

Haven Herald



Teenagers and Grief by Sarah Raison

The teenage years are a tumultuous time for most of us, full of many changes in feelings, behavior, body image and the forming of our own unique identities. Life becomes even more complex if a teenager experiences a significant loss in their life: a parent, a sibling, other close family member or friend. While people in all age groups struggle following a loss, teenagers face particularly specific and painful adjustments after the death of someone they love.

Coping Skills

Adolescents often have an adult understanding of the concept of death but do not yet have the life experiences, coping skills, or behavior of an adult. Because of their age and inexperience, most teenagers won't have sufficient self-care knowledge to properly cope. It is important that the adults in their life normalize grief emotions and let them know it is okay to cry, feel a variety of emotions (other than just sadness), and do whatever brings them comfort.

Experiencing Emotions

Teenagers who were already flooded with emotions may struggle even more to manage the intensity and variety of their emotions following a loss. Other teens who were already somewhat closed off may shut down even more, unable to express anything. Either way, teenagers need gentle guidance and help so they do not become completely overwhelmed or completely shut down.

Lack of Understanding from Peers

Many teenagers spend their time focusing on experiences that are light, fun, and sometimes shallow or inconsequential. Death, in contrast, is deep, serious, and heavy. It is easy for a teenager to feel extremely out of sync with their peers when their lives now contain the heavy impact of death, while the people around them have no real understanding of what that means or feels like.

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Letter from the Executive Director

The winter is challenging because it keeps us inside. This is a season for reflection and, for some depression and sadness. The shorter days take the light away when we need it the most, when we are grieving.

Haven takes the winter in stride and plans for the months ahead. We are hopeful that next spring we can offer more of our programs in person.

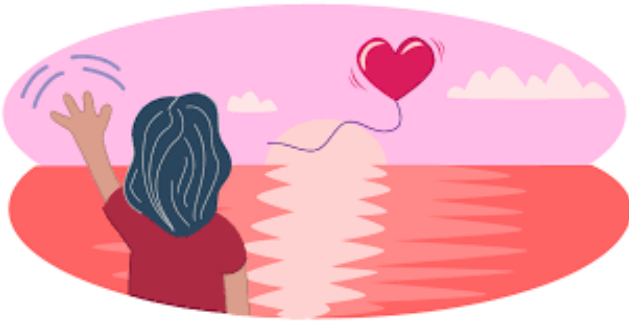
The topic for this newsletter is teenagers in grief. Grief is incredibly difficult for someone who is also experiencing the unique aspects of the teen years. Adult involvement and guidance can be critical to how teens manage their grief. Being present for a teen by listening to their concerns and setting reasonable boundaries can help them navigate the extreme emotions that often accompany grief. This is also a time when honesty and patience can go a long way in supporting a teen who is suffering a loss.

Jill Bellacicco



What Worked For Me

by Charlotte Bryant



she gave me and my older sister (who was 19 at the time and going from high school into college) more responsibilities at home—fixing dinner, mowing the lawn because Dad could not, things like that. At the time I took on those responsibilities thinking things would get better. It was only probably two weeks before he died that I realized he would not get better. He was back in the hospital and this time they said the cancer was all throughout his body. He was 6’3” and only about 80 pounds by that point.

The hardest part was the funeral and the days after that. The funeral was held at the Little Chapel of the Chimes in Portland, Oregon and I thought: what a pretty little name but a horrible day. You were supposed to be strong, be polite to everyone that came, and do the right thing, but it wasn’t where I wanted to be at all. I still don’t like funerals because the first one I’d ever been to was the worst one of my life. Adults usually shield young people from death but when it happened to me, I couldn’t be shielded from it.

My parents had always raised us to keep active, do our best, and have a routine and a purpose and a focus. After my father’s death we were supposed to stay in that routine. I had school and Spanish club and service club and a sorority and on Saturdays I would go with my sister to ride her horse. At first it was keeping up an appearance; I felt lost inside. I was glad my father wasn’t in pain anymore, I saw how sick he was and he couldn’t get better and there was some relief, but then guilt for feeling relief. I think most children who lose a parent feel some guilt. I felt guilty because I had gone out with friends at my mother’s insistence the night before he died. I also had a thought of “this shouldn’t be happening to me” and then I had guilt about that. Other families are focused on doing happy family things and my family life became different. We had to focus on the practical things and spend our time thinking and grieving—at first we were not thinking about happy family stuff. And I was dealing with growing up on top of it.

