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Loss in the Lives of Teens

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Loss in the Lives of Teens

Joseph A Santiago

Annual LGBTIQQ Symposium 2005
What is Grief?

• “Grief is a fact of life. We may push it away, but if we are engaged in life, it is with us.”

• The course of grief, while intensely individual, is in some ways predictable. For this reason, grief counselors have learned a great deal which can help the bereaved. In this presentation we will focus on the grief process of teenagers.

• Although grief is one of life's most painful experiences, it is also one we can get through, learn from, and eventually integrate into a richer more fulfilling life.

• Grief is not an illness to be treated, but an experience to be lived. Most who have done so describe the journey as work; it is an active, not passive, process.

• Individuals supported in their grieving are more likely to more quickly emerge from the darkness of loss into a fuller life, enriched by the lessons they have learned.
Why do teens react differently to death and loss then other age groups?

- Piaget and Erikson developmental theories
- Adolescence is the time of transition between being a child and being an adult.
- When you're a teen, a loss can be especially difficult because it occurs at a point in your life that is already filled of life altering changes. These changes include...
  - Changing bodies
  - Changing sexuality
  - Changing values
  - Changing intellectual processes
  - Changing family relationships
- Teens react differently to loss then children or adults do because the loss complicates these changes and the developmental process of adolescence

"Being a teen is hard enough; being a grieving teen can feel completely overwhelming."
How are these already occurring changes effected by loss?

- **Changing bodies** – A significant loss could result in a heightened or diminished interest in physical appearance or an extreme change in body weight.

- **Changing sexuality** – Some teens use sexual activity as a diversion from the pain of grief associated with a loss.

- **Changing values** – Teens often try to run away from their emotions and they may by using drugs or alcohol.

- **Changing intellectual processes** – After a loss, teens tend to become profoundly aware of the consequences of the death.

- **Changing family relationships** – When the teen experiences a loss parents often become overly protective which can result in the teen becoming more rebellious.
Six Basic Principals of Teen Grief

- Grieving is the teen’s natural reaction to death and other losses.
- Each teen’s grieving experience is unique.
- There are no “right” and “wrong” ways to grieve.
- Every death is unique and is experienced differently.
- Grief is ongoing.
- The grieving process is influenced by many issues.

"I hate when people think I should be grieving according to the stages described in some high school text book. Since my sister's death I have learned grieving is not five simple stages."

"I've had people say that you've got to go on, you've got to get over this. I just want to shout, 'You're wrong! Grief never ends.' I don't care what they say."
Emotions Teens Experience after Loss

- Teens experience a wide range of emotions after the loss of someone significant in their lives.
- Teens often find it difficult to express these emotions outwardly.
- Males tend to find it difficult to express their sadness and females find it difficult to express their anger.
A Closer Look At Emotions: Anger

- Anger is normal for grievers of all ages.
- The cause of anger in teens is often because they feel it seems unfair they should have to suffer the death of someone in their lives, especially at such an early age.
- They feel they have to deny who they are. “Coming out Process”
- Teens may also be angry at specific people
  - The deceased
  - Themselves
  - The police
  - Parents
  - Medical professionals
  - God
  - Fate
  - The entire world
A Closer Look At Emotions: Frustration

- People feel frustrated when they are not able to meet goals, intentions or expectations.
- Teens often experience frustration when effected by loss because their world is drastically and/or unexpectedly changed which effects goals they previously had in the area of relationships, academic pursuits and financial stability.
- Clash with hetro-normative expectations. Two same gendered persons holding hands in public and getting stared at because it.

- Frustration can arise when...
  - There was no chance to say goodbye
  - There is unfinished business with the deceased
  - Financial problems come up
  - Parents become overprotective
  - Grades decline because of difficulty focusing
  - Denied the truth surrounding death
  - Peers tease teen
  - Questions of death go unanswered
  - A perpetrator is not apprehended
  - A body cannot be located
Helping a Teen Deal with Anger and Frustration

Things that can Help

• Try to help the teen express their anger/frustration in a constructive way.
  – i.e. athletics, boxing a punching bag, writing, art, yelling, screaming, playing with play dough
  – Help them understand and design ways to deal with negative interactions.
• If the teen is experiencing these emotions because they are failing to meet their goals, break down tasks into manageable steps.
  – Talk to teachers to help get them organized
  – Ask them to maybe do homework with a friend

Things that can Hurt

• Responding to destructive behavior by telling the teen they should not feel a certain way while demanding they stop the behavior.
• Not validating their emotions toward the situation. A teen needs to know they can feel everything they are feeling and their emotions are normal and okay.
# A Closer Look At Emotions: Anxiety and Guilt

