

Grief

Supporting Students During Loss

with counseling insights from JULIA A. ODELL, M.A.
+ ministry tips from SIV M. RICKETTS

Dear Diary,

It's been three weeks and two days since Dad died, and this is the first time I've felt like writing. I'm not even sure why I feel like writing now, but maybe it's that some of the shock has worn off and enough grief has bubbled up to the surface that I have to get it out somewhere. At least I'm able to cry now. I heard a neighbor's child crying the day after Dad died, and I almost felt jealous. I wished I could just bawl like a baby, but the tears wouldn't come. Here they are...

I feel like someone has lopped off a part of my heart and there's no one to talk to. Most people really don't want to hear all this. Oh, sure, they might listen, but then I don't want to burden anyone. My friends put up with so much from me during Dad's illness that I think they've gotten bored, if not with me then at least with this situation. Now that he's gone, and especially now that some time has passed, they seem to think that life can go back to normal. Sorry—I don't know what "normal" is anymore. I guess they just don't know what to say, so they want to ignore it. If only...

I went to church this morning for the first time since he died. I know I need God, but I'm still so awkward around people. I don't know how to be

anymore. I wasn't sure I would go, but then Geary called and asked if he could give me a ride. Of course, I could have driven myself, but like I said, I might not have. It was good to be out with a friend, to have someone to walk in the doors with and to sit next to.

Because I felt out of place, I couldn't sit in my normal spot. It was the first time I've been in a crowd since the memorial service, and most of those people were Mom's friends. And Geary was OK with us bolting as soon as the service was over. I couldn't take the sad glances and well-meaning words—I'm not ready to gracefully receive the condolences of people who don't know me well enough or care enough to come by the house. I'll dissolve into a puddle—so embarrassing for everyone. I hope people will understand that I've been through a lot and still accept me when I'm ready to fully be there again.

I just can't believe Dad's gone. My mind keeps flashing pictures of him at different times: my little sister dancing on his toes, ice cream after school plays, that fancy dinner when I graduated from elementary school, vacation and holiday memories. And then when he got sick. His skin turned an odd yellow-gray color. He walked slowly and hunched over. Dad in the hospital bed. At the end I wanted to believe that maybe we had a few more weeks, but really we had only hours. And then it was a blessing, for him and for all of us, that it didn't go on any longer. But I don't want anyone else to say that. I have to live through this, and I can't take anyone making me feel bad for how I'm dealing with it.

It is interesting how everyone deals with it differently, though. My sister has been able to break the tension and make us laugh at all the right times. My brother has been fascinated by all the medical stuff, and he even was able to comfort Dad sometimes by explaining what was going on. Mom has been quiet, going through the motions. I've been on a rollercoaster—sometimes fine, sometimes a mess, never knowing how I'm going to feel moment by moment.

Oh, Dad, I miss you so much!

You know, Geary was great this morning. In the car he asked if I wanted to talk, so we did some, but then I asked about “the world outside,” or at least that's how I'm thinking of it, the world beyond my grief. He told me what's been going on at school and at youth group and shared funny stories

about crazy coffee orders he gets at his job in the coffee shop. We laughed and it felt good. I sure haven't laughed much recently. After church we grabbed some food and watched a goofy movie on TV, and then he came with me to walk my dog. It was good just to hang out. With a friend like that, maybe, slowly, I will edge back to a new kind of normal.

When he was leaving Geary asked what he could tell people if they asked how they could help. Tough question. My mom seems to like it that people have brought food. None of us has much of an appetite, but four small appetites still add up to more cooking than Mom has the energy to satisfy. I think she also appreciates seeing people without having to put out effort. People come over, bring food, chat for a while, and then leave. Sometimes they pray with her, or with us, and that can be nice. I guess it depends on how comfortable they are. If they feel awkward talking about death, then their prayers sound even more awkward. But some people must have a gift of prayer because during and after I feel better, more hopeful, like they tore a hole in our roof so God could pour himself down on us.

But what kind of help do I need? What I don't want is for people to assume they know how I feel, or to tell me how I should feel, or to assume they know what I need or will make me feel better. I'd like to get off this rollercoaster more than anyone would like to see me get off this rollercoaster, but for now, this is where I am. That has to be OK.

