

# THE NEEDS OF BEREAVED TEENAGERS

The following notes draw heavily on the work of **William Worden** as well as our own experience of working with bereaved young people. In "*Children and Grief*", (Guilford Press, New York, 1996) Worden summarises the findings of the two year long Harvard bereavement study, which charted the impact of the death of a parent.

Worden states that children and young people have ten needs:

## 1. Adequate information.

Everybody needs clear information given in a sensitive manner after a death. Sometimes assumptions and expectations get in the way. Some adults assume teenagers have heard or understood things that they have not. Young people sometimes believe they shouldn't need to ask questions, or perhaps, may fear the reaction they will get if they talk about what has happened.

It is important to give enough information without overwhelming a young person. Sometimes with traumatic death (suicide or murder) it may help to provide information in stages. If teenagers are not given enough information by the adults around them, they may fill in the gaps themselves, sometimes inaccurately. Young people sometimes think they know or understand more than they actually do. This may cause misunderstandings or rumours.

Some families have spiritual or religious beliefs about death. If talking about these matters, it is important to respect both the teenager's and their family's views, recognising that these could be different.

If at all possible, it is helpful for young people to be prepared if someone close to them has a terminal illness.

## 2. Fears and anxieties addressed.

It is a natural reaction to feel frightened following a death. Young people may particularly fear that a surviving parent (or carer) will die or that they may die themselves. Sometimes lack of understanding about a particular death, or death in general, may exacerbate fears. Clear accurate information helps - for example, talking about dad dying from a brain tumour and how this is different to having a headache. It is important to reassure wherever possible, but equally it is important to be truthful. Fears are often worse at night, especially at bedtime or at other times of separation (e.g. going to school, going on a trip or staying at someone else's house).

When we feel frightened or anxious it may limit what we feel able to do. For example a young person may not want to go out of the family home or go somewhere where they would have to meet new people. It is helpful to have a balance between acknowledging these feelings and encouraging young people to carry on with important aspects of life.

It can be especially difficult for teenagers to talk about their fears and anxieties because they may feel too vulnerable and may worry about being judged. Sometimes this results in angry, resentful or withdrawn behaviour. It is often helpful to find a quiet time to ask if there are any

questions, thoughts or things that are worrying them. Sharing how you feel or how you might feel in their shoes may help.

### **3. Reassurance they are not to blame**

Adults and children often feel that they could have done something differently that may have prevented a death. A natural part of teenagers' development is to over-emphasize their role in things. This may intensify their feelings of guilt and they need reassurance and explanations about why they are not to blame

Sometimes in families, especially following suicide, there is a desire to blame someone for a death and people will feel very angry. It is important that young people are not targeted for this blame and understand that the anger is not directed at them.

Teenagers often have ambivalent feelings towards parents and siblings. It is not unusual for them to have been involved in angry scenes pre-death. This can lead to a teenager believing that the person who died did not know that they loved them. It can help them to remind them of the times they showed they cared and other positive aspects of their relationship.

### **4. Careful listening and watching**

We all show our thoughts and feelings in many ways, not just by what we say. Young people may express their feelings through their behaviour and the way they relate to others. Maybe they do not do things they always used to enjoy, or it seems very important to do something that the deceased person did. They may go very quiet at a particular time, or make a big fuss about something that might appear insignificant.

Teenagers will sometimes find it easier to talk while you are doing something else, like washing up or preparing a meal. Perhaps this is because they feel less self-conscious. It is important to respond to their approaches positively. Sometimes it may be worth creating these opportunities, for instance by travelling somewhere together. Often it really helps to share something of our own experience first.

Sometimes it is easier for teenagers (and some younger children) to talk to someone outside of the family. It may be helpful to encourage them to find an opportunity to meet with someone they like in a setting that helps them to communicate.

### **5. Validation of Individuals' feelings**

The Harvard bereavement study found that 2 years after death one quarter of the children had been admonished for not showing enough feeling, whereas another quarter were told they should have finished grieving. This latter group included children and young people who reported high levels of crying into the second year (Worden).

Allow for individual differences both in feelings and in the expression of feelings. There is not one way to grieve; in fact there are as many ways to grieve as there are people.

