



WinterSpring

Facing Loss, Embracing Life Again -- Together

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How to help a grieving teen

What do teens need?

- **Peer-to-peer bonds**—When teens can share their grief stories with other teens who have similar losses, the healing can be very powerful. Given a safe place to share with rules around confidentiality and respectful treatment, they begin to trust each other and create bonds that can see them through the difficult times. Sharing with each other also empowers them because they each have something to contribute to the whole.
- **Healthy ways to express grief**—Teens need to express their grief. Without good tools, this expression may come out in acting out behaviors, anger, bullying, drug/alcohol use, sexual promiscuity and other anti-social behaviors. Alternatively, tools such as artistic expression (theater, painting, drawing), writing (including journal writing), and healthy physical activities and sports can give them outlets for this important expression of their emotions.
- **Honesty**—As caring adults, being honest about a death helps build trust with a teen. They have the cognitive and abstract ability to understand death and the grief process. They will seek out the truth if they feel it's not coming from you.
- **Understanding**—The grief process is especially difficult for teenagers because of all the other challenges of being a teen. Their grieving may take many different forms, and their emotions may be all over the map. You might experience their anger, despair, confusion, regret, guilt, helplessness, and other difficult emotions. We all grieve differently.
- **Listening without judgment**—Teens have the capability to think deeply and need a way to express their thoughts. Let them talk. Avoid reacting to anything that sounds weird to you as they explore. You can offer your perspective, but it's good to ask permission first.
- **Assurances**—They need supportive and available adults round them. They will fluctuate from needing the adults because the loss has devastated them to exerting their independence because they are teens. Help them to know that you are there when they need the support.
- **Boundaries and routines**—Reasonable and consistent boundaries and routines help teens feel safe. This doesn't mean trying to control them. Giving them potential choices within the boundaries helps them feel like they have some control over their own lives.
- **Respect for their privacy**—Teens need have their own space to retreat to. This is part of their need for independence.
- **Models of healthy grieving**—As a supportive adult, it's important for you to deal with your own grief in healthy ways. It's OK to cry and express other emotions.
- **Healthy eating, sleeping, and exercise habits**—For all of us, our bodies are grieving, too, when there is a death. Eating right, drinking lots of water, and getting exercise help stabilize emotions. Teens need a chance to play, laugh and be active.
- **Companions on their grief journey**—Rather than giving advice and trying to direct their experience, just being with them on the journey is best. Reassure them that the intensity of their feelings will eventually ease.

- **Ways to remember**—Talk about special memories. Create an altar that has pictures and other mementos of the loved one. Suggest they write about the person they lost or do some art work to memorialize that person.
- **To still be a kid**—Sometimes they become little adults, taking on too much responsibility, either because they want to protect the adults in their lives or because the adults expect this of them. Such responsibility can be too much for them at this time.

What else do you need to know about teen grief?

- **Even if the death happened years ago**, children and teens re-experience grief as they grow up. Each cognitive stage of development brings new levels of experience and understanding.
- **There are no “right” and “wrong” ways** to grieve. Sometimes adults express strong opinions about “right” or “wrong” ways to grieve. But there is no correct way to grieve. Coping with a death does not follow a simple pattern or set of rules nor is it a course to be evaluated or graded. There are, however, “helpful” and “unhelpful” choices and behaviors associated with the grieving process. Some behaviors are constructive and encourage facing grief, such as talking with trusted friends, journaling, creating art, and expressing emotion rather than holding it inside. Other grief responses are destructive and may cause long-term complications and consequences. For example, some teens attempt to escape their pain through many of the same escape routes adults choose: alcohol and substance abuse, reckless sexual activity, antisocial behaviors, withdrawal from social activities, excessive sleeping, high risk-taking behaviors, and other methods that temporarily numb the pain of their loss.
- **Their academic performance** may be affected for a period of time. Help them to prioritize their work, talk with teachers, seek out the school counselor, and give them permission to take a lighter load, if possible.
- **Watch for** hopelessness, anger not constructively dealt with, impulsiveness, isolation, strange behaviors, or a sense of helplessness, especially longer term. This might indicate that professional help is recommended.
- **Suicide loss** is especially intense and can give rise to: shock and numbness; hysteria; rage (*This is unfair...why did God let this happen?*); anger at self or at the deceased loved one (*Why did I let this happen? How could s/he do this to me?*); guilt (*I did something to cause the suicide.*); embarrassment and shame (suicide is a disenfranchised loss); denial (*This can't be true.*); and helplessness and feelings of abandonment. This experience can complicate the normal grief process and teens need extra attention/patience to help them through such a difficult loss.

How do words impact teens?

- **Teens are blunt and take words literally.** Most important is our genuine compassion as we speak.
- **Do say**, “I don’t know what to say that will help, but I am here to listen if you want.” Do say, “This must be very difficult for you and I’m here with you.”
- **Don’t say**, “I’m sorry.” Don’t say, “Your loved one is in a better place.” Don’t say, “Now you have to be the man (or woman) of the family.” Don’t say, “I know how you feel.” Don’t say, “You were lucky to have your loved one for as long as you did.” Don’t say, “You’ll get over it soon.”
- **Try to ask questions without overusing, “how did that make you feel?”**—Instead say, “What was that like?” or “Can you say more?” or “How did that affect you?”