

## **The Problem of Facing Death**

Most people think of death and dying in relation to adults, particularly to the elderly. But adolescents must often deal with the prospect of death as well.

Young people are faced with the necessity of coping with a very "adult" problem at a very young age, a process that often carries with it many profound and difficult results.

### **I. The Effects of Facing Death**

A young person who is facing the prospect of death will, like anyone, experience a wide range of different emotions.

#### **A. The Five Stages of Grief**

**1. Denial**—The person may refuse to believe that he or she is dying.

**2. Anger**—The [youth] may question why this is happening. Can result in anger.

**3. Bargaining**—This is usually an attempt to postpone death. . . . The bargaining is usually done in secrecy, with God.

**4. Acceptance**—When the dying person works through the feelings and conflicts that have arisen, he or she may now be ready to accept the fact that death will soon come.

Numerous other effects, physical as well as emotional and psychological, will be experienced at various (or all) points throughout the five stages of grief.

#### **B. Physical Effects**

1- Difficult breathing marked by sighing and tightness in the throat

2-

3- Digestive symptoms including:

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Other physical symptoms are likely to include sleeplessness or too much sleep, headaches, and uncontrollable and often unexpected weeping.

#### **C. Emotional Effects**

##### **1- Fear.**

Fear will, of course, be a likely response to the prospect of dying. The young person will not only fear the actual death, he or she may (quite naturally) fear what will happen as the illness progresses. He or she also may fear the pain that might be expected.

2- Guilt. Though a young person may know, cognitively, that the illness or condition threatening his or her life is no one's fault, the inability to accept a seemingly unexplainable event or diagnosis may lead him or her to assume some measure of guilt.

3- Helplessness. The prospect of death as the result of a life-threatening disease or condition will likely leave the sufferer (as well as those around him or her) feeling helpless.

4- Resentment. Frequently a young person who is facing the prospect of a terminal illness and / or death will display resentment, particularly to those who are closest and most helpful.

5- Doubt. A common reaction among those facing terminal illness and death is to ask, "Why?"

### **III. The Biblical Perspective of Facing Death**

The Bible is straightforward about death. It presents death realistically, sometimes in detail. God's Word depicts death as the universal experience of humankind.

The Bible describes Job's longing for death, Hezekiah's bargaining to forestall death, Jesus' recoiling in the face of a cruel death, and Paul's facing death.

Because of God's holiness, sinful man cannot spend eternity with him. To permit this would be totally inconsistent with God's holy nature. This state is called "spiritual death." Every one of us deserves to experience spiritual death, because not one of us can meet God's standards of perfection. "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23).

The good news is= \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.

A Christian can know (not hope) that if he should die, he would immediately be with Christ. . . .

2 Corinthians 5:8

*8 We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord.*

What lies beyond the grave for a believer? Jesus said, "*In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.*"

From the Bible, God's Word, we can know this much about the place called Heaven:

- Heaven is a place of rest (Rev. 14:13).

- Heaven is a place without pain, weeping, or mourning (Rev. 21:4).
- Heaven is a place of total joy in the presence of the Lord (Acts 2:28).
- Though we will be changed, we will recognize our loved ones (Matt. 17:3, 4; Peter recognized Moses and Elijah).
- Heaven will be more beautiful than anything we can imagine (Rev. 21-22).
- We will be comfortable in heaven, for it will be home (John 14:2) 9

#### **IV. How Should We Respond to the Teenager Who Faces Death?**

##### **A. LISTEN.**

##### **B. EMPATHIZE.** Olson writes:

Counseling with the dying . . . causes counselors to confront their own attitudes about death. Successful death-related counseling requires counselors to be mindful of their own frailty.

##### **C. AFFIRM.**

There should be an open acceptance of the feelings, thoughts and emotional releases expressed by the [teen].

There is no room for judgmental platitudes such as: "You've cried enough now. It's time to pull yourself together". "You don't have to be so worried. I am sure that everything will be okay." These types of remarks are most likely to do more damage than good for the counselee.

##### **D. DIRECT.**

The concerned adult can also help by directing the young person in the following areas:

- 1- Pray for the youth and comfort him or her with God's Word, being careful not to preach nor to spout pious platitudes.
- 2- Sensitively lead him or her to call upon God's resources in prayer; lead the young person to turn to God, confide in Him, trust Him, and seek strength from Him.
- 3- Help the youth make decisions, particularly those directly related to his or her condition.
- 4- Provide practical help—rides to the doctor, helpful books, etc.

How can we help young people who are dying?

