



Understanding Young Adult Grief

Young adults, ages 19-29, are in a formidable stage of life with decisions regarding career and education, relationships, branching out and experiencing life in new and exciting ways. Daily living is a constant balancing act among many demanding activities such as school, jobs, family and friends. In the midst of growth and newfound independence, some are faced with the death of a loved one. Young adults may often seek support and find it difficult to understand their own grief while navigating this new phase of life.

During a time of growing independence, grief can feel complicated

Friends can say the wrong thing or nothing at all

In your peer group, you may be the first person experiencing a significant loss by death. Some friends may be more comfortable reaching out, listening, offering to meet or bringing food. Other friends may seem to forget about you, as they don't know what to say and the topic of death and loss makes them uncomfortable. You may be surprised by a friend who steps up more than you expected or by a friend who retreats when you least expect it.

What to do?

Grief can be isolating and it's important to have people in your life who are supportive and accepting. Identify those people in your family and friend groups to who you can reach out for connection. Consider both online and in-person support groups.

Sometimes random ordinary days are the hardest

While you expect significant milestone days to be challenging...birthdays, anniversaries, major holidays... sometimes it is a day with no special significance that can be unexpectedly difficult. Maybe you hear a song or you see a person on the street who reminds you of them. Suddenly and unexpectedly, you feel a wave of emotion wash over you which can affect you not only in that moment, but for several days following.

What to do?

Feel your feelings. If you can't let your emotions outwardly show in that moment, check back in with yourself as soon as you can. Breathe...inhale deeply through your nose into your abdomen. Exhale through your mouth slowly and deliberately until you are able to calm yourself a bit.

Your emotions can feel confusing and overwhelming

Grief can sometimes make you feel powerless. The feelings of anxiety, sadness, anger and loss can stop you in your tracks. Some days you feel immersed in your emotions while other days they can leave you feeling numb. However, other days you can feel a sense of peace and happiness. It can be disconcerting to experience such a broad spectrum of unexpected strong emotions each day.

What to do?

Show yourself compassion and grace. You are likely experiencing these emotions for the first time and are learning each day. Talk to yourself using your name with positive self-affirmations such as "It's normal to be overwhelmed Jamie, hang in there".

Self-care is extra important

Taking time for yourself becomes less of a luxury but rather, more of a necessity. Perhaps you may find what you used to do for self-care and relaxation, now to be inadequate. Perhaps explore new things, be open to new alternatives that help you center and support yourself.

What to do?

Ask your friends what they do to treat themselves and ask them to recommend podcasts, movies, exercise videos, favorite recipes or favorite foods. Ideally, ask them if they will help give you a respite and do something fun with you.

Understanding Young Adult Grief ... *continued*

You miss not only what was but what would have been

You are about to start a new job, move into a new apartment, decorate for the holidays....and you realize with this new start that you want to share that news and those moments with your loved one. However, you can't anymore. At least not in the same ways that you always have.

What to do?

Remind yourself that it's normal to grieve not only the death of your loved one but the loss of experiencing future events with them. Imagine what they would say to you or how they would celebrate or support you in those moments. Think about a way to include them by carrying a favorite photo, journaling or maintaining a special tradition in a new way.

You wonder how and when to share with others

Young adults go through several transitions in a short span of time...moving into a new apartment, going to school, starting a new job, beginning to date. In each situation, you need to decide when and how to share this now central part of your life story; that you are grieving a death. Sometimes, you may want to be fully transparent and share this news openly. Other times, you may feel awkward revealing this part of yourself and don't want to have to face others' reactions.

What to do?

Setting boundaries is healthy. Decide who to tell about your loss and when to tell them. Take time to sit and think through what feels right for you and prepare yourself for others' possible responses and to set personal boundaries.

Grieving and healing isn't a linear process

Grief isn't something you work through step-by-step to reach a logical conclusion or end point. It's a messy journey with steps forward, steps back and side steps. It can be frustrating to have good days or weeks followed by more difficult times. You can feel stuck or like you're spinning in circles. You may wonder if you are doing something wrong. However, there is no right or wrong ways to grieve. It is as unique a process as your personal fingerprint.

What to do?

Give yourself permission to grieve in your own way and in your own time. Celebrate the good days openly, honestly and without guilt. Even if intimidating, ask for help on the bad days.

Your grief affects more than just how you feel

After the death of your loved one, you may expect to be sad. What you may not have been expecting is the loss of appetite, poor focus, foggy thinking, fatigue and lack of motivation. Your body, mind, and spirit are all collectively grieving in concert, affecting you as a whole person.

What to do?

Take care of your body with proper nutrition, movement and exercise, and staying hydrated. Perhaps try different forms of white noise or other sleep aids to ensure you are getting enough rest. Feed your spirit and express yourself through writing, listening to music, drawing, photography or coloring.

The Center for Loss and Bereavement facilitates a Young Adult Grief Support Group on a bi-weekly basis as well as provides 1:1 counseling designed to meet your developmental grief needs. Please visit our website for inquiry and space availability.