

# Teens and Grief

by Kristin Witte

Grief is the intense distress and emotional anguish that arises when loss occurs. It is the normal response to a loss. Adolescents, unlike children, view death as irreversible and inevitable. Adolescents are aware that everything dies at some time but often view both themselves and their friends as invincible. Death often compels adolescents to ask difficult theological questions about the meaning of life, existence of suffering, and God's divine plan.

Adolescents, by their nature, place a great deal of emphasis on their peer relationships. In light of that, there is a profound concern for others and the pain that other people may be experiencing. Often young people will cry and react to a loss because they see others are sad, not necessarily because they personally knew those most affected. Teens that the youth minister might not "expect" to respond to a loss, may respond dramatically because it triggers memories of another loss they have experienced. It is important to remember to support the entire community (parents, young people, children, other parish adults) whether they were intimately connected to the situation or not.

Often teens are unsure as to how to handle the overwhelming emotions that come after a loss. They often have very little context and experience in dealing with loss in order to create perspective on healing and grief. Adolescents who face a loss may feel anger, responsibility for the death, and sometimes survivor's guilt, asking the question "Why not me?" While attempting to struggle through the exhausting grief process, adolescents may call attention to the pain by exhibiting other addictive distracters (ex. drugs, alcohol, sexual acting out). These behaviors must be addressed and cannot be "overlooked" due to the fact that a teenager is grieving. Instead, the presenting behavior must be appropriately addressed so that the grief process can progress healthily.

## **What can those who serve youth do to comfort and support grieving teens?**

According to St. Thérèse of Lisieux, in her writings *Manuscrits autobiographiques*, "For me, prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned toward heaven, it is a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy." There is no greater way a youth minister or parish community can serve young people during a time of grief and loss, than to pray. Prayer is a beautiful gift from God and a vehicle for healing, sharing emotions and providing a ritual for context and storytelling.

Youth ministry leaders often look for the "right thing to say" at times when teens are grieving. In the encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict XVI wrote "A Christian knows when it is time to speak of God and when it is better to say nothing and to let love alone speak" (#31). After the death of a loved one, it is viable that teens may feel anger towards God for "allowing" the person to die. As a youth minister, often we are called upon to be a peaceful pastoral presence at that time in knowledge that, at that moment, you are providing Christ's love for that young person's troubled heart. Instead of erring on the side of saying far too much, it is always preferable to err on the side of listening intently to the stories, concerns, and questions of young people. They have come to you for a reason, because you are someone they know of Catholic faith. They seek spiritual, as well as emotional, healing at this time. At a time of great vulnerability and feeling of chaos, choosing to engage in conversation (be it theological or otherwise) is an opportunity for empowerment.

As someone who serves youth, you are called upon to provide: (1) A healthy venue for young people to engage in the grieving process (2) Opportunities grounded in our Catholic faith to mourn the loss and (3) Healthy individuals who can accompany the young person as they begin the process of reorganizing their life after the loss.

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