Helping Teens Cope with Grief and Loss During COVID-19

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Before We Begin

• Please ask questions by typing into the “Chat” box.

• Questions will be answered at the end of the presentation.

• Unanswered questions/answers will be posted to our website: johnmuirhealth.com.

• The recorded presentation and slide deck will be posted to our website: johnmuirhealth.com.

• Next week’s presentation
  ○ Tuesday, May 5, 2020 at 6:30PM
  ○ “Parenting Challenges during COVID-19”
What is Grief and Loss?

• Grief:
  o A natural response to loss.
  o The emotional pain we experience when something we love is taken away.
What is Grief and Loss?

• **Examples of Loss:**
  - The death of a loved one
  - The end of a relationship
  - A pet that runs away
  - Getting laid off from work
  - Moving
  - Changing schools
  - Having something significant get misplaced or stolen
  - Losing independence due to illness or age
Common Reactions to Loss

- Shock/Disbelief
- Anger
- Sadness
- Guilt
- Anxiety
- Changes in appetite, sleep, concentration
Common Stages of Grief

• Can occur in any order, simultaneously or not at all.
  o Denial – This can’t be happening.
  o Anger – I hate that this is happening.
  o Bargaining – Maybe if I do X, this will stop happening.
  o Depression – I’m devastated this is happening.
  o Acceptance – I am getting through what is happening.
Common Stages of Grief

• **New grief can remind us of past grief.**
  o Feelings related to loss may trigger memories of previous loss.
  o The mind doesn’t distinguish between situations – feelings are feelings.
What Have Teens Lost During This Time?

• **Structure/Routine** - these things all contribute to a teen’s sense of self and identity.
  - School
  - Clubs
  - Sports practices/games
  - Music lessons
  - Dance classes/rehearsals
  - Scouts
  - Church/youth groups
  - Part-time/volunteer jobs
  - Other extracurricular activities
What Have Teens Lost During this Time?

• **Physical Connection with Friends** – adolescent development is focused on peer relationships but teens are currently unable to:
  - Eat lunch in the quad
  - Meet up after school
  - Go to each other’s houses
  - Work on projects together
  - Go out on the weekend
  - Get food together
  - Hug each other
  - Hang out and relax
What Have Teens Lost During This Time?

• **Things They Needed to Do**
  - Standardized tests
  - Placement exams
  - Tryouts
  - Auditions
  - Summer job applications
What Have Teens Lost During This Time?

• **Events That Bring Closure**
  - End-of-the-year band/choir concerts
  - Spring drama productions
  - Field trips
  - Grad nights
  - Cleaning out lockers
  - Signing yearbooks
  - Saying goodbye to friends/teachers/schools
What Have Teens Lost During This Time?

- **Things They Worked Hard For**
  - Sports finals
  - Dance competitions
  - Tournaments/Championships
  - End-of-year awards
  - Recognition nights
What Have Teens Lost During This Time?

• **Rites of Passage**
  - Bar/Bat Mitzvahs
  - Getting a driver’s license
  - Visiting colleges
  - Going to prom
  - Walking at graduation
What Have Teens Lost During This Time?

• **Autonomy and Independence**
  o Teens are supposed to be individuating and separating from parents.
  o Now they are forced to be with us all the time.
  o No driving, no going out, no going to work, no dating…
What Have Teens Lost During This Time?

• **Sense of Control**
  - Teens didn’t ask for COVID to interrupt their lives!
  - Things escalated quickly.
  - Information keeps changing and a lot is unknown.
  - Personal safety is at risk.
What Have Teens Lost During This Time?