## Anxiety
- Due to the drastic changes in relationships and circumstances that result from death it is normal to feel anxious or worried.
- Some teens can even develop panic attacks.
- Signs of a panic attack include:
  - A palpitating heartbeat
  - Difficulty breathing
  - Throbbing in head or neck
  - Dizziness, or a sense of being paralyzed

## Guilt
- It is completely normal for any age group to feel a sense of guilt when someone passes away.
- There will always be “But what if I ...?”
  - What if I stopped him from driving drunk?
  - What if I was better and didn’t cause him so much stress before his heart attack?
- Many teens feel as though they could have or should have done something to prevent the death.
- It is also normal for them to feel guilty that they did not do more before the death.
Helping a Teen Deal with Anxiety and Guilt

Anxiety

- Mild signs of anxiety are normal.
- You could suggest relaxing activities like...
  - Deep breathing
  - Yoga
  - Reading
  - Meditation
  - Listening to soothing music
- If symptoms do not pass, anxiety attacks persist or there is a dramatic change in mood the teen should be checked by a medical professional.

Guilt

- Arguing the teen was not to blame does not assist the griever and can pressure him to bury his feeling of guilt which does not allow him to get through it.
- Some things that are suggested ...
  - Listen and restate what you heard in your own words so he feels heard and understood.
  - Ask questions to help him work through his grief. (What do you wish you had done?)
  - Avoid “Why” questions.
  - Explain the facts that caused the death.
  - Allow him to express his feelings.
Guilt ... What to do if the teen is partially responsible for an accident or death

- Try to help the young person face the responsibility and discover options for acknowledging the guilt.

- Some actions that may speed healing and result in significant maturing for the teen include...
  - Seeking forgiveness
  - Making restitutions where possible
  - Accepting legal punishment when ordered

- It will not help the teen to tell them that he/she should not feel guilty or to try to minimize the responsibility when he/she is partially responsible. They need to feel and work through their guilt and regrets.
A Closer Look At Emotions: Isolation and Relief

**Isolation**
- Many teens feel isolated from their peers after a death.
- They often will say, “No one understands what I am going through.”
- Unlike children, teens are aware that other people, all over the world, have experienced similar situations (deaths) but they do not feel connected to these people.
- The lack of connection is what causes them to feel alone.
- Teens may even hide their grief to help fit in with their peers.

**Relief**
- Relief is commonly felt under a variety of circumstances.
- Some situations include...
  - when the person who passed away was suffering from a painful or terminal illness
  - When the person who passed away was put in a vegetable state by an accident and has no chance of recovery
  - when the person who died was emotionally or physically abusive to another person
Helping a Teen Deal with **Isolation** and **Relief**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Isolation</strong></th>
<th><strong>Relief</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>• Providing a supportive network of friends, family, and most importantly other teens that have experienced a death will help the teen to know that he or she is not alone.</td>
<td>• It is very important to validate the feeling of relief.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Teens can learn about peer experiences through...</td>
<td>• Dismissing the feeling may cause the teen to feel guilty or misunderstood.</td>
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<td>– Support groups</td>
<td>• It is also important to let them understand relief under many situations is a natural reaction.</td>
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<td>– Books</td>
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A Closer Look At Emotions: Revenge, Rage, and Sadness

**Revenge and Rage**
- A death that seems vicious and unjustifiable often provokes emotions of revenge and rage against anyone who contributed to the death.
- These reactions may be directed to the perpetrator, the deceased or others.
- Circumstances that may evoke such strong emotions include ...  
  - Suicide
  - Murder
  - When the deceased somehow contributed to the death (not taking medications, driving drunk etc.)

**Sadness**
- This is a natural response to someone that was loved being gone and to the changes brought about by the loss.
- Teens often tend to feel as though they are being disloyal if they are anything but sad.
  - Society has taught (directly or indirectly) that love and loyalty to the deceased are expressed through sadness which can make a teen feel guilty when laughing or being happy reminiscing.
- Teens also may fear letting go of sadness means they are forgetting the person who died.
Helping a Teen Deal with Revenge, Rage, and Sadness

### Revenge and Rage

- It is helpful to discuss these strong emotions with the teen while encouraging them toward healthy behaviors to release anger and relax.
- Counseling and support groups may also be helpful with dealing with such a powerful emotion.

