

# COMPANION GUIDE



## A Video Essay on Teenage Grief



Chapter 1:  
The Group Session

Chapter 2:  
The Video Essay



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# Introduction

In this two-part DVD, five female teens ranging in age from 16-19 share their stories of loss resulting from the death of their fathers. Chapter I is a 28-minute segment of a teen grief group in action. It is designed to be used inside or outside the traditional school classroom, by youth groups, teen centers, faith communities, parent-child centers, grief support groups, and by hospices offering bereavement education and support. With facilitation, this segment is a useful springboard for discussion.

Chapter II is a 47-minute segment of the teen grief group which includes the facilitators' educational commentary and analyses. It is structured to support educators, health and guidance professionals, and any adult who wants to better understand the nature of grief, particularly as it pertains to teenagers.

The conventional wisdom about grief:

- Grief is unique for each individual
- The intensity and duration of grief is different for each person
- Within each of us is the capacity to heal
- Support helps in the grief process <sup>1</sup>
- “The key to survival is *support, connection, and meaning*”, (Virginia Fry)<sup>2</sup>

## Intended Audiences

For Individual or Group Use

- Young adults
- Adults
- Youth organizations and teen centers
- High schools, especially high school health classes
- Counselors, counseling programs, psychology classes
- Ministers, clergy, theology students, church groups
- Bereavement support groups
- Hospice trainings
- Parent support groups
- Health care staff and volunteers
- Community groups
- College counseling centers, programs/classes on bereavement, loss, adolescence

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<sup>1</sup> The Dougy Center. [Grief Support](http://www.dougy.org/default.asp?pid=6863519website), <http://www.dougy.org/default.asp?pid=6863519website>, (accessed 9/25/07).

<sup>2</sup> Fry, Virginia, [Part of Me Died Too](#), 1995 Dutton, 2005 Edition through [www.HPCCV.org](http://www.HPCCV.org)

# Purpose of the Video

The purpose of ***A Video Essay on Teenage Grief*** is three-fold:

- to prepare teens for the inevitability of change and loss and the subsequent grief
- to provide grief support
- to educate and sensitize the adults who care for them, so they can provide effective support

We hope to reach and support teenagers who are grieving or are in a position to offer peer support to a friend in need. When considering the fact that 90% of children in the United States experience the death of a loved one by age 18, the magnitude of this population comes into clear focus. The film's producers are pleased to share this educational resource with both teenagers and adults in the hope that it will stimulate meaningful dialogue.

## Short and Long Term Benefits of Viewing ***A Video Essay on Teenage Grief***:

- Prepares viewer for change, loss, and the resulting grief
- Offers immediate support during the grieving process
- Emphasizes accessing and utilizing local community support networks as well as one's own inner strengths and resources
- Explains and validates the grieving process, nurtures creative coping skills, reduces isolation
- The modeling of healthy grief responses discourages self-destructive tendencies and encourages healthy choices for grieving individuals
- For those in key support roles, it raises awareness and increases understanding of the normal grief process, thereby increasing the availability and effectiveness of support
- Encourages individuals to reinvest their time and attention toward a healthy future

# Setting the Stage for Viewing

*A Video Essay on Teenage Grief* offers important information to grieving teens and the people who support them. It can be used as an educational tool with individuals and groups. Prior to viewing this DVD, please consider the guidelines below.

## **Guidelines for viewing and discussing *A Video Essay on Teenage Grief***

- To facilitate an atmosphere of open trust between the viewers and the facilitators, counselors, or teacher, please ask viewers to commit to confidentiality in the discussion process.
- Encourage viewers to make themselves comfortable. Make sure that the seating arrangement is comfortable.
- Facilitators should be aware that viewing this DVD may be difficult for vulnerable or actively grieving teens/adults.
- Allow enough time to view either or both chapters, including time for discussion before and after. Facilitators should allow for and address any feelings which arise in the process of viewing.
- Upon completion of the post-viewing discussion, make personal contact with viewers who seem emotionally moved by the DVD, or who you know are actively grieving a loss.

## **An Introduction to the Group**

In this DVD 5 young women share their journey of grief as they attempt to make sense of the loss of their fathers. Students at a high school in rural Vermont, they came together when the guidance counselor recognized their unique circumstances and need for support. After enlisting the expert advice of a local grief counselor and hospice professional, the guidance counselor, Kathy Pelletier, and Virginia Fry, author of *A Part of Me Died Too*, formed a teen grief support group. The teens, whose fathers died from suicide, a drug overdose, a bike accident, and cancer, met weekly for over a year. As they reflect on their experiences, they share what helped them survive, what was not helpful from others who meant well, and how their losses changed their lives. It is their wish that their stories of creative survival and courageous coping will offer hope to other teens touched by loss.

# Suggested Guidelines for Discussion

## High School (ages 13-18)

1. Introduce the subject of the DVD, its principle players, and why it is being shown to your group or individual viewers.
2. After viewing the DVD, facilitate a discussion using stimulating questions. Following are suggestions:
  - What is your reaction to this film?
  - Is there anything that made you uncomfortable?
  - Is there anything that felt reassuring to you?
  - Could you identify with anyone in the film?
  - Where are the male grievers?
  - Do males grieve differently from females?
  - What did you learn from viewing this DVD?
  - Imagine someone close to you has died, what do you think would be helpful responses from your peers? Adults? Your family?
  - How would you show support to someone your age who is grieving the loss of a significant person in their life?
  - How would you find support if you lost a significant person in your life?
  - Identify unhealthy choices teens might make in the midst of grieving?
  - What are healthy choices teens might make in the midst of grieving?
  - Identify the personal attributes that could assist you in the midst of change, loss and grief.
  - What/who are the resources you have at your disposal in times of hardship?
  - What signs of hope did you see?
  - What would give you hope?
3. To facilitate an understanding of change, loss and grief, the following activities are suggested:
  - Brainstorm as a group all of the possible changes and losses that can occur in the life of teens, from everyday losses to grievous losses (from losing your keys to the death of a loved one). Include intangible as well as tangible losses. Intangible examples are: loss of hope, trust, self-confidence, respect.
  - Brainstorm as a group the physical, mental, emotional, behavioral, and spiritual reactions a teenager might commonly have in response to change and loss. These myriad reactions are what we call *grief*. The following list can assist you <sup>3</sup>:

