



## **ABOUT TEENS AND GRIEF**

*By Bruce H. Conley*

When death has come into your life, your school, family or friends, finding your path is never easy but sharing the journey makes the road less lonely. The work of grief ebbs and flows between thinking, feeling and doing. The process is mental, emotional and spiritual; the pathway is both personal and social and altogether— it is exhausting. Grieving, as a process of “adjustment to loss” is not an “option” for the mind, body and emotions. Grief happens because death happens. However, “Grieving Healthy” is a choice! As a teen or an adult of any age, the “when”, “where” and “how” you grieve is as individual as you are. Use the following points and resources to make healthy choices and navigate your own unique path through grief to healing. Remember, you were made to heal just as surely as you were made to float. Just breathe, keep moving and never, ever give up!

### **GETTING THE NEWS:**

Whenever and however you hear about death, it is always hard. Even when it’s expected, there is shock and at least a part of us denies the news. That shock and denial is partly responsible for the reason why most of us don’t hear all the details correctly. We instinctively repeat what we heard and the next person, also hearing only part of the story, passes on a slightly different variation. No one intends to “distort” the truth, it just happens because we are human. Sometimes distortions do real damage to family and friends. *Help yourself and help others by doing your best to get the facts and leave the “fiction”.*

### **RUMOR CONTROL:**

Getting the facts can be harder than it sounds. Common sources are e-mails, social internet sites, family and friends, newspapers, school, church, and social gathering points like malls, coffee shops and hair salons. Among these, the official statements released by schools and churches are usually based on the most reliable information available at the moment they are written. They may not be the most “satisfying” information but they are usually the safest. *As a general rule, if you have reason to doubt something you hear, DON’T repeat it.* The truth about accidents and illnesses often take days to weeks to determine. Give truth a chance. No matter what happened or how, the result is the same. Someone you care about died. You can’t change what happened yesterday, but in that person’s memory, you can help make good things happen tomorrow.

### **ANGER AND DEPRESSION:**

For many friends and family, anger and depression follow quickly in the footsteps of shock and sorrow. Anger is grief bursting outward at people, places, things and just the unfairness of death! Depression is grief thrusting inward at ourselves for things we cannot change but think we could have or should have. We cannot and should not deny that anger and depression are real but we can and should find safe ways to vent and disarm them. Tears, talking and exercise are the three most common outlets for this kind of grief energy. No matter your age or gender, it’s ok to cry because you are made to cry. Grieving tears have actually been shown to release toxins brought on by great stress. Tears are one of nature’s ways of restoring chemical balance

to the human body. Talking, texting or communicating our feelings by any other means can help release tension as well—but it can also increase our stress. The difference between “release” and “increase” is partly a matter of who is listening and how.

### **LISTENING AND RESPONDING:**

A good listener lets you talk without interrupting; lets painful, powerful feelings fall into silent moments like tears falling to the ground. When you share the hardest, harshest things you think and feel -you need someone who won't run away. You need someone who will let you say those things out loud, but won't let you stay feeling that way. When you share the hardest, harshest things you think and feel, you then need to give your friend a turn to speak. Listen to them as they listened to you. Respond and let the “give and take” continue between you. Over time, the exchange of listening and responding between good friends tends to reduce the intensity of grief energy to a more manageable level. The value of talking and listening may be more about the trust that grows between two people than any special words or ways that can be taught.

### **GETTING INVOLVED:**

The energy of grief is extremely powerful. Kept inside of us, it can do real harm. Focused outside of ourselves, it can do real good. When the initial intensity of grief subsides, its usually a signal that we're ready to get involved. Soon after death, family members gather to make plans for a funeral or memorial service. Often, at the same time, schools, clubs and groups of special friends, gather to make plans as well. Although most groups wait for a few days to see how they can support the family's decisions, working on ideas within your organization or group of friends can be a good way to help yourself and others.

### **ATTENDING SERVICES:**

Although most funerals or memorial services are held within a few days to a week, they sometimes do not occur for a month or more. Aside from the formal service arrangements made by family members, schools and other groups, often hold their own memorial services or events in memory of a friend or member. Whether you help organize a service or event or just choose to attend, it usually helps you deal with your feelings and find support among others who feel the same way. In every culture, race, creed and religion, ceremonies and rituals have evolved to help celebrate life and find hope. Although it is common to feel that attending would be “just too hard”, remember that often the most helpful things in life are the hardest to do. At the same time, most hard things are easier if you have “buddy” to bear them with. If you are having trouble deciding to attend a service, look seriously for someone to go with you and hang out afterwards. When it comes to attending visitations, funerals and memorial services, its amazing the difference a good friend can make.

### **WHEN VIEWING IS AN OPTION:**

If you choose to attend a service and the family has chosen viewing or an open casket, you can usually express your support and condolences with or without taking part in the viewing. Some perspective, however, may help you make a decision about what to do. One purpose of viewing is to jog our minds from denial. For many people when it comes to accepting the reality of death, “seeing is believing”. Today, perhaps more than ever, the prevalence of movie and television dramas about death and life-after-death, can actually make true reality more difficult to grasp. Viewing is one common tradition that tends to ground our grief to both tangible and visual realities that help our natural senses discern the difference between fact and fiction. Many people are also comforted when a person looks peaceful. Even when cosmetic restoration is not

helpful, the fact that someone is dressed in favorite clothing may be comforting. The presence of special jewelry, religious items or just “favorite things” is also meaningful. Overall, part of healing grief is letting go of the physical things we cannot keep and taking hold of the memories and beliefs that death cannot take away. Viewing is an experience that may help you do these things.

**MEMORIES ARE THE THINGS WE KEEP:**

Of all the things we must release to death, memories are the things we keep. The hard thing about memories is that sometimes you can't remember someone without crying; and sometimes, you can't remember them without laughing! Either way, it is in the sharing of our memories that our loved ones remain a healthy part of our lives through the years. The process begins in the early days following a death and continues forever. When you look through a photo album, create a collage, write down a funny story or compose a tribute, you contribute to the “living legacy” of memories. The greatest gift you can give the family of a deceased friend, is your own personal memory of that person. Truly, your memories are their loved one's legacy and your memories are something only YOU can give. More lasting than flowers; more valuable than money, memories are the most valuable gift you can give—and the only gift families and friends can keep.