Sometimes I wish people would just come over and hang out without asking me too many questions. Other times I wish they'd listen. Or I guess people could help me get motivated in general, like offering to go to the library and study together, even if we studied different things. Or, like Geary did, come with me to walk my dog. My poor dog has spent too much time in the yard lately. And I used to have a list of chores...OK, I know no one really wants to do chores with me, but still, they would go faster doing them together, and the yard is looking a little shabby.

The best help would be that, whatever someone did or said, they did or said it with love. I've lost a huge source of love. No one can ever replace Dad, and no one will ever love me with the same kind of love he had for me. But to know that I am loved—that there are people in my life who will stand by me, listen to me, pray for me, and support me in ways I can hear, see, and feel...that I'm not forgotten—that would be huge.



Care and Counseling Tips

THE BASICS

Many of your students will experience the death of a parent, relative, or friend during their teenage years. As a youth leader, you can help support them by learning about the process they are going through.

+ Grief has predictable stages.

The many stages of grief include shock or denial (this isn't happening to me), anger (why is this happening to me?), guilt (it's my fault), bargaining (I'll be a better person if...), sadness or depression (I don't care anymore), and acceptance (I'm ready for whatever comes next). Denial is a normal coping mechanism that protects the individual from experiencing a flood of emotions too quickly. If a student instantly realized and accepted the full reality of a loved one's death, with all the ramifications, he or she would be overwhelmed. However, by accepting the loss in bits and pieces, the individual can deal with it slowly.

+ Grieving is different for each individual.

The grief process will look different for each student. Once a student begins to *feel* his or her emotions, he or she will not progress through the stages of grief in a linear fashion, by completing one stage and moving to the next. Instead, a grieving person typically cycles through the stages, making it possible to experience anger one day (or even one hour) and sadness the next. It is crucial that you allow a person to experience and work through *each* of the stages and emotions.

The intensity and duration of grief will vary depending on factors such as the type of loss, an individual's coping skills, previous experiences, and the available resources to support them.



Care Tips

While supporting your grieving teenagers will require a long-term commitment from you, there are some immediate things you can do to help.

+ Listen.

The most beneficial thing that you can do for a grieving teenager is to be a good listener. The bereaved student will need a safe place to share feelings and thoughts. Being a good listener requires time and energy. Grieving individuals may want to talk about the deceased incessantly, often repeating stories and memories. While listening, don't give advice until asked for input.

+ Normalize the student's feelings.

You can help your grieving student see that any feelings he or she has about the loss are normal. Don't place expectations on how the student should feel—any feeling is normal and should be accepted. If your student shares that he or she has been feeling sad or guilty about the death, even a simple “That sounds pretty normal” can go a long way in helping the student feel that he or she is not crazy or alone.

+ Allow normal activities to continue.

As soon as possible after a death, reintroduce activities into the student's life, such as encouraging him or her to get back into your youth group meetings or events. Getting back to some normalcy will help your student realize that other parts of life can feel normal again, too, and will help him or her avoid slipping into isolation or depression.

+ Don't forget about the family.

The loss has likely had an impact on the student's parents, siblings, and extended family members as well. This is a great time for you to build a

supportive relationship with the family by checking in and seeing how you can be helpful. There are often practical things that you can organize your youth group to do, such as house-sitting during a funeral, gardening, or preparing meals.

WHEN TO REFER

If a student exhibits the following behaviors, a referral to a professional Christian counselor or psychologist is recommended:

- + The student is unwilling or unable to talk to anyone about his or her feelings about the death.**
- + The student's eating or sleeping patterns have significantly changed since the loss and are disrupting daily functioning.**
- + The student is using drugs, alcohol, food, or sex to cope with the loss.**
- + The student has withdrawn to the point of completely isolating him or herself from friends or family.**
- + The student appears to be stuck in one of the grief stages, and you have exhausted your time and emotional resources in trying to help.**



Counseling Tips

The initial crisis of the loss will pass with time, but the grief process may take awhile. Continue supporting your grieving students in these ways:

+ Encourage the expression of feelings.

As time passes, continue to facilitate the expression of the student's feelings by asking open-ended questions about the deceased person, such as:

- What's your favorite memory with [the deceased loved one]?
- Which quality did you most appreciate about him [her], and why?
- What would you most like to tell him or her?

