

The Effects on Teenagers' Self-Esteem After Losing Parents

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The death of a parent is considered one of the most painful, if not traumatic, experiences for a child. When death occurs during adolescence, it complicates a teenager's natural process of defining her identity in the world. The tension between seeking independence and reliance on family support tend to magnify the process of bereavement, according to David E. Balk's "Adolescent Encounters with Death, Bereavement, and Coping." In most cases, teenagers in mourning suffer from low self-esteem.

Timeline

How the loss of a parent affects a teenager's self-esteem does not become clear until two years after the death, according to J. William Worden's "Children and Grief: When a Parent Dies." Studies show that the difference in the levels of self-worth of bereaved versus non-bereaved children is minimal one year after the death of a parent. On the second anniversary of a parent's death, the difference increases significantly. Bereaved children report much lower levels of self-esteem.

Behavior

The lowered self-esteem of bereaved teenagers is linked to behavioral problems, such as withdrawal from social activities, acts of aggression or acting out, and impaired performance in school or on the job. Bereaved children also tend to suffer from increased levels of anxiety, depression and guilt. Some adolescents may become more entrenched in the family at a point in life when they need to individuate. Others may rebel or transit into an

adult role that is premature and potentially overwhelming. In addition, teenagers may experience compounding losses, such as a lack of financial support, disrupted familial routines and plans for the future.

Males versus Females

The loss of a parental figure affects the self-esteem of teenage girls to a greater extent than their male counterparts, according to Timothy J. Strauman's "Depression in Adolescent Girls: Science and Prevention." Research indicates that female teenagers assume more emotional responsibility for intimate relationships. When facing the loss of a parent, they tend to gauge their self-worth in a negative manner. Female teenagers have also reported greater anxiety over abandonment than male teenagers.

Violent Death and Resilience

A study done on children whose fathers were killed in the Yom Kippur War revealed an interesting response by bereaved adolescents three to four years after death. While some children became needy or aggressive, others exhibited emotional control and laudable behavior, according to Robert J. Haggerty's "Stress, Risk, and Resilience in Children and Adolescents: Processes, Mechanisms, and Interventions." Because these bereaved children assumed new tasks and responsibilities due to the absence of the parent, they boosted their self-esteem. Sheer necessity forced these children to become highly functioning in order to survive.