



## Supporting bereaved adolescents

A bereavement during the teenage years can have a huge impact in what may already be a turbulent time. The young person will be going through a stage of separation from parents and a greater reliance on their friends.

The death of a parent at this time can really shake a young person's confidence and sees of teenagers develop a more adult understanding of death - they will not 'puddle jump' in an out of grief like younger children and they may feel overwhelmed by their feelings.

Young people become more aware of the future and grieve for the fact that mum or dad will not be there to see them leave school and get a job, or have children.

They are at the stage in their development of separating from parents as they develop into young adults. This can be a real struggle after a bereavement when they feel very insecure and uncertain inside yet compelled to fit in with their peers who are coming more independent. They may also feel that they have to take on the role of the parent who has died for the surviving parent and any other children in the family.

It can be very difficult to separate the effects of bereavement from the normal processes of adolescence - they are many features in common, such as challenging or risk-taking behaviour.

### What is normal for a grieving teenager?

They may have **physical symptoms** such as tiredness, stomach aches, lack of energy, dry mouth and tiredness. Sleep and eating patterns may be disturbed. If a loved one has died following an illness such as a brain tumour or stomach cancer, young people may become anxious about developing the same symptoms.

There may a big mix of difficult **thoughts and feelings**. **Sadness** may be overwhelming and many young people will find themselves crying easily. But some don't cry and they should be reassured that this is OK too. After a sudden death especially, there may be a sense of **numbness** mixed with disbelief. This may initially protect from the emotional pain following the death but if this persists, it may lead to getting stuck in unresolved grief.

Feelings of **guilt or regret** are common after a death, especially if the relationship with the person who has died was difficult or the last conversation was an argument. There may also be a sense of "*I wish I had done something different*". This is especially difficult following accidental death when a young person was a witness to the event or was involved in some way.

**Anger** is commonly seen after a death. There may be an obvious reason for anger - if another person has caused the death through dangerous driving, or following murder or manslaughter. If there is a death by suicide, the grief and loss following the death may be mixed with intense anger towards the person who took this action.

It is more difficult to place anger when someone has died due to an illness but there may still be angry feelings – “*Why my dad?*”

**Withdrawal, loss of concentration** and lost interest in usual activities are common reactions in young people following a death. Life can seem pointless and it may seem wrong to go out and have fun.

### **Tips for supporting bereaved young people**

- Acknowledge the death. A simple “*I am sorry to hear about... Sometimes it helps to talk about things and if you want to, you can talk to me*” can help a child and family feel supported.
- Be yourself. Your ability to understand, stay constant and keep routines and boundaries in place will create a sense of safety when all else is in chaos.
- Be prepared to listen if they want to talk and let them lead the conversation. Grieving young people need your support and presence more than advice.
- Be aware that grief reactions may not show themselves immediately (particularly following an unexpected death) but it may be weeks, months or even years after the event. Grief may also be revisited at significant times and at different stages of development. It can be helpful for a young person to understand that this is normal.
- Accept and encourage the expression of feelings – grief encompasses so many different and intense emotions which can feel overwhelming and scary. Normalise these feelings and work out with young people how they can best manage them in a safe and helpful way.
- Give a young person choices about what sort of support they need. When the rest of their life feels out of control, it helps if they can be involved in decisions about what support they need and how and by whom it should be delivered.
- Offer opportunities for remembering the person who died. Encourage the telling of stories, the recording of memories and the collecting of photos and special items from as wide a source as possible to be put in a safe place – maybe a memory box.
- Watch and listen out for any changes in behaviour which might indicate that they are struggling. Explore the possible reasons for the changes, recognising that they may not necessarily be attributable to the death.
- Help the young person identify their support networks both at home and at school, so they know where to access help when needed.
- Encourage guilt-free fun. Remind them that having fun does not mean they will forget the person who died, but they need to remember that *living* is important too.