parents' support system in the neighbourhood. In some cases, they may already be part of that network. Some parents need no more than the assurance that they will be welcome at the school at any time; others appreciate an invitation to a specific event. A few may need gentle weaning from the school. However, all should be made to feel that the original support will continue beyond the time of the death.

There remain the marks of a child in school: his name on a list, his belongings, his books. There is no need for any of them to be whisked away; it is probably better to remove them gradually over a period of several weeks. Some memories can be consciously kept through photographs, and perhaps more powerfully, through casual conversations: 'Do you remember the day Billy brought his mouse to school and we couldn't catch it?'

A death always brings special sadness to a school. If it has been anticipated, however, it need not be devastating and may lead to psychological growth.


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# Helping Teenagers and Young Adults Cope with the Death of a Parent


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The death of a parent is hard to bear at any age. Whatever the ages of the child and parent concerned, it will almost always result in a shift in self-perception, a reappraisal of the relationship with the deceased, and the often painful realisation that the possibilities for conciliation, reparation and explanation are now over. In my work interviewing and counselling teenagers and young adults[1], I have found that this age group is likely to face particular difficulties in coping with parental bereavement. In the short term, death and grief are incompatible with the many other demands and pressures on young people, and in the long-term, denied or unresolved grief can be the source of a range of problems in adult life.

Until recently the needs of young adults coping with a parent's death have gone relatively unheeded. Although literature on this kind of bereavement has been available for some years now in the United States, Britain has lagged behind. In her book, 'Aspects of Grief'[2], Jane Littlewood asserts that, 'despite the relative frequency of parental deaths, little research has been conducted regarding the impact of these deaths upon adult children.' Teenagers and people in their early twenties, in particular, fall between the two stools of research into child and adult bereavement. Yet they are an especially vulnerable group, who are even more than most in need of proper support, understanding and recognition in coping with death.

The death of a parent at this age represents not only the loss of a central figure in a young person's life, but also a fundamental part of their identity. A parent's death shatters both their world view and their innate sense of self, isolating them from friends and family, and making all the normal business of being young seem remote, disloyal (to the memory of the dead parent) and impossibly demanding.

### An isolated group

Adequate support, whether formal or informal, is still singularly lacking for this age group and feelings of isolation and abandonment on the death of a parent are exacerbated by the absence of support and recognition.

Feelings of isolation are commonly expressed, isolation both from the peer group and from older adults with whom they come in contact, eg teachers, employers and relatives. A recurring theme is the painful loneliness these young people experience after the death of a parent. Many of them describe the feeling that there was no-one to talk to, that no-one would want to listen to what they needed to say, and that articulating their feelings was dangerous because it might lead to a greater degree of isolation. The tension between needing to talk and fearing the effects of expressing their grief preoccupies many young people. The reasons for the social isolation experienced by the young bereaved person are various. Incompatible notions in our society about what it is to be young and what it is to be bereaved certainly do not help, and a burgeoning youth culture has undoubtedly contributed to making this an awkward age group, isolated from younger children and older adults. Young people themselves are often wary of adults, and inclined to feel misunderstood or patronised by them.

In the context of a bereavement, older people, uncertain how to approach this age group, instead take refuge in the widespread misconception that the young are resilient and will soon 'get over it'. School teachers, college tutors and employers are also often reluctant to broach the subject, nervous about the overlap between personal and professional roles. Friends of their own age, however well-meaning, seldom have experi-

ence of bereavement and have little idea how to help. As a result, the bereaved young person may find himself very isolated: older people may appear unapproachable, and may in reality be keeping their distance, while the peer group may be unintentionally insensitive and unhelpful.

A combination of these factors can leave the bereaved young person with no external validation of their loss and no-one to turn to for help in coping with their sorrow. While the non-bereaved young should be encouraged to be understanding and tolerant of bereaved friends, the onus for offering support must fall to older adults. It is therefore ironic and unfortunate that those best placed to provide informal, low-key support are often the ones who may in fact unwittingly be putting pressure on young people to conceal their grief.