### Sadness

- Teens need to be reassured that love for the deceased can be expressed through other emotions.
- Sadness and prolonged, chronic depression are two different things.
- When a teen is showing withdrawal, lack of energy, and motivation he or she should be evaluated by a mental health professional.
Common Reactions to Loss

- Academic Problems
- Crying
- Physical Reactions
  - Weight loss or gain
  - Headaches
  - Anxiety or panic attacks
  - Insomnia
  - Fatigue or sleeping more than usual
  - Muscle aches
  - Digestive problems
  - Dizziness
  - Visual Impairment
  - Dehydration
  - Weakened immune system
- Eating Problems or Disorders
- Nightmares or Dreams
- Playing
- Regressive Behaviors
- Struggling with Core Belief System
- Suicidal talk or behavior
- Lack of concentration
- Loss of interest in usual activities
- Wanting to be alone all the time
- Drug and/or alcohol use
- Risk-taking behaviors
- Promiscuity
Basic Needs for the Grieving Teen

**Assurance:** they need to know their caregivers are healthy and in control

**Boundaries:** reasonable, consistent boundaries provide safety

**Choices:** choices empower the teen and give them a sense of balance

**Food:** necessary to refuel the body

**Listeners:** teens need to be heard so they can get out their emotions and work through their grief

**Models:** to learn how or not how to mourn

**Privacy:** in order to reflect, contemplate, evaluate, express emotions, and memorialize

**Recreation:** in order to have fun and take a break from grieving

**Routines:** bedtimes, mealtimes and chores provide a safe predictable environment

**Sleep:** to recover from the fatigue caused by grieving

**Truth:** helps to heal and promotes a healthy healing process

**Water:** necessary to rehydrate the body
14 Ways We can Assist a Grieving Teen

1. Listen, care for and accept them as they are
2. Tell the truth and answer their questions honestly
3. Encourage them to make healthy and creative choices in dealing with their pain and healing process
4. Encourage them to view the body, participate in the memorial and burial, or see the cremated remains
5. Suggest they create memory rituals, talk about the person and recall memories
6. Discuss their perceptions, experiences and beliefs
7. Acknowledge their loss of focus and interest
8. Be steady and stable through this turbulent period
9. Seek help for your own grief process
10. Affirm and appreciate your children during this difficult time
11. Assure your adolescent of your love and respect
12. Use words and expressions of comfort and affection
13. Express that you appreciate and value the uniqueness and differences between siblings
14. Accept each teen's unique grief process
Things not to say to a grieving teen

• “Be Strong” or “Carry On”
• “I know just how you feel.”
• “You had wonderful years together. You’re fortunate.”
• “Now you have to be the man/woman of the house.”
• “In time you’ll forget all about this.”
The Importance of Funeral Ceremonies and Memorialization

- **CHOICES** – teens will appreciate being invited to be involved in the ceremony.
- Attendance of the wake and funeral should be an option. They should not be denied rights to go or forced to go against their will.
- Being able to say good bye in a significant way is more important than attending the funeral and very important to grieving teens.
  - Write a good-bye letter
  - Make a scrapbook
  - Create rituals
  - Make a collage
  - Write music or poetry
In My Eyes

In my eyes,
Tell me what you see.
There is more there
Than the color green. . .

The days are short,
But to you they're long.
Nothing will replace
The memory where you belong.

There is more than
You will ever know.
But I will always try
To not let it show.

In my eyes,
You can feel the sorrow.
Then you know why
I don't want to live tomorrow.

Stare and reminisce,
Remember the good times,
Even though there were few,
And hear the harmony chime.

When it does,
That will be my time to go.
And since this is our last,
Do not let the pain show. . .

I pause and see a light.
From a far, it looks like the moon.
I come closer and it's a crystal
Humming a familiar tune. . .

In my eyes,
Hidden behind my grief and fears,
You saw my love,
And now I cry a river of tears.

My cries have stopped
And I want to go back to you.
The crystal shows you're gone
But I will be there soon.

Again, I run through the dark
Then, amidst the fog.
But now my eyes
They no longer taunt.

I am back to the place
Where I left you alone.
I look down and
A puddle of water is shone.
In my eyes,
A tear silently creeps.
You are gone. I am lost.
And now I will forever weep.
Tears Fall

Tears fall down my face,
they keep flowing one by one,
the pain begins to show,
please tell me what i've done.
The sad and angry part of me,
wants to just let go,
i want to be completely free,
of all this pain and agony.
Silent Teardrops
Fall From My Heart
As You Slowly
Tear It Apart

Silent Teardrops
Form In My Eyes
As I Think Of You
My Heart Softly Cries

Silent Teardrops
Come Every Night
Wishing I Could Be Ok
And Everything Alright

Silent Teardrops
Fall Down So Fast

As I Think Of You
And Of Our Past

Silent Teardrops
They Make No Sound
They Fall From My Eyes
And Silently Hit The Ground

Silent Teardrops
There All Just For You
For All The Pain And Hurt
You Ever Put Me Through

Silent Teardrops
Always Seem To Fall
And What Hurts The Most
You Dont Even Care At All
I'm Not Supposed to

I'm not supposed to love you,
I'm not supposed to care,
I'm not supposed to live my life wishing you were there,
I'm not supposed to wonder about what could be.
I'm not supposed to live my life wishing you loved me.
And so I take this silver blade and cut along my arm.
Knowing you aren't there to care makes me want to do more harm.

