

## Developmental Ages and Stages of Grief

Each child/adolescent moves through stages on their own time. Everyone can regress in times of crisis, not just young people. Be prepared for the signs of regression.

### Ages 9-12

Death is permanent, personal, and universal; Understanding they will die someday, fascination with the macabre, and finding details of the death events appealing.

#### Developmental Stage

- operational thinking
- logic
- socialization
- possible transition from concrete to abstract thinking

#### Understanding

- developing a sense of the impact of death on others
- understanding of the universality and inevitability of death
- generalization about death and understanding its magnitude
- beginning to believe that it can happen to anyone, and struggling with this realization
- interest in the dying person's experience
- fears about whether it is painful or scary
- interest in what happens after death – to body and spirit: fear non-existence and separation
- development of personal theories about death – why and how it is decided.

#### Grief Response

- Want information
- concern with the right way
- outward mourning,

#### Distress signs

- school problems
- suicidal thoughts
- behavior changes

#### Grief Reactions

- anxiety and general fearfulness
- covering up emotions
- concern about:
  - other survivors
  - about personal future and security
- withdrawal from or endless questions about death
- somatic physical complaints
- regression in behaviors and/or skills

## **Ages 12+**

Most have reached adult levels of understanding death. Many have very intense emotions about death and do spend time thinking about it. Adolescents however are Teflon encased as it won't happen to me.

### Developmental Stage

- formal operational
- problem solving
- abstract thinking

### Understanding

- fearful/fascinated
- final/permanent/universal
- believes it only affects others – invincibility is directly challenged by the fact that a death occurred in their lives
- able to think in "what ifs"
- deeper meanings
- questions about the meaning of life and death
- the search is intensified by a death directly affecting their life

### Grief Response

- intense emotions
- invincible feelings
- "tempting" death

### Distress Signs

- depression
- anger
- guilt
- behavior changes

### Grief Reactions

- symptoms of anxiety
- body complaints
- phobias
- overly-cautious behavior
- increased risk-taking in defiance of death (i.e., drug use, sexual activity, reckless driving)
- fear of being singled out as different may lead them to cover up feelings and try to appear normal by joking, acting cool, pretending nothing has changed, etc.
- concern about one's future, security, and death
- interference with the developmental task of forming a sense of identity
  - attempting to grow up quicker or to assume the roles of the deceased person rather than following their own path to self-identity

- intense spiritual and philosophical questioning and doubt (i.e., why death happens to the “good” people, anger at god)
- normal struggle for autonomy may either be hampered or exaggerated: rather than continuing to venture out and assert oneself, the teen may shrink back, become more dependent, and halt the developmental process or the teen may feel such a strong conflict between feeling a longing for the deceased vs. the need to be independent that he/she attempts to halt the grief process by distancing from the family and focusing on “my life”
- intense anger at the death
- anger at the person who died
- these displays also serve to hide other feelings and to help the teen regain a sense of power and control
- depression and guilt, accompanied by isolation or suicidal thoughts

### **Interventions For All Ages**

- listen
- express feelings
- be attentive
- share honest and accurate information about the death
- reassurance about their own future
- modeling by adults by appropriate grieving and sharing of fears, thoughts, feelings
- discussion of philosophical concerns related to death
- highlighting the natural conflict between the normal tasks of adolescence vs. tasks of grief
- recognition that behavior may not accurately reflect underlying feelings (i.e., assume that the person is in pain and wants to receive information and support, regardless of the external behavior that may seem distant, disinterested, or testy)
- communicating a tolerance for all feelings
- providing specific coping tools (i.e., ideas for managing stress, journaling, and a variety of ways to express one’s feelings)
- encouragement to focus attention and energy on teen pursuits and the future
- respect for privacy as needed: privacy of their thoughts, feelings and writings
- inclusion by the young person’s own choice in rituals, discussions, and plans for honoring the memory of the person who died.

*Dearest Lord,*

*May I see you today in the person of your sick, and while nursing them, minister to you. Give me faith so that my work will never be monotonous. O beloved sick, what a privilege is mine to be allowed to tend to you! Lord, make me appreciative of the dignity of my high vocation. Never permit me to give way to coldness and hurry. Bless my work, now and for evermore.*

*~Daily prayer of Mother Teresa*