It is important to let a bereaved person know that the death, however painful, is something they can talk about. However, it is not helpful to make comments like: "I know how you feel", "You've got to be brave", "You should try and forget it", or "At least you've got another sister". These all have the effect of stopping any real conversation about what has happened, and denying the reality of the loss.

Sometimes validating a feeling, especially feelings of despair or deep pain, help us to move through those feelings, at least temporarily. When we believe it is not OK to feel something our feelings can get locked away inside us. This can make them harder to deal with and may lead to difficulties in later life.

## **6. Help with overwhelming feelings**

We all sometimes need to protect ourselves from difficult or painful feelings. Sometimes young people want to pretend that something awful has not happened, or at least to forget about it for a while. It is important to respect this need, at the same time as providing an environment that encourages confidence in our natural capacity to deal with difficult emotions.

Sometimes young people will feel very angry, destructive, anxious or withdrawn. They need to know that this is normal and they are not alone.

Adults need to balance teenagers' need for consistent boundaries and expectations about their behaviour, with an acceptance that they may be less capable than you would usually expect from someone of their age.

Some teenagers will find it helpful to engage in sport or another activity where they can let off steam or tire themselves out. Time with friends may provide valuable relaxation and the opportunity to "switch off" for a while.

## **7. Involvement and inclusion.**

Young people should be given an informed choice about their roles in rituals and activities which surround a death. This may include visiting a sick person before death, seeing the body after death, their involvement in the funeral and their opinions about memorials.

Many young people will never have been involved in any of the customs or ceremonies around death before a significant loss, so they need clear explanations of what they may expect to see, how long things will take and why things are arranged in a particular way. Most young people believe they should have a choice about whether to view a body and most who choose to do so will find it helpful.

These are just some of the ways teenagers have been involved: helping choose what the deceased wears, providing a photo or letter to be placed in the coffin, writing something to be said at the funeral, choosing music or a poem for the ceremony, helping organise a memorial event, creating a memorial website or suggesting a charity for donations in memory of the deceased.

Young people need to feel needed and valued. They can contribute to all aspects of every day life including providing practical help and emotional support to the adults around them, to balance the help they receive themselves.

## **8. Continued Routine Activities**

Young people benefit from being able to continue routine, previously enjoyed activities and interests. It is sometimes hard for adults to see them wanting to carry on with things so soon after a death (e.g. going to a club with their friends). It is natural to dip in and out of grief, and just as adults need to carry on with the normal routines of daily life (making meals, cleaning the house etc.), so teenagers need their normal activities. Often these will focus on spending time with their peers.

It is especially important following traumatic loss to provide as much stability and continuity as possible. The death of someone close is often very frightening. Continuity helps to re-establish stability and helps teenagers to realise that though life will never be the same there are still many things that remain constant.

## **9. Modelled grief behaviours**

“Children (and young people) learn how to mourn by observing mourning behaviour in adults.” (Worden p. 145). Adults can promote an environment where it is easy to talk about the deceased and to acknowledge good and bad memories.

When talking about such things it is natural to feel sad. Other feelings which might be important to acknowledge are anger, guilt, relief, confusion and fear. If an adult can model handling these difficult feelings it will help a teenager too. It is important to do this in a way that does not overwhelm them or give them more information than they want, but young people are usually very good at letting us know when they have had enough.

We should acknowledge that none of us have all the answers and there is no “right” way to grieve.

## **10. Opportunities to remember.**

When someone who played a significant part in our life dies there will be countless moments when we are reminded of their absence. When a family is able to speak about the deceased naturally, it helps a teenager to make sense of their own reality. At the same time it is important to respect that any individual may need to protect themselves from pain at times, and at times they may not want to talk about the deceased.

Sometimes when significant events are coming up, like anniversaries or Christmas it is useful to plan in advance how the day will be spent. Families have found it helpful to do something in memory of the deceased at the beginning of big family occasions, for example, a visit to the grave or other memorial or looking at some photos together. Such times can also be a good opportunity to remind everyone that it is OK to have fun, perhaps by saying something like: “I’m sure Mum would want us all to enjoy Christmas as much as possible, though we are bound to feel sad that she is not here.”