

## **A Parent Guide for Assisting Teens Through Trauma and Loss**

### **Assisting teenagers through loss**

The loss of people we care for is very painful and confusing. We recognize pain expressed by tears, but pain evidenced by withdrawal, hopelessness and anger can be harder to detect. Sometimes we see pain and grief as short term so when certain behaviours appear, we wonder what is behind them.

Adolescents, often present an image of strength. Unfortunately, this results in a tendency for emotions to be buried, only to be resurrected later, sometimes in less healthy ways.

The need not to reveal weakness often causes much pain and grief to go unnoticed. These coping strategies can often be rewarded unwittingly with comments such as, "You are handling things very well." While this may appear to be the case, it is often an illusion.

### **How you can help:**

While most helping response occurs in the first few weeks after a traumatic event, grief usually lasts longer than anticipated. The effects of grief are often revisited long after the event. These delayed, seemingly unrelated responses to grief can be baffling. It is important to keep this in mind when dealing with behaviour that is uncharacteristic.

- Be a listener. Most help comes from genuine concern that listens rather than seeks to give the "right" piece of advice. Communicate that grieving lasts longer than anyone expects although the intensity usually subsides. Certain events such as birthdays and holidays may result in a "revisitation" of grief.

- Do not avoid talking about the person or event because you feel it might reawaken the pain. Avoidance of the topic conveys a lack of caring rather than the more likely fact that you do not know what to say. Usually your teenager will want to talk, although it may not come in the fashion or the time you had planned. Follow their lead and be a listener.

- Try not to make any unnecessary changes during this time. Times of grief and loss are not the times to be making important decisions. Attempt to keep the situation as normal as possible.

Perhaps the greatest challenge you, as a parent have, is to encourage and allow the admittance and healthy expression of grief.

### **What to watch for:**

Trouble signs to watch for in adolescents following a loss may include:

- withdrawal and isolation
- physical complaints (headache, stomach pain)
- emotional concerns (depression, sadness, tension, suicidal thoughts, confusion)
- anti-social behaviour (stealing, acting out, aggression, substance abuse)
- school problems (avoidance, disruptive behaviour, academic failures)

Most of these are temporary. Teenagers who appear to be withdrawn and who isolate themselves from family and friends may be experiencing emotional difficulties. Their need to appear competent may work against their reaching out to others for assistance. Most grief reactions are normal responses to disaster or loss, however it is imperative that suicidal thinking be treated seriously and that help is sought.

Loss and disaster can thrust teenagers into an adult role. Regardless whether these results occur, it is important that they give themselves permission to grieve.

### **Understanding the grief process**

While the following stages commonly occur in the grief experience, it is important to remember that grief does not follow a defined pattern. These stages may be experienced repeatedly, in differing sequences and with differing intensity.

- **Denial** is a shock absorber, which temporarily reduces the full impact of the crisis, such as a person's unwillingness to talk about the loss. In the early stages denial isn't something that is wrong, however problems can occur if it continues. Give permission to feel.

- **Anger/guilt** often occur due to a person's feeling of powerlessness over the loss. Questions include: How could he/she do this to me? Why would God allow it? How could this happen to someone at our school? Blaming others can also be a common response. It is important to admit the anger, identify the real source of the anger, understand that it is okay to be angry. Seek healthy ways to express it such as strenuous physical activity, keeping a journal, sketching or talking with people you trust.

- **Sorrow/depression** are evidenced by some or all of the following: crying, isolation, silence, a loss of energy, and an inability to sleep. Allow and encourage expressions of grief. Emphasize that crying is not a sign of

weakness, rather it is the facing and acknowledgment of loss. Recording thoughts in a journal can also be very healing. Activity is helpful for depression, although sometimes depression is so deep that even activity seems too difficult. Referral to the family physician is encouraged for depression that persists.

- **Bargaining** is a means of trying to regain control or to make sense of what has occurred. This often takes the form of a promise to God that things will change if only He does something. The question “Why?” is very naturally asked through all stages but is, perhaps, most prevalent in the anger and the bargaining phase. The real problem cannot be faced until the “why” is abandoned and the person looks at “who, when, where and how” things happened. The reality of what has happened cannot be changed.

- **Acceptance and admission** of our powerlessness in the situation is not quickly or easily reached. Having grieved we can move on with life. Emphasize that acceptance is not a matter of forgetting the person or minimizing the pain. In fact, it is a full acceptance that the loss was real, significant and painful.

## **A Difficult Time**

The events of recent days have, no doubt, been upsetting for you and your child. Traumatic events shake the world that we had considered safe and predictable. These events also create a high level of confusion and apprehension. Discussion in the news and at the school often adds to the disruption.

The experience of a loss or a sudden violent event can produce intense anxiety and fear. These feelings are very normal. Suffering, loss and death have shattered the teenager’s sense of invincibility and immortality. Teenagers often present an image of strength and other forms of “best face forward”. Unfortunately, this results in a tendency for emotions to be buried, only to be resurrected later, sometimes in less healthy ways.

## **Caring for the Caregiver**

In order to take care of yourself, be certain not to put unreasonable demands on yourself by trying to be all things to all people. Expectation and normal daily activities may need to be scaled down. Remember:

- Grief usually lasts longer than anticipated. Most response occurs in the first days and weeks but the effects of grief are often revisited for some time.
- Most of your child’s reactions are normal responses to disaster or loss.

**Other sources of help in Fort McMurray**

- Student Services/Counseling Services at your child's school
- Personal Support Network - 780-791-1757
- Family Community Support Services - 780-743-7910
- Fort McMurray Victim Services - 780-788-4250
- Some Other Solutions - 780-743-4357 or [www.someothersolutions.ca](http://www.someothersolutions.ca)
- Mental Health Services (Northern Lights Regional Health Centre) - 780-791-6194
- Shanneen Gozulak – 780-880-7665 or [shanneen@me.com](mailto:shanneen@me.com)
- Tamra Austin – 780-792-6672 or [psychsmith@hotmail.com](mailto:psychsmith@hotmail.com)
- Denise Mannell – 780-715-7211 or [mannell@shaw.ca](mailto:mannell@shaw.ca)
- Tapestry Counselling – 780 790 0890 or [tapestrycounseling.ca](http://tapestrycounseling.ca)