

Teens and Grief

Death is a subject that causes most everyone anxiety. This anxiety sometimes feels overwhelming. Yet death is part of the cycle of life. In the role of a youth minister or campus minister you are called to be a leader in supporting the young people who are entrusted to your care, their families and your parish or school community. This does not cause the anxiety to disappear; in fact, it can cause more anxiety because of the enormous responsibility upon you. The youth with whom you minister do look to you for guidance, most especially in times of crisis.

It is crucial to acknowledge that every death brings with it our own personal grief – from the very first death we experienced, even that of our family pet, to the death of a sibling, parent, grandparent, or close friend. However, there are some who have traveled the course of life with minimal personal encounters with death.

This section and the resources contained therein are designed to help you be present to the youth who look to you for guidance. If you are dealing with the death of a person closely related to your parish community, you will have your own grief to address as well.

Sometimes being present is the best thing we can do.

“When we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives means the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving much advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a gentle and tender hand. The friend who can be silent with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing, not curing, not healing and face with us the reality of our powerlessness, that is a friend who cares”
~ Henri Nouwen

What is Grief?

It is one of life's most difficult and painful experiences; grief is a natural universal and important process – one where we display countless, often-conflicting emotions and actions that over time aid in healing our sense of loss. Everyone experiences a wide variety of reactions during the grief process – sadness to anger, numbness to pain, guilt to fear. Since grief does not surface uniformly, all of us do not react in the same manner. There is no “best way” or step-by-step instructions or written directions. Everyone mourns the death of a loved one; everyone reacts uniquely and emotionally to grief.

Grief is not an illness to be treated, it is a human process to be experienced; good grief is a crucial life skill to be learned and lived to integrate the past so we can grow into the future.

Stages of Grief

There are many different ways that people have presented the grieving process. Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, a psychiatrist in the late 1960s, was a pioneer in the quest to understand and document how people respond to death and dying. Below are the stages she reported, however this cycle is not a step-by-step guide, but a way to put feelings into words. People can move forward and backward; you do not move forward and never return to the previous step.

Denial (shock/numbness)	This isn't happening to me
Anger (despair)	Why is this happening to me?
Bargaining (yearning)	I promise to be a better person if...if I had only
Depression	I don't care anymore...I can't do this
Acceptance (reorganization/readjustment)	I'm ready for whatever comes

Three Tasks of Grief

- To understand the person is dead
- To feel the feelings about this death
- To go on living and loving after the person has died

Cultural Competence

In our community today the cultural differences of people who are suffering grief need to be explored to ensure that we have knowledge of the rituals and beliefs. Prior to a crisis situation it is important to have knowledge of these cultural differences and to be able to be present and open to the needs of the young person/family we are supporting. As a youth minister, the young people will look to you for guidance for the appropriate way to be sensitive to the cultural differences.

Signs of Young People's Stress

Adolescents stress is expressed through some of the following:

- Uncontrollable emotions
- Aggression
- Withdrawal
- Insomnia
- Excessive sleep
- Destructive actions
- Depression
- Hypochondria