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Forward

“A difficult age.” “The awkward period.” “Raging Hormones.” “The age of many varied mood swings.” Such quotes we have often heard concerning adolescents in today’s world. You may even have heard many others. Although at times, many of these quotes are true in an adolescent’s life, adults must never use them as an excuse for not communicating with adolescents or showing them compassion, empathy and understanding during difficult times.

Adolescents are not supposed to die. They feel invincible. They expect themselves and their friends to live a long time. It’s against all the norms of nature. It is not fair. It is not right. Although it should never happen, the harsh reality is that it does happen, and when it does, it is a terrible shock for the adolescent. This is a time when a caring, unassuming adult can make a positive difference in a young person by fostering growth and maturity. If it were offered as a course in life, none of us would sign up for it, but we can be better off for having had this experience when handled in a caring and compassionate manner.

The death of a parent can result in the adolescent experiencing adult depression, neurosis, suicide, and physical illness later in life. (Breier 1988, Osterweiss, Solomon and Green 1984) At the time of death, adolescents may exhibit immediate reactions of withdrawal, helplessness, guilt, lack of concentration, insomnia and/or eating disorders. (McIntrye 1987, Osterweiss, Solomon and Green 1984) Experts conclude, however, that in time, healthy accommodation can take place following the death of an adolescent’s parent if circumstances are favorable; that is, if caring, understanding and compassionate adults are willing to take an active approach to enhance the grief process of the adolescent.

In dealing with adolescents, as with any other group, respect must be demonstrated by the caring adult. They are not children or adults. They make up a special group of grievers who deserve a special kind of care and consideration from the adults in their world. Many times, however, adults expect teens to grieve like they do and expect that “time will heal all.” Because of these “adult” expectations, communication barriers arise, and the caring adult loses his or her effectiveness in guiding the adolescent through this emotionally turbulent time.

Although there are cases where clinical help is necessary, one of our most common fundamental beliefs about grief is that it is best handled outside of the psychologist’s or psychiatrist’s office. Ordinary people who care and have compassion for their fellow human beings play an extremely important role toward the healing process of the grieving person. Many adolescent referrals to professionals would never have to be made if adults would take more time to learn about some simple supportive fundamentals in guiding the adolescent through the grief process.

We will never have all the answers as to why things happen. We will never always know what to say. The adolescent in a grief crisis may not be able to communicate any feeling soon after the tragedy. Because of these factors, it is easy for the adult to withdraw or even make an immediate referral for the adolescent to professional counseling. Although professional counseling may help, our research and experiences clearly show that the adolescent, in most cases, prefers to talk to a trusted adult where they already have an established relationship. Also, it doesn’t matter to most adolescents what profession (factory worker, custodian, teacher, secretary, etc.) this trusted adult may belong to, as long as they show empathy, caring and compassion. Our first response to a grieving teen should not be to simply make an appointment with a professional for them, but to listen, talk, and communicate with them about their issues.

As much as adults may wish to protect adolescents from the pain and sorrow that accompanies death, life's experiences will lead to these encounters. Statistics indicate that one of every six children will lose one parent through death before they reach the age of 18. (Van Dexter, 1986) These experiences influence the total lives of the adolescents – their academic pursuits in school, their social lives, their relationships with family and friends, and their emotional selves.

Although we will never always know what to do, we do know that when our hearts are right, most of our instincts about what to do or say will be helpful. We cannot give a cure but we can give care. This unique group of griever needs a caring touch from a caring adult if they themselves are to become caring, emotionally mature adults.

“Understanding and Addressing Adolescent Grief Issues” is a work dedicated to helping the caring adult guide the adolescent through this turbulent time.

SAMPLE



