

When Does the Hurting Stop?

A Parent Guide for Assisting Teens Through Trauma and Loss

Assisting teenagers through loss

The loss of people we care for is very painful and confusing. We recognize pain expressed by tears, but pain evidenced by withdrawal, hopelessness and anger can be harder to detect. Sometimes we see pain and grief as short term so when certain behaviours appear, we wonder what is behind them.

Adolescents, as noted in the introduction to this pamphlet, often present an image of strength. Unfortunately, this results in a tendency for emotions to be buried, only to be resurrected later, sometimes in less healthy ways.

The need not to reveal weakness often causes much pain and grief to go unnoticed. These coping strategies can often be rewarded unwittingly with comments such as, "You are handling things very well." While this may appear to be the case, it is often an illusion.

How you can help:

While most helping response occurs in the first few weeks after a traumatic event, grief usually lasts longer than anticipated. The effects of grief are often revisited long after the event. These delayed, seemingly unrelated responses to grief can be baffling. It is important to keep this in mind when dealing with behaviour that is uncharacteristic.

- Be a listener. Most help comes from genuine concern that listens rather than seeks to give the 'right' piece of advice. Communicate that grieving last longer than anyone expects although the intensity usually subsides. Certain events such as birthdays and holidays may result in a "revisitation" of grief.
- Do not avoid talking about the person or event because you feel it might reawaken the pain. Avoidance of the topic conveys a lack of caring rather than the more likely fact that you do not know what to say. Usually your teenager will want to talk, although it may not come in the fashion or the time you had planned. Follow their lead and be a listener.
- Try not to make any unnecessary changes during this time. Times of grief and loss are not the times to be making important decision. Attempt to keep the situation as normalized as possible.

Perhaps the greatest challenge you, as a parent have, is to encourage and allow the admittance and healthy expression of grief.

What to watch for

Trouble signs to watch for in adolescents following a loss may include:

- withdrawal and isolation
- physical complaints (headache, stomach pain)
- emotional concerns (depression, sadness, tension, suicidal thoughts, confusion)
- anti-social behaviour (stealing, acting out, aggression, substance abuse)
- school problems (avoidance, disruptive behaviour, academic failures)

Most of these are temporary. Teenagers who appear to be withdrawn and who isolate themselves from family and friends may be experiencing emotional difficulties. The need to appear competent may work against their reaching out to others for assistance. Most grief reactions are normal responses to disaster or loss, however it is imperative that suicidal thinking be treated seriously and that help is sought.

Loss and disaster can thrust teenagers into an adult role. Regardless whether these results occur, it is important that they give themselves permission to grieve.

Understanding the grief process

While the following stages commonly occur in the grief experience, it is important to remember that grief does not follow a defined pattern. These stages may be experienced repeatedly, in differing sequence and with differing intensity.

- **Denial** is a shock absorber which temporarily reduces the full impact of the crisis, such as a person's unwillingness to talk about the loss. In the early stages denial isn't something that is wrong, however problems can occur if it continues. Give permission to feel the feeling.
- **Anger/guilt** often occur due to a person's feeling of powerlessness over the loss. Questions include: How could he/she do this to me? Why would God allow it? How could this happen to someone at our school? Blaming others can also be a common response. It is important to admit the anger, identify the real source of the anger, understand that it is okay to be angry. Seek healthy ways to express it such as strenuous physical activity, keeping a journal, sketching or talking with people you trust.
- **Sorrow/depression** are evidenced by some or all of: crying, isolation, silence, a loss of energy, and an inability to sleep. Allow and encourage expressions of grief. Emphasize that crying is not a sign of weakness, rather is the facing and acknowledgment of loss. Recording thoughts in a journal can also be very healing. Activity is helpful for depression, although sometimes depression is so deep that even activity seems too difficult. Referral to the family physician is encouraged for depression that persists.
- **Bargaining** is a means of trying to regain control or to make sense of what has occurred. This often takes the form of a promise to God that things will change if only He does something. The question "Why?" is very naturally asked through all stages but is perhaps most prevalent in the anger and the bargaining phase. The real problem cannot be faced until the "why" is abandoned and the person looks at "who, when, where and how" things happened. The reality of what has happened cannot be changed.
- **Acceptance and admission** of our powerlessness in the situation is not quickly or easily reached. Having grieved we can move on with life. Emphasize that acceptance is not a matter of forgetting the person or minimizing the pain. In fact, it is a full acceptance that the loss was real, significant and painful.

A Difficult Time

The events of recent days have, no doubt, been upsetting for you and your child. Traumatic events shake the world that we had considered safe and predictable. These events also create a high level of confusion and apprehension. Discussion in the news and at the school often adds to the disruption.

The experience of a loss or a sudden violent event can produce intense anxiety and fear. These feelings are very normal. Suffering, loss and death have shattered the teenager's sense of invincibility and immortality. Teenagers often present an image of strength and other forms of

'best face forward'. Unfortunately, this results in a tendency for emotions to be buried, only to be resurrected later, sometimes in less healthy ways.

The need not to reveal weakness often causes much pain and grief to go unnoticed. These coping strategies can often be rewarded unwittingly with comments such as, "You are handling things very well." While this may appear to be the case, it is often an illusion.

This pamphlet is intended to help you, as a parent, to understand and help your child through this difficult time.

Other sources of help

Loss and disaster wound many, even those who seem not to be touched by what occurred. There is no shame in expressing your pain as well as the pain felt by your children. There is also no shame in seeking help from people in the community. School counsellors, counselling clinics, Health Department personnel, the clergy etc. are just some of the resources available to assist you and your family.

Caring for the caregiver

Disaster and loss can have a profound effect far beyond anything this pamphlet can address. Those in the midst of crisis understand that it is one thing to know helpful ideas; it is quite another issue to practice them. At these times, even the simplest steps can seem almost impossible. Calming the distressed child or feeling confined by the clinging child can be emotionally draining in the extreme.

Walt Whitman said, "I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself become the wounded person." At one level Whitman is describing the attitude needed to help people in pain but his words also point out that the wounds felt by those we love, are felt by us as well. In order to take care of yourself, be certain not to put unreasonable demands on yourself by trying to be all things to all people. Expectation and normal daily activities may need to be scaled down. Remember:

1. Grief usually lasts longer than anticipated. Most response occurs in the first days and weeks but the effects of grief are often revisited for some time.
2. Most of your child's reactions are normal responses to disaster or loss.

The information in this pamphlet is based on materials prepared by School District 38 (Richmond), School District 36 (Surrey) and Health and Welfare Canada.

