Anticipatory Grief
For Teens
Anticipatory Grief for Teens

When someone you care about is seriously ill and may even die, it is natural to think about what your life would be like without that person. You may also experience feelings of loss and grief, even though the seriously ill person is still alive. This is called anticipatory grief. It is a normal process of trying to prepare yourself for the death of your loved one.

Some reactions you may have

- Depression — feeling heavy, lethargic and like nothing seems to matter
- Feelings of being alone and that nobody understands what you are experiencing
- Change in sleeping and eating patterns
- Loss of interest in school
- Lack of concentration
- Sadness and tears
- Disbelief that this is really happening
- Anxiety – like you can’t stop moving, thinking or worrying
- Anger
- Fear of other loved ones becoming sick
- Thoughts about hopes and dreams that may not happen
- Guilt
- Avoidance of your loved one who is ill
- Worry about what life will be like without your loved one
- Frustration about disruptions in your daily life
  - Not being able to spend time with your friends because you are needed at home
  - Missing a special event, such as a school dance or game
  - Visits by a nurse or hospice staff in your home
  - Seeing and hearing medical equipment in your home, such as an oxygen tank

Some challenges you may experience

A change in family roles

- You may need to take on added responsibility
- You may need to take care of the sick family member
- You may need to take care of younger siblings
- You may need to act as the adult and make household decisions, such as meal planning, setting rules for younger siblings and paying bills

Changes in the family routine since your loved one has become ill

- Your daily schedule may change.
- You may not be able to sit down to a meal together as often as a family.
Some challenges you may experience (continued)

- Other family members may be stressed, exhausted, worried and not readily available
- The presence of medical equipment and staff in your home
- Feelings of fear and discomfort about having to visit or spend time with a sick family member.

Some ways to help you get through this

- Request information about your loved one’s illness.
- Identify support systems, such as family, friends, church, or synagogue in the community
- Identify someone you can confide in who is outside your family.
- Decide how you want to communicate with your loved one in person, via e-mail, or by telephone.
- If hospice is involved, ask the hospice team members for support. They can
  - Find more help for the family
  - Lead a family meeting where everyone airs feelings
  - Listen to your concerns
  - Help you find information and answer your questions about your loved one’s illness

Some ways you can express your thoughts and feelings

- Express what you need to say through writing (journal, letter, poem, song), music or art
- Create a photo album or memory book with your loved one
- Create a special music CD by downloading music that your loved one and you can enjoy together
- Create a family Web site for your loved one
- Put together a photo CD for your loved one
- Tape record or video tape conversations or stories with your loved one
- Take breaks as needed without feeling guilty
- Ask for help when you need it

What can you say to a dying person?

- It’s important to keep in mind that the person that is dying knows they are dying and it is something you don’t have to avoid.
- Don’t forget to say “I Love You” - the book The Four Things That Matter Most, by Dr. Ira Byock, writes that dying people typically want to hear (and to say) four things: “Please forgive me,” “I forgive you,” “Thank you,” and “I love you.”
What can you say to a dying person? (Continued)

- Talk about how they are feeling (and listen) - Listening to your loved one is the first step to understanding what they truly need most. Ask them what they’re thinking about, what they may need – and if they need help with something, do the best you can, whether they ask for help with household chores or simply your company.

- Encourage them to share memories and End-of-Life Goals - Everyone is going to approach their death differently; some will find it most important to mend relationships with friends or family, while others will prefer to focus on remembering accomplishments or airing old regrets. Either way, it’s important to give your loved one a chance to open up and talk about what they have experienced, and what is to come. Have conversations about the things they’ve learned, the legacies they’ve left, the memories you have of them. Help them feel like they were important.

- Be truthful, but kind - You don’t have to avoid talking about the fact that your loved one is dying. It is very okay to say you don’t have answers to the big questions, or that you don’t know how to respond to some expressed need. Always be truthful, but don’t clobber them with the truth. Most of all, you’ll want to let your loved one guide the situation. It’s not so much the exact words you say as it is maintaining the openness of the conversation.

- Don’t be afraid of tears – yours or the dying individuals. Tears may help that person express their death in a healthy way with you. Be present to give warmth and empathy. You don’t have to fix or heal their pain. Just be there.