### Physical Reactions

tightness in the throat-difficulty swallowing  
shortness of breath  
sleep changes: too little/too much  
weight and appetite changes

### Emotional Reactions

shock  
numbness  
disbelief  
anxiety

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<sup>3</sup> O'Toole, Donna, *Facing Chang: What Is This Thing Called Grief*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2004. Burnsville, N.C.: Compassion Press, 1995.

tiredness  
deep sighing  
feeling weak  
energized: feeling strong/invincible  
muscle tension  
pounding heart  
headaches and stomach aches  
increased activity—can't sit still  
decreased activity—no energy  
increased sensitivity to sights/sounds  
slowing of reactions  
increased number of colds/infections  
taking on symptoms or behaviors of the  
person who is absent

### **Mental Reactions**

difficulty concentrating  
continuously thinking about the loss  
thinking that the loss didn't really happen  
difficulty in making decisions  
low self esteem: feeling worthless  
believing you were responsible for the loss  
increased/decreased dreams  
increased nightmares  
thinking everyone watches you  
thinking you are different from everyone else  
self-destructive thoughts  
seeking creative expression through music, writing, art

### **Behaviors and Social Reactions**

searching for what was lost  
withdrawing from friends and family  
withdrawing from social activities  
being constantly active  
clinging  
seeking approval and assurance from others  
excessive touching or withdrawal from touch  
aggressiveness  
overachieving—trying to be super good  
underachieving—trying to be super bad  
changes in grades at school  
being preoccupied and forgetful  
being confused about time and space  
bumping into people and things

fear  
betrayal  
emptiness  
apathy  
impatience  
sadness  
powerlessness  
agitation  
excitement  
despair  
uncertainty  
shame  
guilt  
thankfulness  
relief  
loneliness  
isolation  
anger  
strength  
weakness  
feeling uncared for  
feeling disconnected  
uselessness  
helplessness

crying  
blaming others  
being apathetic—dropping out

### **Spiritual Reactions**

feeling lost and empty  
feeling forsaken, abandoned, judged or condemned by God  
questioning a reason to go on living  
feeling dislocated—as if you don't belong  
questioning your religious beliefs  
extreme pessimism or optimism  
feeling the presence of God in your life  
feeling the presence of the person who died in your life  
needing to give or receive forgiveness  
needing to give or receive punishment  
feeling spiritually connected to what/who was lost

4. Brainstorm healthy and unhealthy choices in response to grief.

### **Adults:**

An adult can play a significant role in accompanying a teen on the journey through grief. Whether parent, teacher, counselor or friend, a caring adult can help a grieving teenager come to terms with buffeting forces of grief. Initially by recognizing and validating the loss and then through attentive interaction, an empathetic adult can offer an important outlet. Working through the grieving process can be hard work, yet the lessons learned and friendships forged can be long lasting.

1. Discuss the context for viewing the program. What goals or objectives do you have? (For example: to become more familiar with the nature of teenage grief and to identify healthy coping strategies.)

2. View Chapter 2 and consider some of the following questions:

- What about the video was most challenging, most difficult?
- What was most reassuring, most hopeful?
- What losses would be most difficult to talk about?
- What psychological and/or social issues are the participants dealing with?
- Can you identify with these teens and/or facilitators?
- Did the viewing trigger any unresolved grief for you?
- What are some effective ways to validate a teenager's feelings?

3. Please make use of any new found awareness. By accompanying a teenager through grief, you are giving one of life's most precious gifts—yourself.<sup>4</sup>

## What Teens Have Taught Us

With the exception of infancy, no developmental period is as full of change (and loss) as the teen years. The gradual transition from childhood to adulthood can be both exciting and daunting in its complexity. While leaving the relative security of childhood, and undergoing the process of separation from their parents, teens are particularly vulnerable to the emotional impact of sudden loss and change.

Although teenagers fully understand that death is irreversible, it is commonly seen as distant and impersonal. If a family member or loved one dies, teens can experience an overwhelming sense of grief. An initial feeling of shock or numbness over such a loss is a healthy and normal response. Unfortunately, teens are not always encouraged to share their grief, or aren't sure who to turn to with such strong and often conflicting emotions. A student's ability to concentrate and focus on academic demands may be severely hampered by grief. Withdrawal, isolation and depression can often follow. At such times, it's essential that a grieving teen find safe and supportive outlets for their emotional needs.

While peer support can be invaluable through the grieving process, many bereaved teens are met with indifference by their inexperienced peers. Caring adults can communicate that strong reactions to loss are normal and healthy. With patience and understanding, adults can help support teens through this vulnerable time and help make the experience a valuable part of a teen's personal growth and development.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Wolfelt, Alan. Center For Loss and Life Transition: Griefwords: Horan & McConaty's Funeral website. <http://www.centerforloss.com/griefwords.php>. (accessed 10/3/07)

<sup>5</sup> Wolfelt, Alan. Center For Loss and Life Transition: Griefwords. <http://www.centerforloss.com/griefwords.php>. (accessed 10/3/07)