

Helping your teen to cope with the loss of a loved one

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The mother of a fifteen-year-old boy called me recently. While on the way to the airport to visit his father, his stepmother called and told him that his father had a massive heart attack that morning and died on the way to the hospital. Instead of getting to enjoy time with his father, he got to go to his funeral.

When "Dave" came home a few days later, he insisted that he was fine. After all, he only saw his father twice a year and had never been close. "Joan" wasn't convinced; as she knew from his cell phone bills and by monitoring his Facebook account that they communicated regularly. She also noticed that he was quieter than usual, wasn't eating much, and spent most of his time in his room.

Joan was worried and encouraged him to talk to a therapist, but Dave was against it. He promised his mom that he would go if he really needed to, but he didn't think it would be necessary. Rather than insist that he see someone right away, she asked that I advise her.

When we met, I suggested that she tell Dave just how sorry she was about his dad and ask if he's ok. I also encouraged her to tell him gently what she'd noticed and let him know she'd be available to talk if he wanted. When people experience trauma, they're often too shocked to talk at first. By letting

him know she'd be open to talking about it, he'd come to her when and if he's ready.

I also reminded her of how it's normal for teens to turn to their friends for support. Even if he only hung out with them and didn't talk about his father at all, he'd benefit from the time with them. I encouraged her to guide Dave toward those friends who would be "there for him," should he want to talk about his father.

When Joan told me how fearful she was that he wasn't talking to her or any other adults, I suggested that she guide Dave toward adults with whom he connects. Perhaps he could talk to relatives, a trusted teacher or coach. Or maybe he'd be open to speaking with his minister. I also suggested that she contact Dave's counselor at school and ask if she would check-in with Dave and offer to talk if he wanted.

I also encouraged her to help Dave keep his regular schedule. As much as death and grief are overwhelming and it's tempting to drop everything, the reality is that life needs to continue. The goal wasn't to ignore the loss and pretend everything is fine. Instead the hope was that by encouraging Dave to study, go to practice, and work after school, she could help him keep his routine and ease his pain.

As much as Dave insisted that he was fine, I encouraged her to keep an eye out for major changes in his behavior. Were she to get any hints of

deep depression, significant drug use, or other more serious choices, I encouraged her to insist that he speak to a professional.

Although it's too soon to tell for sure, it looks

like Dave is coping pretty well with his dad's death. Unfortunately, other teens have a much more difficult time coping with death, and it's important for parents to keep a close eye on how they're doing

and take necessary steps to help them. By doing so, the likelihood increases that their teens will be able to adjust to the tragedy without being completely overwhelmed by the loss.

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