Helping Teens and Their Families Cope with Terminal Illness: An Interview with The Prevention Researcher

During adolescence, many young people experience the illness and death of a family member, friend, or loved one. Peer support can be especially important for teens and their families in navigating through illness, grief, and loss. Patricia Ellen, M.A, with the Center for Grieving Children in Portland Maine, discusses ways of helping teens and their families cope with terminal illness in a new interview with The Prevention Researcher, the quarterly journal focused on successful adolescent development.

Eugene, OR (PRWEB) August 29, 2012 -- “What we’ve found is that when people are going through something like an illness, if they’re with other people going through the same thing, just the sharing your own personal wisdom on how they’re coping helps them get through it better and, with kids, it helps them feel less isolated,” says Patricia Ellen, M.A., with the Center for Grieving Children in Portland, Maine. “What we do in groups is what’s called peer support,” notes Ellen in an interview with The Prevention Researcher.

Patricia Ellen is coordinator of The Tender Living Care Program at the Center for Grieving Children and serves as Outreach Director at the Center presenting workshops to children, parents and professionals on supporting children through illness, grief and loss. As an educator, workshop leader, and interfaith minister, Ellen has worked with children and families in a variety of settings for over 25 years. She is co-author of the book Living with Illness and Finding Hope.

In the interview, Ellen says “very often what happens in families is the illness becomes like the elephant in the living room that nobody wants to talk about, and the children won’t say what they’re feeling, ’cause they’re protecting the parents, and the parents don’t want to say what they’re feeling, because they’re protecting the children.” So a group is “a good place for people to be able to say what they’ve been sitting on for a long time.”

Ellen notes that “with teens, very often teens are great into denial, so a lot of teens will want to avoid it. They’ll want to be doing everything else other than talking about the illness. They also are more reluctant to come to groups than, say, younger children. Then the other thing is that the teens are in a funny place where, developmentally, what a teen’s job is to do is to be breaking away from the family. But when an illness happens in a family, what it does is pulls the teenager back in. So they’re really caught in a bind, that they’re supposed to be breaking away, and they’re also being pulled back in.”

Among the ways to support teens with an ill family member, sibling or friend, Ellen suggests that people “acknowledge that there are a lot of losses already happening when somebody’s ill, even if the person is going to get better, whether it’s loss of the person they knew as they were or change in ability to be present at sports events, a lot of different things, so to, number one, support the actual grieving that’s going on. The other is that people know that there’s absolutely no one right way to get through it.”

Ellen notes that “what we do is, with the peer support model, we follow the lead of the participants. So in the group itself, very often there will be tears, but very often there will often be laughter, or sometimes there will be celebrations.”
“I think what’s really important for people to know is that, in the midst of an illness, families can have amazing experiences and that when they take the time to be able to talk to each other about what they’re feeling and what’s going on, the family, we very often see, really becomes closer,” concludes Ellen.

For a copy of the complete interview with Patricia Ellen on “Coping with Terminal Illness,” link directly to The Prevention Researcher or www.tpronline.org

About The Prevention Researcher

Founded in 1994, The Prevention Researcher is published by the non-profit, Integrated Research Services in Eugene, Oregon. The quarterly journal focuses on successful adolescent development and serves professionals who work with young people in a variety of organizational settings.

Each issue of The Prevention Researcher covers a single topic, presenting the latest adolescent behavioral research and findings on significant issues facing today’s youth. The journal provides information about programs that create supportive environments for youth, strategies for preventing problems affecting adolescents, and resources that help youth-serving professionals.
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