



APOSTOLIC CHRISTIAN

## Counseling and Family Services

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### GRIEF/LOSS, PART 5

Four earlier Grief/Loss articles were printed in the September, November, and December 2009 and February, 2010 Silver Lining issues. This last article in the series is focused on helping teenagers manage grief. Psalms 25:17 *“The troubles of my heart are enlarged: O bring thou me out of my distresses.”* Psalms 31:9 *“Have mercy upon me, O LORD, for I am in trouble: mine eye is consumed with grief, yea, my soul and my belly.”*

While people in all age groups struggle with losses, teenagers face particularly painful adjustments following the death of a loved one. Teens go through many changes in their body image, behavior, attachments, and feelings. These are the years in which teens break away from their parents to develop their own identities. While the need for teens to create distance from parents is normal, it is easy to see how a sense of guilt and “unfinished business” may complicate the teens’ mourning if a parent dies. Teens grieve deeply but often work very hard at hiding their feelings. They may act as if nothing has happened while they are breaking up inside. They can turn off feelings quickly, much like flipping a light switch. They may not realize that they are looking for distractions rather than staying with the grief process long enough to find real relief. Teens feel an overwhelming loss when someone they love passes away. This loved one may have helped shape the teens’ fragile self-identities. These feelings about the death become a part of their lives forever.

Sometimes teens are told to “be strong” or “carry on.” They are expected to be “grown up.” They are often expected to support other members of the family. When teens feel a responsibility to “care for the family,” they do not have the opportunity, or the permission, to mourn. They may not know if they will survive themselves let alone be able to support someone else. Sometimes teens “choose” to take on the role of caregiver as a distraction while denying their own grief. These kinds of conflicts hinder the “work of mourning.”

When teens are ignored, they may suffer more from feelings of isolation than from the death itself. They may feel all alone in their grief. They should be encouraged and allowed to tell their stories as much and as often as they like. This helps them accept the reality of the death of their loved one. They begin to realize that their lives will be forever changed; their loved one will not return to them. If teens have said or done something hurtful to the departed loved one that cannot now be reconciled, they may feel unresolved guilt. James 5:16 *“Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed.”* Encourage teens to talk about their guilt—to confess the problem to a trusted adult. Encourage them to ask God for forgiveness. Teens will go through a period of reconstruction, of learning that life goes on without their loved one, and they can adapt and move on.

How do you gain the trust of teens to talk with them during their times of grief? Teens often trust only their peers, but unless their peers have experienced grief themselves, they are not a reliable source of help. Instead, their peers become a distraction to the grieving process. To gain the trust of teens, adults should be good, nonjudgmental listeners. Make time to be with teens alone. Acknowledge their grief; and if they want it, offer your thoughts of how to ease their pain. Teens grieve whether or not they talk with you about their grief. They often need caring adults to confirm that it’s all right to be sad and to feel a multitude of emotions when someone they love dies. It is ok for teens to cry—yes, for boys to cry, too. Help teens realize that the feeling of grief is a

natural expression of love for the person who died. Teens also need help understanding that the deep hurt they feel now won't last forever.

Although adults cannot shield young people from the sorrow caused by the death of a loved one, they can guide and comfort them through the process of mourning. Just as Jesus took the time for little children and blessed them (Mark 10:16), take the time to be with grieving teenagers alone and listen, really listen. Share your love for them. Invite future conversations. Initiate them regularly if they do not. Talk openly of the departed loved one at meals, at work, in the car. Do the grieving teens have a memento of the loved one? A picture? A memorial tree planted where teens can see it often? Allow teens to help in the decision-making process for mementoes or memorials.

It is wise to talk to teens about preparation for heaven. Help them understand David in II Samuel 12:23: *“But now he is dead, wherefore should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me.”* If teens have not already done so, they need to make preparations in this life to be with loved ones in heaven. Revelation 21:4: *“And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes: and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.”*

Some teens who are having serious problems with grief and loss may need extra help or safe and nurturing emotional outlets. Although most people grieve less over time, additional help might be considered if teens (or children) exhibit several of these behaviors over an extended period:

1. an extended period of depression in which the teen loses interest in daily activities and events
2. inability to sleep, loss of appetite, prolonged fear of being alone
3. acting much younger for an extended period
4. repeated statements of wanting to join the dead person
5. withdrawal from friends
6. sharp drop in school performance or refusal to attend school
7. lack of concentration
8. over-activity, acting too busy
9. drug and/or alcohol use
10. risk-taking behavior
11. promiscuity
12. self-destructive, antisocial, or criminal behavior
13. suicidal thoughts

These warning signs indicate that professional help may be needed.

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Comments taken from articles written by John Schwiebert, Sharon Strouse, and Dr. Alan Wolfelt. Also from “Facts for Families” and “The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.”

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