(1a). Develop Healthy Attitudes in the Home.

When parents are open and honest about death, children learn that this is an issue to be faced honestly and discussed openly

(2b). Anticipating and Learning about Death.

Death education is a relatively new but growing emphasis. In schools, churches, and other places, people are learning to talk about death (including their own deaths), and to discuss such issues as how the terminally ill face death, how people grieve, [etc.].

(3c). Anticipatory Grieving. When people develop terminal illnesses, families and friends frequently pretend that all will be well, and there is no talk of "leave-taking." When patients and families can talk about the possibilities of imminent death and can be honest about their sadness, the subsequent grief process is less likely to be pathological. . . .

(4d). Theological Understanding. . . .

The Bible says a great deal about death, the meaning of life, the reality of the promise of eternal life with Christ for believers, and the pain of mourning.

**D. ENLIST.** It is important to enlist the participation of a young person--even one who is facing the possibility of death.

Guide the youth to make some decisions, such as what treatments and / or medications he will or will not use, what she wants to say to family and friends, unfinished projects or unmet goals he wants to complete, even what his or her funeral might be like.

The dying young person must make sure prepared for eternity.

**E. REFER.** The youth worker, pastor, or teacher should be careful to work in cooperation with the young person's parents, and all concerned adults should be sensitive to the possible contribution that a professional Christian counselor, who is a Christian, could make to the dying young person.

## **Dealing With Grief**

Death touches many teens and preteens. Many experience the death of a grandparent. Some lose a parent to cancer or other disease. Some must deal with the loss of a sibling. Others endure the death of a friend, an acquaintance from school, or a teacher.

### **I. Causes of Grief**

Grief is an experience of deprivation and anxiety which can show itself physically, emotionally, cognitively, socially and spiritually.

#### **Any loss can bring about grief:**

divorce, retirement from a job, amputations, death of a pet or plant, departure of a child to college or of a pastor to some other church, moving from a friendly neighborhood, selling one's car, losing a home or valued object, loss of a contest or athletic game, health failures, and even the loss of confidence or enthusiasm.

#### **ALSO:**

Doubts, the loss of one's faith, the waning of one's spiritual vitality, or the inability to find meaning in life can all produce a sadness and emptiness which indicate grief. Indeed, whenever a part of life is removed there is grief.

As Christians we take comfort in the certainty of the resurrection, but this does not soften the emptiness and pain of being forced to let go of someone we love. When we experience loss by death grievers are faced with an absolute, unalterable, irreversible situation. What is it? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.

Somehow, adults seem to think that young people do not feel the pain as much. Of course, this is not true.

Young people who are confronted with the death of a friend or loved one face the difficult task of coping with a somewhat "adult" problem while they are still struggling toward adulthood. Coping mechanisms are often undeveloped in the young person.

Counseling professionals agree that, while grief is natural, understandable, and necessary, it is not always healthy. **Normal grief**, which can be quite severe, often involves: "intense sorrow, pain, loneliness, anger, depression, physical symptoms and changes in interpersonal relations, all of which comprise a period of deprivation and transition that may last for as long as three years or more.

Normal grief leads eventually to restored mental and emotional well-being.

**Ross states 5 stages of grief:**

1. Denial—The person may refuse to believe that [the death has occurred.
2. Anger—The [youth] may question why the death occurred. When the answer is not apparent, he or she may lash out in anger at the seeming unfairness of it all.
3. Bargaining—This is usually an attempt to postpone [an imminent] death [or "cut a deal" that will lessen the pain of grief or the reality of the separation]. . . . The bargaining is usually done in secrecy, with God.
4. Depression—When the . . . person faces the reality of . . . [the] death, depression often sets in. . . .
5. Acceptance—When the . . . person works through the feelings and conflicts that have arisen, he or she may now be ready to accept the fact [of the] death.'

Pathological grief typically differs from normal grief in its depth (the symptoms of grief are much more intense), duration (the grief endures far longer), and destination (it does not lead to mental and emotional health but to further psychological problems).

Collins points out that several things tend to contribute to grieving that is pathological:

- Beliefs (the absence of religious beliefs)
- Background and personality ("People who are insecure, dependent, unable to control or express feelings and prone to depression often have more difficulty handling their grief.")
- Social environment (Social attitudes toward death that encourage the denial or quick dispatch of grief—whether communicated by a family, region, ethnic tradition, or society in general—can greatly influence mourners' ability to cope with grief.)
- Circumstances accompanying the death (An untimely death, a tragic mode of death, the closeness of the survivor to the deceased, and other circumstances may intensify the grieving process and incite a pathological response.)

