong” for others, the teen will repress their grief. They may not allow themselves to mourn their loss.

Historically, aunts, uncles and cousins rallied around to offer support to a distressed family. Today, the mobility of most family members makes reaching out to each other difficult. **Our fast paced culture isolates families and teens from their nearest relatives.**

Unless a teen’s friends have an understanding of grief, they may not get much support from their peers. **Their friends may feel helpless and as a result, ignore the subject of loss and death entirely.** Both the teen’s friends and family may say “Get on with life.”

ADOLESCENCE IS A TIME OF CONFLICTS IN RELATIONSHIPS.

Conflicts in relationships occur with parents and friends during adolescence. It is normal for teens to feel alienation from their parents and friends at times. **If a parent or friend dies during an estranged time, a teen can feel extremely guilty.**

When a boyfriend or girlfriend dies, a teen may feel partially responsible. They may have “broken up” or had an argument that causes the teen to feel terribly guilty. Unfortunately, many teenagers do not have relationships with adults they trust enough to help them explore their feelings. These **teens are much more at risk of unhealthy behaviors.**

The result of adolescent complicated bereavement is:

- Chronic depression and low self-esteem
- Academic failure or indifference to school activities
- Deterioration of relationships with family and friends
- Drug or alcohol abuse, fighting, risk-taking
- Chronic anxiety, restlessness, agitation
- An image of maturity to hide feelings of loss

Please be observant of the teens in your family. Talk to them! Ask them how they are feeling. Give them permission to grieve. **Tell them you are available at any time should they want to talk.** Offer to connect them to another “safe person” to talk to who will respect their need for confidentiality. Your interest may initiate a healthy grief process for them. You will ensure that your young person does not suffer in silence as the forgotten mourner.