**Problems in the family**

As well as being isolated from their peer group and older adults, bereaved young people may experience feelings of alienation from other members of their own family. It is therefore wrong to assume that young people will be able to fall back on their families for support. The remaining parent is likely to be preoccupied with his or her own loss and unable to provide much emotional or practical support. Many bereaved teenagers find themselves in the peculiar and disturbing position of being the ones giving support to their remaining parent. They are also in many cases expected or obliged to take on additional responsibilities for younger siblings, who therefore represented an additional burden rather than a source of support.

In addition, it is within the confines of a grieving family that many young people will fully confront, for perhaps the first time, the uniqueness of their relationship with the deceased. The nuances of the parent-child connection are subtle and complex and intensely personal: within the same family, one child may be grieving for an ambitious mother, another for an adored friend and guide; a son may have shared his father's sense of humour while his younger sister found the same man's teasing, hurtful and upsetting. The relationship that is being mourned will be unique to the particular parent and child involved. If they are to find a way through their sorrow, teenagers and young adults need to be able to acknowledge the uniqueness of what they have loved and lost.

**A relationship in flux**

The death of a parent is particularly difficult to come to terms with for people in their teens and early twenties because of the complexity of the relationship they are mourning. It is essentially a relationship in flux. The emotions that exist between a parent and child at this time are often turbulent and complex to handle, even when a parent is alive.

To mourn effectively, the bereaved must recognise what has been lost, but to do so is not easy at precisely the time when the relationship between parent and child is at its most fluid and most fraught. Dr. Tony Walters in his book, 'Funerals and How to Improve Them'[3], makes the point that: 'It is not the quality but the intensity of the relationship with the deceased that is crucial, and the hardest grief can be for those close family members with whom you did not get on'.

For teenagers and young adults, engaged in the fragile and often tempestuous business of renegotiating the boundaries between themselves and their parents, the task of grieving for a dead parent can be awesome. The anger, resentment, frustration and hostility which often accompany this process of disentangling from one's parents and establishing a more autonomous identity, are compounded by the equally complicated emotions normally associated with grief.

After a bereavement, unresolved tensions in the relationship with the deceased can lead to acute feelings of guilt, regret, shame, unrealistic responsibility, self-hatred and anxiety. The bereaved child can be left with an urgent need to resolve the difficulties, but neither the practical nor the emotional means to do so. The ambivalent and contradictory feelings towards the parent, which the bereaved young adult now has no chance of resolving in a maturing relationship, can in turn block the process of mourning. It can be very difficult for young people to recognise that their behaviour prior to their parent's death was in fact normal.

**A time of change and loss**

Adolescence is a period of transition which shares much in common with a bereavement. It is a time when young people will be sloughing off parts of their identity and exploring new aspects of themselves. Mood swings, anger, guilt, depression, impatience and impetuousness are all emotional states common to the bereaved and to the adolescent. Learning to live with the death of a parent involves changes and losses in terms of both self-identity and world view. So too does making the transition from childhood to adulthood.

One of the major difficulties for young people coping with a parent's death is this simultaneous burden of two kinds of bereavement. They are bereft not only of their parent, but also of parts of themselves and of the once familiar world that they inhabited as children. Although young people can appear to expend a great deal of energy in acts of rebellion against the child's world on the one hand and the adult's rule on the other, they nevertheless have a deeply vested interest in the solidity of exactly the structures they are in the process of rejecting. A parent's death removes this solid structure from beneath the fledgling adult's feet, making it hard to take even the minor steps associated with this stage in life.

Leaving school is a kind of loss, so is leaving home, moving house, bidding old friends farewell, ending a relationship or changing job. Young people are already experiencing myriad minor bereavements as they make this journey of maturation, losing parts of themselves and the world around them. A parent's death at the same time strikes a double blow. It is an additional loss and shock in a time of already considerable shock and loss.

