



SUPPORTING A BEREAVED TEEN

Here are some simple, key ideas to consider as you support a teenager who is grieving the death of someone they love. Encourage them also to visit the helpful youth info section of our website at www.skylight.org.nz

- The grief of a teenager is as real and life-changing as any adult's grief. They need understanding and support as they grapple with the death of someone close to them.
- Include teens in the family loop. Talk with them, listen to them, involve them with decisions, let them know what's happening and involve them with activities at the funeral or tangi. This kind of acknowledgement is very important. It lets them know they're valued and respected. If they decline to be involved, respect their choice, but perhaps offer more than once.
- Although teens will have developed a general understanding about death, they often can be deeply affected by personal experiences with death - especially so if it's their first experience of it.
- Be willing to explore with them the bigger life questions around death, dying, loss and grief. These ideas will go with them into the future and will shape their responses to other death situations in life.
- Talk with them about any worries or concerns they might have about their own death, or the death of others close to them. These emotions can often be stirred up in them after bereavement.
- Provide honest, clear, straightforward information about what has happened. Be truthful. Avoid secrets and the strain and confusion and distrust that they can cause.
- Repeat key information - check for understanding. Invite questions, now or any time in the future.
- Talk about practical concerns. What things need to be organised?
- Talk about what won't change after a loss. Provide as much stability and routine as possible.
- Reassure them that they are loved and cared about. Some teens respond to physical affection, for example, hugs, a hand held, a back or arm rubbed. All these are unspoken ways of saying I care and I'm here for you, because I know it's rough for you right now. However, don't ever force physical contact if it's not wanted.
- Explain that grief is different for everyone. It is like our fingerprint - unique and personal to each of us. Help teens understand that different family members will grieve differently and that everyone needs their own grief styles respected.
- Explain that grief is a process to help us gradually adjust our lives to the reality of what's happened. It takes time, and feelings and thoughts will come and go, often intensely, for quite a while but will gradually ease up. Let them know memories and bonds with the person will always live on.



A skylight information sheet

- Find out about grief yourself, so you can talk about the sorts of experiences grieving people can have. (See articles on www.skylight.org.nz about the kinds of ways grief can affect young people of different ages.)
- Some important ideas to share with teens about grief might be:
 - There are no 'right' or 'wrong' ways to experience grief
 - There's no secret method that will instantly take your grief away
 - There are no rules
 - There is no set timetable
 - Grief isn't a test
 - Grief isn't a race or a competition
 - Though it might seem hard to believe, it does gradually get easier to handle. Take all the time and space you need to grieve in your own way, for as long as it takes, keeping yourself safe as you go.
- Give a young person permission and room to grieve in their own way. This might mean withdrawal for quite some time, or spending a lot of time with friends and not at home. It may mean being closer to you for a while, or wanting to talk about what's happened a lot. Or all of these things at different times.
- Shock and numbness can mean grief reactions can be delayed. A teen not sharing thoughts and feelings with you doesn't mean they don't have them! Be careful you don't expect or direct them to grieve in the way that works for you.
- Encourage the natural expression of acute pain, sadness, anger, guilt and other feelings in the aftermath of the loss. Emotions are okay—they are part of who we each are. They can be upsetting to observe at times, but they are normal and healthy. Perhaps suggest some ways they could use as outlets for what's going on inside (e.g. talking with friends, writing, art, music, sport, walking, biking etc.). Be aware that teens may turn to risk-taking behaviours to seek comfort, (e.g. drinking, drugs, sexual relationships, driving fast, gambling) so encourage them regularly to make wise choices and keep themselves safe. Give them permission to call you for support any time, without condition, in case they find themselves 'in over their head'.
- Consider using skylight's youth guide to grief—***The Journey Through***, and the leaflet ***Grief is Like a Wave***. They, and other youth resources, can be ordered through our online catalogue at www.skylight.org.nz or call skylight on 0800 299 100. We can also post you out a catalogue.
- If you are concerned about your teen's well-being, talk with them about why you're concerned. Listen to where they're at. Perhaps they could visit a GP for a check-up, or talk with a counsellor. Remember most colleges and training centres have a guidance counsellor available for support. Consider also youth workers, church workers, marae workers, and youth health centres. Occasionally, for some, depression can arise from ongoing grief. If over several weeks their low mood is not lifting at all, or deepening, seek assistance for them. Do not hesitate in doing this. See www.outoftheblue.org.nz for more information about depression.