I had my friends, though when I talked with them it was about regular teenage things, not my father’s death. People didn’t want to bring it up because they were uncomfortable and I didn’t want to bring it up because I knew I would get emotional. I kept a lot inside. There was one girl though, who came to me and told me that her father also died the year before. I appreciated that so much because it made me feel less alone—somehow she got through it so it helped me believe I would get through it. And as the months went on my mother and sister and I still did things as a family so I was lucky for that. Church was also a support system for us.

My father’s death made me stronger and more independent. It made me think more about what I wanted to do with my life. Though my parents had always been driven and goal-oriented so there was that influence also. But once you only have one parent, you have to step up and do more. You have to be careful that you don’t get into trouble because you have to help manage your own life. You need to think about what you’re doing and why. You have to be a good kid.

My mother carried on my dad’s business until she was 74 years old, and she lived to be 98 years old. Sometimes I can’t remember the exact day my mother died but I will always remember the date my father died, and I think of it every year. That is the difference, I guess, of the trauma involved with loss when you are young and not expecting it.



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Adult Assistance

Teenagers have a natural need to separate and be independent of their parents. Because of this, they may not be receptive to adults trying to help them through their loss. They may tell the adults in their lives they are “fine” or “doing okay” when they are not because of the natural urge to be independent, likely hoping they will be able to deal with the grief on their own.

Reckless Behavior

As they develop their identities, are influenced by peers, and test out new experiences, many teenagers are prone to some reckless behavior. But a teenager that is devastated by the death of someone important to them is even more at risk. Anger, despair, and existential crisis can all lead to a teenager acting recklessly or impulsively in terms of substance abuse, physical violence, or sexual behavior.

So how can teenagers best be helped considering the unique challenges they face after the loss of a loved one? Those close to the grieving teen can strive to help keep a sense of routine and normalcy in their life, while also allowing them to express and manage whatever emotions they feel. Teenagers should be encouraged to spend time with friends and continue activities, and memorialize their loved one in ways that are meaningful to them. Adults can model self-care, be present but not hovering, and be mindful with their language. Like any other grieving person, teenagers do not want to be told to “get over it” or “move on.” A grieving teenager deserves the same respect as a grieving adult.

The Bill of Rights of Grieving Teens by Teens at The Dougy Center

A grieving teen has the right...

- ...to know the truth about the death, the deceased, and the circumstances.
- ...to have questions answered honestly.
- ...to be heard with dignity and respect.
- ...to be silent and not tell you her/his grief emotions and thoughts.
- ...to not agree with your perceptions and conclusions.
- ...to see the person who died and the place of the death.
- ...to grieve any way she/he wants without hurting self or others.
- ...to feel all the feelings and to think all the thoughts of his/her own unique grief.
- ...to not have to follow the “Stages of Grief” as outlined in a high school health book.
- ...to grieve in one’s own unique, individual way without censorship.
- ...to be angry at death, at the person who died, at God, at self, and at others.
- ...to have his/her own theological and philosophical beliefs about life and death.
- ...to be involved in the decisions about the rituals related to the death.
- ...to not be taken advantage of in this vulnerable mourning condition and circumstances.
- ...to have guilt about how he/she could have intervened to stop the death.

This Bill of Rights was developed by participating teens at The Dougy Center and does not represent “official” policies of the Center. <https://www.dougy.org/resource-articles/the-bill-of-rights>



HOW HAVEN IS FUNDED

Haven is classified by the Internal Revenue Service as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. It is funded mainly by donations from individuals in the community who wish to support our work and by those who donate in memory of a loved one. Donations are tax deductible. If you are interested in making a donation, please contact Haven at (703) 941-7000 or at havenofnova@verizon.net



Haven of Northern Virginia, Inc.

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Annandale, Virginia 22003

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Winter Schedule

Widow/Widower/Partner Support Group
Spring 2022 is forming.

Parent Loss Support Group
Spring 2022 is forming.

Registration required, space limited
For information call 703-941-7000 or
Email: havenofnova@verizon.net

ZOOM Drop-in Suicide Loss Support Group
1st and 3rd Saturdays of each month
11:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

Haven also offers individual support by phone and in person; please call to schedule an appointment. For immediate support without an appointment, a volunteer is available on a walk-in basis Monday through Friday between 10:30 a.m. and 1:00 p.m.

Contact Information

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Hours of Operation

Monday through Friday
9:30 a.m. – 2:30 p.m.
www.havenofnova.org

Messages may be left on our
voicemail after hours