

HEALING A TEEN'S
GRIEVING HEART

100 PRACTICAL IDEAS
FOR FAMILIES, FRIENDS
& CAREGIVERS

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1.

Understand the difference between grief and mourning.

- Grief is the constellation of internal thoughts and feelings we have when someone loved dies. Mourning is the outward expression of our grief.
- All teens grieve when someone loved dies. But if they are to reconcile the loss, they must have a safe, accepting atmosphere in which they can mourn.
- Often teenagers don't want to mourn because mourning makes them feel vulnerable and dependent. And feeling vulnerable and dependent runs counter to their natural need to separate from parents and other authority figures.
- Grieving teens need permission to mourn. Sometimes what they need most from adults is an awareness that it is OK to feel the many emotions they feel and to talk or not talk about those emotions.

Carpe diem

When you were a teenager, did someone you love die? If so, did you mourn the death or did you just grieve, bottling up your feelings inside?

2.

Make a “contact pact” with yourself.

- Commit to contacting the teen once a week or once a month.
- Vary your means and time of contact so the teen won't feel she's just an item on your “to do” list.
- Your contact needn't take a lot of time; a brief phone call or a short note are enough to demonstrate your support. Many teens appreciate doing instead of talking. Take her to a movie or out for pizza.
- Don't neglect the teen as time passes; mourners of all ages need support long after the event of the death.

Carpe diem

Get our your daily planner right now and pencil in days on which you will, without fail, get in touch with the teen. Plan out an entire year.

3.

UNDERSTAND THE SIX NEEDS OF MOURNING

Need 1. Acknowledge the reality of the death.

- To move toward reconciliation, teenagers must, over time and with the gentle understanding of those around them, openly acknowledge that someone they love has died and will not return.
- Don't expect young people to acknowledge the reality and finality of the death in the same way adults do. Some teens, especially younger ones, will embrace the reality slowly and may even seem indifferent at times. A full sense of loss does not typically come about until several months after the death and may not occur until much later.
- As you talk with and listen to the teen, be honest about the nature and cause of the death—even if the death was violent or self-inflicted. Teens can cope with what they know; they cannot cope with what they don't know.

Carpe diem

Today, talk about the physical reality of the death. Don't assume that just because he's a teenager he really understands from a medical standpoint what cancer or a heart attack or an aneurysm is. Make sure he understands how and why the person died.

4.

UNDERSTAND THE SIX NEEDS OF MOURNING

Need 2. Move toward the pain of the loss.

- Another important need for teens is to embrace the pain of the loss. This need involves encouraging the young person to embrace all the thoughts and feelings that result from the death.
- Like the need to acknowledge the reality of the death, this need is often quashed by adults who want to protect young people from pain. Yet, as Helen Keller said years ago, “The only way to get to the other side is to go through the door.”
- Keep in mind that the teen’s naturally strong resistance to mourning does not mean the teen isn’t hurting inside or isn’t capable of mourning with support and understanding.
- Also remember that because teens don’t articulate their feelings well, they often do as much if not more of their mourning through behaviors rather than words.

Carpe diem

Do something physical with the teen—shoot hoops or go for a hike or rollerblade. After the two of you had have some “warm up” time together, ask him how he’s feeling about the death.