**Facing the outside world**

There are many pressures on young people, quite apart from the need to grieve for a dead parent. Studying for exams, leaving school, starting work or going to college, moving away from home to live on one's own or with friends for the first time, making new friendships and relationships—all these are part of the normal businss of being young.

But the momentum out into the world is severely disrupted for the young person also struggling to come to terms with the death of a parent. One teenager said she felt as if her life had been 'derailed'. In facing the various tasks of maturation, the bereaved young adult needs all the help he or she can get. Returning to school or work after the funeral may be a traumatic experience, but so too may breaking up with a girlfriend eight months later, or leaving home a year and a half later.

Many young people feel overwhelmed by these double demands. Several choose to defer university entrance for a year, while other leave demanding jobs for less taxing employment. But for every one person who is kind to him or herself, there are three or four who

battle on, doing less well than they had hoped in exams, attempting to stifle feelings of despair, depression and hopelessness.

**Conflicting needs and suppressed grief**

As a result of the immense pressures on people in their teens and early twenties, it is often impossible for them to grieve effectively at the time. There may simply not be enough emotional energy or strength to cope with everything. The struggle for many young adults is not only how to cope with the bereavement itself, but how to cope with it in the context of an unaccommodating world. Grief may often be suppressed or denied, not only because of the individual's lack of emotional resources to mourn effectively, but also because of the insensitive and uncaring environment in which young adults are expected to do their grieving.

Perhaps the hardest aspect of a parent's death for young people—and the one most consistently overlooked and misunderstood—is that death, mourning and grief involve feelings of helplessness and lack of control that are exceptionally hard to cope with at precisely the life stage when the individual needs and expects to feel powerful and in control. The bereaved young adult often simply does not possess the emotional resources necessary to handle the conflict between personal need and social expectation. This profound inner conflict frequently finds expression in self-destructive behaviour, such as eating disorders, sexual difficulties, and drug and alcohol abuse.

The expression of unresolved grief in behavioural problems of this kind is a frequent feature in the experiences of young bereaved adults. Less dramatic, but equally expressive of inner anguish, are difficulties with intimacy, surfacing in a tendency to adhere to destructive relationships, an inability to make close emotional bonds with another person, or acute anxiety surrounding the separation from or absence of a partner.

**The way ahead**

Making the passage from adolescence to adulthood is a slow, demanding and erratic process. So too is the journey through the months and years of grieving. To have to do both at the same time is a considerable undertaking that may require more psychological and emotional resources than the young person has available. Wider recognition of the particular needs of this age group and a greater emphasis on primary and secondary care could go a long way to alleviating this prolonged and unnecessary anguish.

There are a number of ways in which this could be achieved:

- research into the impact of parental death on adolescents
- targeted support of young people through schools and universities
- training of teachers in how to support bereaved pupils
- wider range of teaching aids for raising awareness of the issue in the classroom
- increasing the availability and range of literature on this kind of bereavement in bookshops and libraries
- wider availability and improved access to counselling services and support groups for bereaved young people.


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# Parental Responses to Different Types of Infant Death


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The loss of a child through death may engender different feelings and responses from those evoked by the loss of an elderly relative. One possible explanation for this is that there has been a disruption in the normal 'pecking order' of death. This implies that grandparents are expected to die before parents, who should die before their own children. For parents who lose a young infant, such an event may threaten their perceived ability to have control over their own destiny, and those for whom they are responsible[1]. Also although infants die more commonly than older children, even in developed countries, nevertheless infant death is still a relatively rare event. Therefore, within their community, parents may not have been in contact with anyone who has lost a baby.

Another possible explanation for an intense bereavement reaction following infant death applies particularly to women. This reaction in women may be due, in part, to the normal hormonal changes which occur during pregnancy, delivery and in the first few months following birth. Postnatal depression is well recognised as a clinical syndrome during this time. In such cases, the loss of an infant superimposed on an existing depression may precipitate more profound psychological symptoms[2-4].

**Back row: John Thearle, Bill Foster, Jake Najman**
**Front row: Gary Embelton, John Vance**