

Complicated Grief

Suicide

Someone attempts suicide every forty-two seconds. Someone dies by suicide every seventeen minutes. According to American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, suicide is the third leading cause of death for fifteen to twenty-four year olds, and sixth leading cause of death for 4 to 16 year olds.

In her book, *Bart Speaks Out: Breaking the Silence of Suicide*, Linda Goldman writes that we are able to explore “the topic of suicide openly if we are to break through the barriers of shame and secrecy that accompany this topic and create fertile ground for the resolution of this complicated grief situation.”

Survivor-victims of suicide should be treated essentially the same as with any death, however it is important to remember to acknowledge the changes wrought by the suicide, commemorate the death, but do not romanticize it; recognize the despair that brought on the act; focus on remembering the individual, not the act; be vigilant for anniversary reactions; deal with the caregivers stress – both parents, teachers, coaches, youth ministers and others directly involved with survivors.

An important difference to acknowledge includes being vigilant to the survivor's increased risk of suicide. There is much that is still not much understood about the impact of a suicide on a child or an adolescent. At best, the suicide-bereaved child/adolescent may be no worse off than a non-suicide-bereaved child. However, it is equally likely that in the wake of suicide, young people may be especially vulnerable to pathological reactions as well as increased risk for their own acts of self-destruction. Timely referral for intervention is best when dealing with suicide-bereaved young people.

The act of self-destruction raises the obvious questions, “Why?” and “What could I have done to prevent it?” Anxious and grief stricken, the survivors ask, “How can I face my friends? What will they think of me?” Death by suicide stigmatizes not only the victim but the survivors as well.

Homicide/Violent Death/Automobile Accidents

Murder/violent death/automobile accidents can instill a deep sense of grief and fear. People usually try to avoid the subject for lack of what to say. It is important to be present and offer support and listen. It leaves young people with a sense of “what will happen next? Am I to blame for not being with him/her? What could I have done to keep this from happening? Why did God let this happen to him/her?” Life is out of control and loss of control brings great fear to the grieving adolescent.

Military Death

In our country today there are many families whose mothers, fathers, and other family members have been sent into war zones. The children/adolescents with parents overseas experience loss while their parents are deployed and also live in fear for the notification that their loved one has been injured or died in the war. There are resources on the diocesan website to assist should this happen in your parish community.

Getting Professional Help

Several risk factors may lead you to consider obtaining professional help for a young person. Please refer to Diocesan Policies 7.4 regarding referring young people for assistance for more information. Below are some indicators that young people may exhibit that might lead you to consider seeking professional help.

- Continually shares no thoughts or feelings about the death
- Is clingy to adults, or shows signs of extreme anxiety
- Threatens to hurt himself/herself*
- Not able to see anything positive in their life*
- Does not socialize
- Is involved in high-risk behavior such as truancy or use of drugs and/or alcohol
- Is unusually argumentative, aggressive, defiant, cruel to animals or other children
- Has pronounced appetite loss, change of sleeping habits, or other change in daily routine
- Failing in school
- Has a constant somatic complaint – stomachaches, fatigue, headaches
- Has not been told the truth about the death
- Had a difficult relationship with the deceased
- A family member has an untreated mental health or substance abuse problem
- Parents/Guardians feel overwhelmed by parenting demands
- Seems “stuck” in only one major reaction or feeling

* Requires immediate referral for evaluation to primary care physician and notification of parents and/or guardian. It is also important to keep the Pastor and/or Principal informed.

What Can I Say?

When talking with young people in times of grief, consider these comments as a means to get the conversation started or to bring peace to an otherwise tense situation.

- I am here/be present/ listen
- I don't know how you feel but I am here
- I can't imagine how you must feel
- I am so sorry that this has happened
- I have no words to say, but know I am here
- I wonder about that too (when asked a “why” question by a young person for which there is no answer)
- Silence is OK

What Not To Say

When talking with young people in times of grief, these comments can actually make things worse, no matter how well intentioned.

- I understand how you feel
- He was old/was very sick, etc.
- I know how you feel
- God needed another angel in Heaven
- God only takes the good at a young age
- God needed him/her more than we do here
- Things will get better as time passes
- When my Mother...grandmother...died I felt the same way
- He/she will be looking down on us from Heaven
- He/she looks like he/she is just sleeping

What Helps People Cope With Death?

When talking with young people in times of grief, consider these suggestions for keeping communication clear and the young people informed.

- Clear information; a clear understanding of what caused the death
- An understanding of the normal reactions people usually have when they experience a similar death
- Being able to speak openly and honestly about concerns, feelings, and ideas relating to the death
- Maintaining, to the degree possible, old routines, rules, and structure of daily life
- Having age-appropriate power to contribute to some decisions related to the new life circumstances
- Participating in rituals to mark the death or to reflect on the changed life circumstances
- Reinvesting in the "normal" routine of life; having fun, getting back to school, sports, etc.
- Ability to somehow make sense of the death if possible

Ways That Adolescents May Want To Honor The Death

The best way to honor the death of a young person (or an adult who has had significant contact in the lives of young people in a parish or school) is the Diocesan Pastoral Cross. There may be times when the cross is not available. In times such as those, consider the following alternatives (or consider using these in addition to the cross, especially if your dealing with a large group of people).

- Balloons/Flowers at an important place to remember the person
- Plant a tree or flowers
- Creating a memory and/or story book with pictures and notes to the family
- Creating a prayer chain (elongated pieces of construction paper stapled together in links) that includes notes and prayers for the deceased and their family
- Creating a scholarship in honor of the deceased
- Prayers/notes placed into the Pastoral Cross

- Prayer wall if there are too many people to gather around the cross
- Scrapbook
- Gathering of young people in their youth ministry area separate from the funeral Mass and viewing to share openly with words, music, poetry, pictures

The above ideas also work when the crisis does not include a death. If a young person were critically ill, for instance, decorating their hospital room (or room at home) with a prayer chain would be a great way to show him/her that the community is praying with/for him/her.

Adolescents can demonstrate great creative and unique ways of commemorating the death of a loved one. Empower them to exercise their own critical and creative abilities to deal with their grief. Young people can demonstrate sensitivity and imagination in dealing with death and can be the people who lead the adults in managing their grief. At the right time, it is important to give them permission that it is okay to move on, listen as they explore their own ways to cope. Acceptance is at each person's own pace but they will explore and want someone to let them know it is okay to live their life with joy again. Life will never be the same, there is no closure, but it still can be full of happiness and look to a successful future.

What About My Grief?

In times of death we reach for support from our closest family and friends. The person we reach for may not be able to be that person for us. The person who reaches out to you and can walk the journey with you may not be the person you expect. Parents/guardians, siblings, etc. are dealing with their own grief and may not be available to you in your grief. Your journey is your holy ground. Be open to those who offer to walk with you.