

Straight Talk About Death

For Teenagers



MADD
VICTIM SERVICES

Straight Talk About Death for Teenagers

by

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Excerpts from the book of the same title
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Mothers Against Drunk Driving®
Revised, 1995

Death is a trauma: a complete shock to the survivors. Death resulting from drunk driving ranks among the most severe traumas.

An act by another person has destroyed part of your future.

Driving drunk displays extreme indifference to human life. Someone's recklessness killed your loved one. An automobile can be as much a weapon of destruction as a gun or knife.

You are caught in the tragic effect of the crash.

You may try to imagine how it must have been when your loved one died. You envision the graphic details as you relive the crime. Was there much suffering? You feel ravaged as you picture the horrifying scene.

If only you could stop thinking about it. You try, but these thoughts haunt you when you are awake and in your dreams when you sleep.

It's natural to feel hate and bitterness, and to think of revenge. In your rage you may secretly plan a torturous retaliation -- a life for a life. Recognize that your thoughts are normal. Just don't act on these impulses. Instead use your justifiable anger to help stop drunk driving or lobby for stronger victims' rights.

Grief is not a disorder, a disease, or a sign of weakness. It is an emotional, physical, and spiritual necessity. It is the price you pay for love. The only cure for grief is to grieve.

The pain may be so powerful that you can't believe anyone on earth could possibly understand it. When people ask, "Where does it hurt?" you want to shout, "EVERYWHERE!"

Some teenagers say that it's like having a tooth removed without novocaine. A poet from the nineteenth century, Henrich Heine, called grief "a toothache of the heart."

But really, there are no accurate descriptions.

When will you feel better? No one can give you that answer. There is no timetable for how long you will hurt. You can't measure grief in terms of a calendar.

There is no correct way to grieve and no way to know how long you will grieve.

Grief does not travel along a straight line and then fade away and disappear. There is no cookbook for grief. There are no recipes. You may have contradictory feelings at the same moment. The experience of loss is uncharted territory.

If only you could get your hands on some magic pills to achieve a miracle cure. There are no such pills. There is no easy way out.

But remember this: You will eventually feel better.

The grieving process depends on many personal factors.

Your relationship with the person who died:

It's like a wound on a body. Some cuts are mere scratches and heal rapidly; others are very deep and need a long time to heal. You will be affected by how close you were to the person who died and how deeply your life will be altered.

Your coping strategies:

How have you handled emotional distress in the past?

Your supports:

Whether you have friends or family with whom you can openly share your anguish, who won't tell you how to feel, and who won't say that everything's okay when it isn't.

The intense feelings of grief are scary. Yet they are real. Though teenagers experience death in different ways, there are some common landmarks along the journey of grief. Knowing about the process will help you understand some of the normal reactions.

There is nothing wrong with you if you have some of the feelings described on the following pages. Or if you don't. Give yourself permission to feel the way you are feeling. Feelings keep changing.

Sometimes you may not even know what you feel.

Dazed

A teacher calls on you in class, but you don't hear your name. Like a robot, you are functioning mechanically. You are on automatic pilot--a spectator in your own life. Your body is not connected to your mind.

Numbness helps you work through the necessary details of death. You shut down your emotional system so you won't suffer the overload.

Disbelief

You wake up in the morning forgetting for a moment that a tragic death has occurred. When life seems unbearable, disbelief intervenes. It's natural to close your eyes to what is hurtful. It protects you from the ordeal.

Eventually you must face the truth. Your loved one is dead.

Anger

You may be angry at

your friends, for saying the wrong things, or worse, friends who say nothing;

the medical community, for not doing more to save your loved one;

God, for letting it happen;

your family, for not giving you the support that you need;

the person who caused the crash...even if it is the same person who was killed;

yourself, for feeling the way you do.

Anger feels like fire. Let it burn itself out. Otherwise it will burn you. To deny your anger is also to deny the possibility of healing.

Try to take a break by:
going on a walk,
shooting some hoops,
screaming in private places like in
the shower or in the woods,
jogging around the neighborhood,
beating a pillow with a tennis
racquet,
listening to favorite music,
or whatever brings some relief.

One of the most important ways of dealing with rage is trying to forgive yourself and others. Forgiveness contains the word "give."

You "give" yourself new energies to move on to meet other challenges.

You "give" yourself permission to live in an unfair, disappointing world.

Envy

You may even feel envious of the one who died. In death one becomes suddenly all-perfect, all-wise. You may feel threatened because you can't possibly compete with these praiseworthy virtues. Try not to make comparisons. Just be yourself.

Panic

It's difficult to get hold of yourself when your mind is a jumble. You can't concentrate on the simplest routine task. You are so tense that you just can't sit in one place. You feel helpless, hopeless, disorganized. You want to run away, anywhere.

Emotional swings are part of the grieving process. Your inner resources are stretched to the limit.

In time, you will gain greater control of yourself.

Loneliness

No one understands exactly how you feel. Your friends are busy with their own lives. Your parents or siblings may be wrapped up in their own grief. And now your loved one is no longer there to share your life.