I wish that maybe you would notice tomorrow that I'll no longer be there.
Because once I'm done with this knife I'll forever be away.
Because living my life without you in it, just isn't worth living at all.
So I'll decide to end my pain,
Once and for all.
I have lost you
And I know that it's true
You had never loved me
The way that I loved you

Why did you stay with me
When you knew you loved her
Why didn't you tell me
When you slept with her

Many sleepless night
Were spent crying over you
Wondering what I've done
Too have my heart broken by you

I have lost you
I know that it's true
But the best part of all
I saw the REAL you

No longer will I cry
Anymore tears for you
Because as of this moment on
I have no more love for you
2 Major Factors that Effect the Teen’s Grieving Process

- The nature/cause of the death
  - Death from a Chronic Illness
  - Accidental Death
  - A Death by Suicide
  - A Violent Death
  - Being a Witness to a Death

- What the relationship with the person who died was
  - Parent
  - Friend
  - Sibling
Death from a Chronic Illness

- Some studies have shown people have a more difficult time dealing with deaths that result from a lengthy illness.
- A lot of energy is used prior to the death, there is not much left to use to grieve after the death.
- Just because you knew a death is coming doesn’t mean you will be prepared for the death.
- While the person is dying it may be difficult to remember the good times.
  - It is helpful to reminisce
- It is completely normal and natural to experience emotions of relief when the death does occur.
- Teens may develop a fears of their own health.
- Teens need honesty about the circumstances so they can prepare themselves.
Accidental Death

• Unexpected deaths tend to be more traumatic for teens.
• There is no opportunity for good-byes or apologies.
• When someone dies in an accident we often feel it was before their time.
• Feeling of regret and guilt often arise if there was unfinished business or even if you felt you could have stopped it somehow.
• Accidental deaths leave the ones left behind full of if-onlys.
• Expressing regrets, guilts and if-onlys helps the griever.
A Death by Suicide

• The person made his/her own choice - No one drives anyone else to complete suicide.

• No one is to blame for someone else's decision to commit suicide.

• Guilt, shame and anger are commonly experienced by the loved ones left behind.
  – Shame – the social stigma of suicide
  – Anger – at the person for giving up or abandoning them
  – Guilt – for not making the persons life easier or not stopping them ... even though it was in no way their fault.

• The suicide Gene?

• Community response from bullying and suicide.
A Violent Death

- Murder and Drunk Driving Crashes (MADD)
- Social Stigma of violent deaths
- Media and legal system do not always provide justice.
- True justice is impossible – deceased life cannot be restored
- Those left behind may have additional stresses.
  - Prolonged period of uncertainty
  - Lack of closure
  - Fear of perpetrator getting them
- Feelings of anger and revenge are commonly experienced
- Feelings of Revenge and Rage take time from healing
Death of Parent
Death of a Parent

- Teen feels loss of control and stability.
- Often have unresolved issues with parents because adolescence is the period of breaking away from parental authority.
  - Feelings of guilt and regret
- Financial and daily living circumstances change
- Realization the will not have a father or mother to celebrate rites of passage
  - Graduation, marriage, childbirth
- Strong grief reactions will be triggered by daily events.
- Need to protect surviving parent for fear of losing them too.
- Need to break away from surviving parent because of over protectiveness or unrealistic role expectations
Death of a Sibling
Death of a Sibling

• Siblings are peers that experience a unique attachment as children of the same parents.
• They share countless memories both good and bad.
• They generally will have unresolved conflicts and rivalries.
• The surviving sibling(s) may have intense regret or guilt about actions or things said.
• Parents become overprotective yet often don’t provide enough attention to the surviving children because they are dealing with their own pain.
• The surviving sibling will try to protect their parents by not telling them how bad they are hurting.
  – It is important they find someone to talk to, if they do not want to talk to their parents
Death of a Friend

- Peer relationships are often more important to teens than family relationships.
- When someone the teens' age dies, they may feel psychologically threatened.
  - Even if the two peers were not close, the fact someone their own age has died strongly affects them.
- Feelings of omnipotence are altered — realize they are no longer immune to death and death does not only happen to old people.
- Feel Competitive Grief
- May feel abandoned by the friend
- Loss may pull large group of friends together or it may tear them apart
Other losses teens often experience

- Parents get divorced
- Abandonment by a parent
- Choosing to have an abortion as a result to getting pregnant
- Breakups with a boy/girlfriend
- Changing friendships
- Parents lose their job
How have you supported teens who are your students to deal with grief?
Thank you for coming.

Comments or questions contact Joseph A Santiago CCH balanceheart@hotmail.com