Common Developmental Grief Responses of Teens
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12-18 Concept of Death: May see death as inevitable and universal. Working at making sense of personal/spiritual beliefs. May challenge parent’s beliefs/values. Capable of abstract thinking. “Who am I now that I lost this important person?”

Common Grief Responses: May display initial shock/denial followed by feelings of anger, sadness, worry or guilt. May be more likely to talk with peers/other adults outside the family. May feel vulnerable and embarrassed, but reluctant to acknowledge fears. May deny being affected by the loss, or want to repress uncomfortable feelings of depression and anxiety regarding possible future loss. “Leave me alone, I am just fine.” May experience mood swings and express irritability toward others. May experience physical complaints such as headaches, stomach aches, difficulty concentrating, or sleep disturbance. Signs of distress include withdrawing from family and peers, engaging in high risk behaviors such as sexual promiscuity, drug and alcohol use, truancy or gambling.

Suggestions for helping: Offer direct open conversations about the death. Encourage questions and listen actively to the teen’s beliefs and feelings without advice giving or interruption. Utilize books such as “Mick Harte was Here” by Barbara Park (for middle schoolers), “When Death Walks In” by Mark Scrivani, and “Help for the Hard Times” by Earl Hipp, to normalize feelings, encourage positive coping strategies and encourage discussion. Model good parental self-care: balancing work/exercise/play with adequate rest, time with supportive listeners such as friends or helping professionals, and quiet time for spiritual/emotional reflection. Set consistent parental limits while promoting decision-making and natural consequences. Be patient with mood swings/irritability and praise positive behaviors you are hoping to encourage. Maintain communication with teachers regarding the teen’s current functioning and helpful strategies to support the grieving child. Balance respect for the young person’s growing need for privacy and autonomy with encouraging positive resources to assist with coping. Do not attempt to take the grief away or minimize the teen’s feelings of loss. Create opportunities to stay connected and let the teen know that you are there for them for as long as it takes. Anticipate emotional upsurges around holidays and important anniversaries and encourage children and teens to share ideas for creating family rituals to facilitate getting through difficult times: cooking dad’s favorite meal on his birthday, sharing special memories on the anniversary of the death. Encourage participation in grief support groups with other peers where available.
Considering Professional help: Loss is a natural part of life, however some children and teens are at increased risk of complicated bereavement due to experiencing multiple significant losses including the deaths of friends and family members. Grief may also be complicated by a number of other factors including the nature of the death (sudden, unexpected, traumatic, violent, stigmatized) and the relationship to the person who died. Additional personal or family stressors such as physical or mental illness, abuse, relocation, divorce, broken personal relationships, chemical abuse, or traumatic events such as a serious accident, house fire, or witnessing violence may also require additional support and guidance. Have your child/teen promptly evaluated by a grief counselor, trauma therapist, or mental health professional if their symptoms are severe. Symptoms of trauma or depression may include significant weight loss or gain, significant changes in sleep patterns including recurring nightmares, day time fatigue, anxiety, hypervigilence (startles easily) or flashbacks to the traumatic event, feelings of survivor guilt, thoughts of self harm including suicidal thoughts, drawing or writing about themes of violence or death, cutting, or other high risk behaviors such as alcohol abuse.

Persistent symptoms (lasting more than a few months) avoidance of reminders of the traumatic loss with emotional numbness, anxiety, low self-worth, separation anxiety, physical complaints, sleep disturbance, declines in school performance, social isolation, anger/irritability, survivors guilt, feelings of powerlessness, feelings of hopelessness (“I have no future”, “I won’t make it to 25”, never going to date, or let people get close) also may warrant professional evaluation and additional support.

Local Resources
St. Mary’s Grief Support Services provides individual, family, and group grief counseling for children and adults who are living with a life-threatening illness or have experienced the death of a loved one: (218) 786-4402.

SMDC Behavioral Crisis Line provides 24 hour intervention and referral for children, teens, and Adults: (218) 723-0099

Websites:
www.adec.org
www.cancer.org (type grief in search section)
www.griefnet.org
www.tlcinstitute.org

References:
Living with Grief: Children, Adolescents, and Loss Hospice Foundation of America 2000
Lowenstein, Liana (2006) Creative Interventions for Bereaved Children