• Sense of Fun
  o Life is very serious right now.
  o The news is frightening.
  o Adults are worried/preoccupied about jobs/money/health.
  o Fun has been cancelled.
  o *Kids are thinking about mortality at a time when they should be feeling carefree.*
What Happens When We Don’t Grieve Properly

- Energy is spent on avoiding painful feelings.
- We may experience increased anger.
- We may revert to unhealthy habits.
- We may experience unresolved grief.
How To Help Teens Cope

• DON’T: Avoid the topic because you think it’ll make things worse.
  o Model how talking about painful/difficult issues is healthy.
  o Look for ways to connect.
  o It’s ok if it starts off awkward or uncomfortable.
How To Help Teens Cope

• DON’T: Use band-aids.
  o You may think you are cheering them up but they will feel minimized.
  o Avoid statements such as, “It’s not a big deal,” “There will be other baseball seasons,” “I’m sure they will reschedule the tournament,” or “At least you aren’t a senior.”
How To Help Teens Cope

• DON’T: Take over the conversation.
  o Avoid immediately jumping to a solution such as, “When I was your age and I couldn’t see my boyfriend…”
  o Just listen. Silence can be golden.
  o Your goal: cultivate a repeat customer.

sometimes we don't need advice, we just need someone to listen.

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How To Help Teens Cope

• **DO: Make sure you are coping.**
  - Take care of yourself and model positive coping skills.
  - Demonstrate how exercising/meditating/walking the dog is healthier than sleeping all the time/overeating/drinking alcohol.
  - If you are struggling to cope, seek support from an adult.
How To Help Teens Cope

• **DO: Think about other loss your teen has experienced.**
  - Is previous loss affecting their current experience?
  - How did they cope before?
  - How did you support them before?
How To Help Teens Cope

• **DO: Acknowledge their feelings.**
  
  o Help them identify their feelings: “Are you missing debate team?”
  
  o Share your feelings: “I’m worried about Grandma. What are you worried about?”
How To Help Teens Cope

• **DO: Model that it’s ok to have mixed feelings.**
  - Things are not always simply black and white.
  - There have been some positives from this.
  - Give your own examples: “I wish we didn’t have to shelter-in-place but I love not commuting to work.”
  - Help them recognize their own mixed feelings because mixed feelings can be confusing.
How To Help Teens Cope

• **DO: Validate their feelings.**
  - They are not being selfish or immature.
  - They are human.
  - They do not have to take on the world’s problems.
How To Help Teens Cope

• **DO: Teach perspective.**
  - “Safe at home” versus “Stuck at home.”
  - Gently point out that teens all over the world are struggling too.
  - Balance the negative with the positive – look for inspirational stories or reassuring data.
How To Help Teens Cope

• **DO: Encourage structure.**
  - Have a general schedule for waking up, showering, eating, distance-learning, going to bed.
  - Invite their participation in developing routine.
  - Include time for them to have space/privacy.
  - Structure should be flexible – consider it a guide.
How To Help Teens Cope

• **DO: Offer choices.**
  o With so much taken away, teens will appreciate options.
  o Let them pick dinner or what time they do something.
  o Avoid power struggles.
How To Help Teens Cope

• **DO: Encourage hobbies.**
  - Hobbies are coping skills!
  - This is a great time to get really good at something.
  - Support their interests – ask if they need supplies or help.
How To Help Teens Cope

• **DO: Encourage contact with others.**
  - Peers understand what they are going through.
  - Other relatives and adults can also provide support.
  - Physical-distancing versus social-distancing.
How To Help Teens Cope

• **DO: Encourage creative coping.**
  
  o Everyone copes differently.
  
  o Does your teen need space, company, faith, comfort, information, exercise…? 
  
  o Consider doing something to help – research shows that volunteering improves mood.
How To Help Teens Cope

• **DO: Provide other sources of support.**
  o Therapists
  o School Counselors
  o Crisis lines (2-1-1 in Contra Costa County)
  o Text “START” to 741741
  o National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-TALK
How To Help Teens Cope

• **DO: Keep the conversation going.**
  - We are going to be doing this for a while – check in periodically.
  - Regular family meetings versus a more casual approach – do what’s best for your family.
  - Take advantage of having more time for conversations.
How To Help Teens Cope

• **DO: Be patient, sensitive and open-minded.**
  o Their losses may seem small compared to your fears but they are real issues for them.
  o Give focused attention.
  o Recognize what a gift it is to get this time to connect with your teen.
Conclusion

• Your understanding of grief and loss will help you guide your family beyond this pandemic.

• This is a difficult time for all families and there is no handbook.

• Do the best you can – your teen will see that you are trying your best.

• If you make a mistake, you will have opportunities to try again.

• Teens are resilient and never cease to amaze us!
Questions?

Type your questions into the Chat box