

WHAT ABOUT GOD?

TEENS, SPIRITUALITY AND GRIEF

One of the biggest changes that occurs during adolescence is the development of abstract thought. Because teens are able to think about concepts that they can't see or touch, they are developmentally set up to wrestle with bigger questions about God and their beliefs than they ever have before. This is even more true for teens who are grieving, as these questions become more personal and immediate. Here are some things to consider when talking with teens about God and grief:

- **Expect and make room for big questions**

Teens are likely to wonder about God's involvement, power, and choices in what happened to their person and to them. They may ask questions that adults also struggle to answer, such as "Did God make this person die? Did He allow this to happen and choose not to stop it? Why?" Don't panic, even if these questions feel negative or push against the foundation of faith they have. Listen to your teen, and let them know it's okay to ask hard questions. Part of a healthy relationship

with God is the ability to ask questions and express negative emotions. You don't need to necessarily offer answers or perspective. Begin by listening to your teen, reflecting their questions back to them, and reminding them that you, their faith community, and God understand why they have a wide range of emotions right now. If they ask directly for your views or how you have sorted through these questions, talk to them about your own journey, as well as your conclusions.

- **Make space for shifts in your teen's engagement in and views on faith**

Some teens who are grieving find comfort in faith, and may move toward God or practice their beliefs much more actively than they did before the death occurred. They may find comfort in faith practices or with their church community. Others may push away, expressing more anger or confusion. Remember that teen responses tend to be extreme, and may change often. These shifts are a part of normal grief as well as normal development. Maintain boundaries you feel comfortable with around this, while allowing your teen to be where they are. For example, you may require that your teen attend church with the family, but allow them to choose whether they want to be in the adult service or teen programming.

- **Lean on outside support**

As teens naturally shift away from focus on their immediate family, they may want to take their questions or emotions around faith to others as well. Let your teen know that you want to hear and be involved in this aspect of their life, but foster other supports. Consider connecting your teen with a mentor, youth leader or other trusted adult to help them work through how their faith connects with their grief. Talk with your teen to see if there are other people who might invest in their faith journey. If your teen is pushing away from their faith, try to maintain a positive connection with the faith community while decreasing the pressure. This may mean talking with the youth pastor privately about how your teen and family are handling the loss, or connecting with a possible mentor about spending time with your teen without pushing spiritual conversation they don't feel ready for.