

the teenager to express his feelings openly; listen when he needs to talk, hug him when he needs comfort, and where possible teach him to direct his emotional energy into other activities.

For many teenagers, the loss of a loved one occurs suddenly - perhaps through suicide, an accident or undiagnosed health crisis. The unexpected nature of the loss can make it extremely difficult to come to terms with. Feeling bewildered and empty is common in the early days, until the reality of the loss sinks in. As a caring adult, you may find you are needed more in the weeks, and even months, after the death to provide compassionate support as the teen mourns.

Sometimes teenagers experience serious problems with grief. Look out for:

- Deep depression – some indicators of this could be restlessness, trouble sleeping, and a drop in self esteem
- A change in eating patterns, including overeating, or skipping meals
- Apathy and indifference to school and other activities
- Withdrawal from peers and family members
- Participating in high-risk activities such as alcohol or substance abuse, aggressive behaviour and sexual experimentation
- Denial and cover up of feelings, particularly pain

If you are concerned, seek the help of a counsellor or church group.

Healing opportunities

One activity that is especially healing for teenagers is creative expression. Where appropriate, encourage the teenager to release his inner turmoil onto the page, in the form of poetry and songs, or in his art.

Consider also finding a support group. Peer groups can be instrumental in helping a teen express and work through their grief. In such a group the teen can feel secure to share with others of similar experience just how the loss has impacted and changed his life.

With your loving guidance and support, the teen will emerge from his grief with the healthy understanding that death is a natural and permanent part of life, just as grief is a natural and permanent part of love. As life and love are to be embraced, so then must death and grief be experienced and shared. In sharing, we find the path to healing.

We offer this brochure as a means to convey our support. This brochure is not meant to replace the professional guidance of a psychologist or counsellor. As you move through this difficult time, please seek professional help if necessary.



Freecall: 1800 803 196

www.burstows.com.au

Email: directors@burstows.com.au

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BEING THERE FOR
*a teenager who
is grieving*



because *life* is important





Teenagers need to grieve

When a teenager loses someone she loves you cannot protect her from grief. Grief is a natural part of losing a loved one - no matter what you say or do she will feel it anyway. The most loving thing you can do for the teenager is to support her as she moves through her grief. At this time, she needs you to:

Understand that she is not yet an adult, and that she needs the loving guidance of adults at this time;

- Support and reassure her;
- Encourage her to experience her grief in her own way; and
- Provide her with coping strategies and healing opportunities.

Not quite an adult and no longer a child

Teenagers are emotionally vulnerable at the best of times. They need to feel accepted by their peers, even as they assert their independence and identity within their family. They have unique social and academic pressures, carrying the weight of their futures as they negotiate the politics of the playground. They worry about the way they look and the ways of the world. They feel at once powerful and powerless. And while they may look like adults (and strive to behave like them) they are still young enough to need the support and guidance of the adults in their lives.

Support and reassurance

At no time is your love and guidance needed more than when a teenager loses someone he loves. A teen who loses a parent or sibling is often expected to 'put on a brave face' and 'be adult about it'. He may even adopt this role of his own accord in response to the overwhelming grief of his surviving parent. This is a terrible burden for a teen to bare, for it is not only a burden of responsibility but one of grief. If the teen is made to feel that he is not allowed to mourn - that his feelings must come second - his grief will remain unresolved inside him, preventing his recovery and putting him at risk.

Reassure the teen that he has the right to mourn, that his feelings are important. Let him know that you are there for him. Give him the opportunity to mourn his loss. If his family is having trouble coping, help them find the practical support they need so the teen does not feel he is their sole carer. It may help to gently remind the teen that grief is an expression of love to be shared by those united in loss. He cannot protect his family from grief any more than they can protect him.

Be aware that the teen may feel guilt and regret over the way he treated the family member who died, and this will complicate his grief. If you can, reassure him that it is natural for a teenager to pull away from his family at times - it is part of finding his own identity. Comfort him with the knowledge that most teenagers act this way, and that parents understand this. After all, parents were once teenagers too.

Support and reassurance at school

Friendship and solidarity are so much a part of teenage life, it is easy to believe that a grieving teen will find support amongst her peers. In truth, her grief may be ignored by friends who retreat out of helplessness and fear of saying the wrong thing.

If you are the teen's teacher, you can alleviate her classmates' sense of helplessness by teaching them appropriate ways to show support. You may wish to begin with this guide:

<i>What to do</i>	<i>What to say</i>
Let your care and concern show.	I'm sorry. I'm sad for you.
Be a good listener. Allow your friend to talk about the person they have lost.	I'm here to listen.
Help out where needed. Perhaps you can help your friend with her schoolwork.	What can I do?
Encourage your friend to be patient with herself.	Take all the time you need.

When it is a classmate who has died, you can be a source of comfort and reassurance to all of your students. Do not feel apologetic for expressing emotion in the classroom - this shows the students it is safe and acceptable for them to do the same.

Know that they may experience all kinds of emotions: shock, anger, curiosity, fear, and deep sadness. The death of a classmate will confront them with their own mortality, and they will turn to you for guidance. You may wish to seek the help of a grief counsellor at this time.

Moving through grief

Know that everyone experiences grief in different ways, and that healthy grieving is particularly difficult for teenagers at this crucial point in their self development. Make it safe for