You feel a quiet, dull ache. You are so alone.

Being alone doesn't always mean being lonely.

There are times when you may like being by yourself. It's peaceful and quiet. You're not being bugged by someone. You like your own company.

"Alone" becomes "loneliness" only when the separation makes you feel sad and dejected.

Recall the wisdom of the serenity prayer: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; the courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference."

Physical Symptoms

Physical complaints and illnesses are your body's reaction to the tragedy in your life.

Maybe you:

collapse in bed and then can't fall asleep, or
sleep more than ever but are still tired when you wake up.

Maybe you

are so filled with grief that you
can't possibly eat...or maybe you
can't stop eating;
feel a constant emptiness in the
pit of your stomach;
are frequently nauseous and feel
like vomiting;
have pounding headaches;
feel dizzy, lightheaded, almost
giddy;
find it hard to breathe;
have sensations of choking with a
tightness in your throat;
are afraid you have a serious
illness.

Whatever the cause, your pain is not
imagined. The agonizing period
following a death triggers the
suppression of the immune system. It is
estimated that 75% of routine doctor's
visits are for stress-related disorders or
illnesses.

Going Nuts

When you act as if everything is normal,
a voice inside you may scream, "Am I
losing my mind?"

You may do things like
getting lost on your way to
school;
hearing voices or footsteps;
trying to call your loved one on
the phone;
talking out loud to the person
who died;
seeing your loved one while
walking in the mall or other
places;
dreaming that you are visiting
with your loved one;
forgetting your own name.

Are you having a nervous breakdown?

No.

Understand that most grieving people have similar symptoms and that they are temporary.

They fade and disappear as you continue your journey through the grieving process.

In time it will get easier, even if you hurt sometimes. You will be able to remember your loved one without so much emotional turmoil.

Depression

You don't think you can bear the deep aching in your body another minute. Your nerves are on fire. You are torn apart.

Depression can be disabling when you feel worthless, powerless, helpless, and unprotected.

**Grief says, "How can I go on?"
Depression cries, "Why go on?"
Grief says, "Will I ever laugh again?"
Depression cries, "There is no laughter."**

Depression is not a weakness. It is part of saying goodbye to someone you cared deeply about.

Regrets

Grief is often filled with feelings of guilt. If only...I had known. What if...I had insisted that he go to a different hospital. I should not have...let her drive the car after she had had a few beers. I wish I could have...told him how much I really loved him.

You think about all these things you should or shouldn't have said or done.

If only you could turn the clock back.

But you can't.

There are no real answers to the question, "Why?"

Philosophers have explored this question since the beginning of time. Still, no one has completely solved the mystery of death. You will probably continue to search for an answer until you find one that fits with what you know about the death and your own faith or philosophy of life.

Growing with Grief

Now that you've encountered tragedy, you may see life differently. When someone you love dies, you confront your own mortality. Knowing how brief life can be might encourage you to try to make your own life more meaningful and enjoyable.

Now that you've encountered tragedy, you may be looking more deeply into your own beliefs. What had been significant may now appear trivial. You may set new priorities and redefine your needs. Growing is knowing not only where you are coming from but what you are searching for.

Now that you've encountered tragedy, you may have a different understanding of the meaning of love. You realize that to love others doesn't diminish your love for the one who died.

Love doesn't die. People do.

Grief begins with a terrible and lonely loss. Grief has changed you but is not destroying you. Grief is a powerful teacher.

Do you remember reading Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland?

"Who are you?" asked the Caterpillar. Alice replied, rather shyly, "I hardly know, Sir, just at present--at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been

changed several times since then."

How different you are now. Nothing in life has prepared you for this tragedy. Like Alice, you have had to make many changes to adjust to your great loss.

Take small steps and take pride in your small victories.

Grief is a process. Getting better is your choice. Grief is the price you pay for love, but you don't have to go on paying forever.

You have endured the worst kind of experience.

You will survive.

There is hope.

If you would like to read Dr. Grollman's 146 page book, Straight Talk About Death for Teenagers, which includes a journal section where you can record your memories of the person who died, your feelings about what happened, and your hopes for the future, ask for it at your local bookstore, contact your local MADD chapter, or call 1-800-369-9226.

Literature Available from MADD

MADD literature may be downloaded from our website:

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One copy available at no charge.

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**Someone You Know
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**Helping Children Cope
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**Straight Talk About
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For Grieving Teenagers

We Hurt Too
For Adult Siblings of
Someone Killed

**You're in Grief, You're
Not Going Crazy***
For the Grieving

Don't Call Me Lucky
For Those Injured by Drunk
Drivers

Closed Head Injury
A Common Complication of
Vehicular Crashes

Men and Mourning
A Man's Journey Through
Grief

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 ***No Time for Good Byes: Coping with Sorrow,
Anger and Injustice After a Tragic Death,***

By Janice Harris Lord (\$9.00)

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Someone Suffering an Injury, Illness or Loss,***

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