



SEEDS OF HOPE

TEEN GRIEF: Navigating Loss During an Already Challenging Time of Life



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Adolescents who experience the death of a family member have unique needs, responses, and perceptions. Developmentally, they may have a more sophisticated level of insightfulness, maturity, empathy, and self-expression than their younger siblings. Simultaneously, they may have strong and significant emotions around the loss and their new reality. Teens typically face many daily pressures through academics, friendships, home and or job responsibilities, and a desire to form both a sense of independence and social belonging. When grief is layered on top of these age-appropriate challenges, they can benefit from support and an understanding of their short and long-term needs.

Adolescent Understanding of Death

- Able to comprehend death concretely - as a permanent, irreversible loss. Also able to process it abstractly - as impacting many areas of their life, identity, relationships, and values.
- Can understand the ways that the entire family has been impacted, as roles, routines, and relationships oftentimes necessarily shift.
- May have conflicted feelings as they remember not only the person who died, but also the unique relationship that they had with that person. Can recall both the positive and hard aspects of memories.
- Likely grieve multiple layers of losses, including how their hopes and visions for the future are altered. Often focus on milestones such as prom, graduation, or the next significant event that their deceased family member will no not be present for.

Common Teen Responses to Grief and Loss

There is a whole range of responses to grief and loss, and no one specific way for a teen to grieve. Teens are unique individuals, and how they express and manage their grief varies based on factors related to their age, race, gender, personality, relationships, prior losses, and family situation.

Even accounting for individual differences, adolescents are at a unique developmental stage in which many experience common, overlapping grief responses such as:

- **Magical thinking:** Imagining things they could have said or done differently, before or following the death, that might have changed the outcome. Feeling regret and self-judgment - looking back and wishing that situations could have been altered.
- **Range of emotions:** They may feel numb at points, and/or have a combination of strong emotions that ebb and flow at varying times. May express a great deal of emotions, or may have times when they focus on their routines and show very little emotion related to the death.
- **Need for predictability and consistency:** They often struggle with the unpredictable or uncontrollable aspects of the death and resulting changes in their day-to-day lives.
- **Increased focus on academics or other interests:** Engagement in activities such as specific studies, sports, or other skills. This helps them to manage emotions and feel some amount of motivation, predictability, and independence.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide to adolescent grief was compiled by The Children's Room, a bereavement center in Arlington, MA, that creates safe, supportive communities so that no child, teen, or family has to grieve alone.

The Parmenter Foundation provides support for compassionate end-of-life care and bereavement programs in MetroWest Boston.

To learn more about The Children's Room:



childrensroom.org

- **Changes in ability to focus:** Decreased ability to concentrate or shifting levels of motivation, as they grapple with emotions and may question their prioritizations in life.
- **Desire for independence and privacy:** Some prefer to separate different parts of their lives by keeping home life distanced from school and social life. Very aware of and selective regarding which peers and adults know details about their person's death.
- **New or different identities:** Shift in self-perceptions and interests, as they explore how their experiences have changed them as an individual and in relation to others. May be drawn towards things that remind them of their person, or away from such reminders.

Each teen will find their own ways of coping with a death, and their responses will likely vary over time. The important considerations are that they have: some level of interest in activities or outlets that feel meaningful, an ability to continue with the majority of day-to-day routines, and a connection to others.

Sources of Support for Grieving Teens

- **Social activities:** Individuals may spend more or less time socially, depending on how comfortable they feel and their personal ways of coping. Some have an increased focus on spending time with peers, which brings some sense of belonging and positive distraction from their grief.
- **Friendships:** Typically teens are less open in sharing emotions with parents/guardians, as they are aware that their family members are also grieving and holding lots of emotion. They may confide more freely with close friends or other trusted individuals outside the family.
- **School:** School routines can bring a sense of normalcy, predictability, and space to refocus on their own needs, interests, and identity. Teachers, coaches, and school mental health professionals can also provide understanding and support by advocating for the student's emotional and academic needs.
- **Therapy:** Some teens benefit from having an understanding, validating, neutral person to speak with one-on-one, as they may otherwise keep their emotions and thoughts inward. Therapy especially is recommended if your teen has difficulty functioning day-to-day or shows other significant, sudden changes in personality.
- **Grief support groups:** Local grief support groups offer a place for teens to connect with peers who have had similar experiences.

Talking with Teens in Preparation for or Coping with Loss

Whether the loss of a close family member is anticipated or sudden, there are specific ways you can support a teen:

- Discuss the situation openly and honestly, and acknowledge that it might not be easy to talk about.
- Help teens anticipate what might happen next, either through an illness or in making arrangements after a death. Acknowledge the unknowns, and agree to share any new information.
- Give the teen an opportunity and space to ask questions, and listen carefully to their responses and concerns. Follow their lead in how much they feel comfortable discussing.
- Include the teen in decisions that are age-appropriate, such as choosing elements of a memorial service or what information will be shared with their school.
- It can be helpful for the adult to share memories or stories to model that it is okay to talk about the person who died. Offer for the teen to talk about the person or how they're feeling anytime they need.
- Find a local support group with peers who "get it."

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