**II. The Causes and Effects of Grief**

We are not just talking about grief that comes because of a death, it could be resulting from a broken dating relationship. These effects can be intense, but they are nonetheless normal and usually healthy.

### **A. Physical Effects**

- Difficult respiration marked by sighing and tightness in the throat
- Feelings of physical exhaustion and lack of physical strength and endurance
- Digestive symptoms, including altered sense of taste, loss of appetite, insufficient salivary production and hollow feeling in the stomach.
- Sleeplessness or too much sleep, headaches and uncontrolled crying.

### **B. Emotional Effects**

1- Fear. "Fear and anxiety," writes Olson, "are common reactions during the grieving process.

2- Helplessness. Death is irreversible; mourners often become keenly aware of their powerlessness to prevent or reverse it.

3- Anger. Anger is a normal and frequent reaction to the loss of a friend or loved one. It may be directed at the deceased for dying, for "deserting" the youth.

4- Loneliness.

This involves a feeling of abandonment. While some adolescents react to grief with anger, others withdraw into themselves.

5-Doubt.

A common reaction to death is to ask, "Why?" It is natural at such times to seek some explanation, some understanding of the possible reasons for our loss.

We just do not have the answers to that question.

6- Relief.

When death comes after a period of disability or illness, the mourner often reacts with a sense of relief; the agony of waiting is over.

## **III. The Biblical Perspective of Grief**

### **A. Old Testament Examples of Grief**

In the Old Testament, we read of God's presence and comfort as we "walk through the valley of the shadow of death" (Ps. 23:4).

We read descriptions of people grieving in times of loss and trouble (Ps. 6:5-7; 137:1, 5, 6; 2 Sam.12); we learn that God strengthens grievers (Ps. 119:28).

**Psalms 6:5-7**

*5 For in death there is no remembrance of thee: in the grave who shall give thee thanks?*

*6 I am weary with my groaning; all the night make I my bed to swim; I water my couch with my tears.*

*7 Mine eye is consumed because of grief; it waxeth old because of all mine enemies.*

**Psalms 137:1**

*137 By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion.*

Jesus the Messiah is described as "a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief.

**Isaiah 53:3-4**

*3 He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not.*

*4 Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.*

**B. New Testament Verses on Grief**

**1. Christ has changed the meaning of grieving.**

There are many nonbelievers who grieve without any hope for the future. For them, death is the end of a relationship—forever. But... the Christian does not believe that.

I Cor.15:4 and I Thess.4- two clearest passages on this subject.

In the

two clearest New Testament passages on this subject

(1 Cor. 15 and 1 Thess. 4),

Those fallen asleep will come back with Jesus.

The dead will be raised incorruptible.

**WHY IS PHYSICAL DEATH STILL PRESENT?**

Physical death is still present because the devil has the power of death.

Calvary has defeated the power of death.

(1 Thess. 4:17; Heb. 2:14, 15; 2 Tim. 1:10; John 11:25, 26).

**1 Thessalonians 4:17**

*17 Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.*

**2 Timothy 1:10**

*10 But is now made manifest by the appearing of our Saviour Jesus Christ, who hath abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel:*



**John 11:25-26**

*25 Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live:*

*26 And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this?*

This knowledge is comforting, but it does not eliminate the intense pain of grief and the need for comfort.

**2. Christ has demonstrated the importance of grieving.**

Jesus preached his Sermon on the Mount and spoke about grieving: "Blessed are those that mourn," he said, "for they shall be comforted" (Matt. 5:4).

When Lazarus died, Jesus was troubled and deeply moved. He accepted, without comment, the apparent anger that came from Mary, Lazarus's sister, and he wept with the mourners. Jesus knew that Lazarus was about to be raised from the dead, but the Lord still grieved.

He also withdrew and grieved when he learned that John the Baptist had been executed (Matt. 14:12-21).

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus was "deeply grieved" (Matt. 26:38), perhaps with an anticipatory grief.

David had grief as he watched his infant son die (2 Sam. 12:15-23).

Even for the Christian, then, grief is normal and healthy.

**IV. The Response to the Problem of Grief**

1- REFER

2- LISTEN.

3-EMPATHIZE.

4- AFFIRM.

5-DIRECT.

6-ENLIST. As suggested above, one way to help the grieving youth might be to elicit his or her response to the question, "How are you going to deal with this . . .

7-REFER. While parents and other caring adults must be involved in helping a young person cope with grief, other resources are often necessary.