

The Grieving Middle School Student

Middle school students are, under the best conditions, experiencing a great deal of turmoil due to the physical and hormonal changes in their bodies. Grieving students must deal with the additional stress of the grief process. Because of the many physical changes, pre-adolescents tend to have a variety of physical symptoms such as headaches, stomach problems, sleep disturbances, and changes in eating patterns.

They generally experience a range of emotional reactions. In addition, they may be beginning to get their primary support from friends rather than family, as in the past. The normal process of moving away from family towards friends for support is altered when a death impacts them. They want very much to be like their peers and not to be treated differently just because of the death in their family. They often become confused about how and from whom they can get their support.

Although pre-teen students are much more verbal and cognitively process information at a higher level, physical outlets are still very important to the pre-teen student. They comprehend that death is final and unavoidable. This may provoke feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, and may increase risk-taking behaviours. These students are apt to exhibit concerns about the survivors and what their future holds.

<i>Common Behaviours to Expect</i>	<i>How to help</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Argumentative ▪ Withdrawal, sullenness ▪ Anger, fighting ▪ Sleepiness ▪ Lack of concentration and attentiveness ▪ Risk-taking behaviours (drugs, sexual acting out, stealing) ▪ Unpredictable ups and downs or moodiness ▪ Erratic, inconsistent reactions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Expect and accept mood swings ▪ Provide a supportive environment where the student can share, when needed ▪ Anticipate increased physical concerns including illness and body aches and pains ▪ Allow the student to choose with whom and how she gets support ▪ Encourage participation in a support group ▪ Allow flexibility in completing school work

The Grieving High School Student

High school students are often philosophical about life and death and believe that death won't happen to them. While functioning at the formal operational stage of cognitive development, they appear to use "adult" approaches of problem solving and abstract thinking in dealing with their grief. However, it is important to remember that high school students are not yet adults. In their attempts to make sense of the world and what has happened to them, you may see depression, denial, anger, risk-taking and acting-out behaviours. You may see teens fighting against their vulnerability because they want very much to be independent. It is not unusual for people to assume that a teen will become responsible for the family. A

boy whose father has died may be told that he is now “the man of the family.” Or, a girl whose mother has died may find out that she is expected to “take care” of her dad and brothers.

After her brother died, a 15-year-old dropped out of school for three months and never left the house. She spent a lot of time wearing his clothes and sitting in his closet. The parents were terrified, but a wise therapist said “be patient with her, she is grieving her way.” When she returned to school she resumed her role as a good student.

<i>Common Behaviours to Expect</i>	<i>How to help</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Withdrawal from parents and other adults ▪ Angry outbursts ▪ Increased risk-taking behaviours (substances, reckless driving, sexual behaviours) ▪ Pushing the limits of rules ▪ Lack of concentration; inability to focus ▪ Hanging out with a small group of friends ▪ Sad face, evidence of crying ▪ Sleepiness, exhaustion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Allow for regression and dependency ▪ Encourage expression of feelings such as sorrow, anger, guilt, regret ▪ Understand and allow for variation in maturity level ▪ Answer questions honestly and provide factual information ▪ Model appropriate responses, showing the students your own grief ▪ Avoid power struggles and allow choices ▪ Help students understand and resolve feelings of helplessness ▪ Assist students with plans for completion of assignments ▪ Allow for some flexibility in assignments, e.g. be willing to adapt assignments to topics relevant to the student’s current experience