Writing in a journal is an effective way for a teenager to express and work through feelings individually. You can encourage the student to write in the journal before bed each night, to recap the events of the day and to identify the various emotions that the student experienced. A teenager can read his or her journal entries with a friend or support person, or he or she may decide to keep the journal private.

+ Participate in therapeutic activities.

You can also participate in therapeutic activities with the student. Asking him or her to show and discuss pictures of the deceased is an easy way to facilitate the process of grieving. Other activities symbolize letting go, such as sending a toy boat down a river together or releasing balloons into the air. It may be helpful for the bereaved person to write a goodbye letter first and then attach the letter to the boat or balloons. You may wish to pray aloud or read a Scripture passage, such as Psalm 121, before releasing the symbolic item.

Students can express anger through safe physical activities such as punching a punching bag, screaming into a pillow, ripping up pieces of paper, or throwing rocks into a lake. These are helpful because they allow students to release physical energy and express frustration and

anger in ways that do not cause harm to themselves, others, or valuable property.

+ Take care of yourself.

Ministering to someone who has recently lost a loved one can be physically, emotionally, and spiritually draining. Developing a support system is critical. Don't consider yourself the only support for the student: Actively seek out friends and family who are available for support. You might suggest that other adults or students call and check in with the student.

SCRIPTURE HELP

+ Psalm 23

+ Psalm 31:9, 14

+ Psalm 139:13-16

+ Lamentations 3:31-33

+ John 11:17-44

+ Romans 5:1-5

+ Romans 8:35-39

+ 2 Corinthians 4:6-12

+ Philippians 3:10-14

+ 1 Peter 1:3-4



Group Tips

+ Go to church together.

Offer to give the mourner a ride. Getting out the door can be a difficult step for someone who is grieving. Knowing he or she doesn't have to make the effort alone can be a tremendous support.

+ Remember important dates.

Organize your group to call or write a card every week for the first month and then every month for at least six months. Also remember the mourner on special days like holidays, birthdays, and the anniversary of the death. He or she needs tangible remembrances of your love and support long after the first few weeks. Grief comes in waves and often feels more intense just when one might expect it to lessen.

+ Pray together.

Show grieving students in prayer, gently reminding them of the One who knows them better than they know themselves, who loves them, who will always be with them, and who offers hope for today and tomorrow.



What Not to Say

+ **“I know just how you feel.”**

Grieving is such an intensely personal process that you have no idea how someone feels, even if you are grieving yourself. The mourner may not be sure how he or she feels from moment to moment, so you can't assume you know. Allow time and space for the mourner to share with you how he or she feels during the process.

+ **“They're better off.”**

It may be true but still don't say it. The mourner can say it, but if you say it, it can sound like an invalidation of the person's feelings of loss and grief and worse, an accusation of selfishness.

+ **“They'll always be in your heart.”**

Of course, the mourner will always have memories, but right now they'd rather have the flesh-and-blood person.

What to Say



+ **“I don't know what to say.”**

Grief can make even the most confident speaker feel awkward, so if you don't know what to say, just admit it. Honesty is refreshing.

+ **“Do you want to talk about it?”**

Sometimes it helps to talk, and other times silence helps most. Sometimes mourners want to look through photo albums and share memories; other times they want to be distracted with chitchat about almost anything else.

+ **“Do you know how I can best help you?”**

In the past your student might have really loved cornball movies but now

might prefer going for a walk. The student might like to go on as if nothing has happened or might like you to help the world “stop” for a time (collecting homework assignments or taking his or her baby-sitting jobs for a while) so the student can just live this time of grief. He or she may not even know the kind of help needed; in that case, check back in a few days or a week and see if your student has thought of something specific you can do to help.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

+ Books

Don't Ask for the Dead Man's Golf Clubs: What to Do and Say (And Not to) When a Friend Loses A Love One. Lynn Kelly. New York: Workman Publishing Company, Inc., 2000.

The Grieving Teen: A Guide for Teenagers and Their Friends. Helen Fitzgerald. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.

+ Online Resources

www.griefnet.org (GriefNet)

www.helpguide.org (Helpguide)

www.hospicenet.org (Hospice)