

# How to Support a Teenager who is Grieving

## Adults often make the mistake of assuming that teens can “handle” a death and do not need help

- Teens may be embarrassed to express their grief to friends and might not be receiving the comfort from peers that adults expect.
- Teens may look and sound mature but cannot cope by themselves and need the support of adults around them.

## Help them understand the reality of the death

- Teens will feel guilty or blame themselves. Listen to their concerns and help them understand it was not their fault.

## Address the feelings that the teenager is experiencing

- Even though teens may cover up their emotions and act like they don't care this does not mean they are not upset. Coach the teen as to what behavior is acceptable (feeling angry, crying) and what is not (violence, drinking).
- Grief doesn't feel natural because it may be difficult to control the emotions, thoughts or physical feelings associated with a death. The sense of being out of control may frighten or overwhelm some teens.
- Teens need validation that it is okay to feel a multitude of emotions. They need help to understand the way they feel now won't last forever.

## Avoid pressuring the teen to take on extra responsibilities

- Teens are often encouraged to grow up and mature faster.
- Roles of caregiver, emotional supporter or financial provider will overwhelm the teen and not give them the opportunity to mourn.
- Comments like “be strong,” “keep it together” or “take care of your mother/father” make teens feel like they are not allowed to be sad and grieve.

## There is no time limit for grief resolution

- It is a process, not an event and is unique for each teen.

## Normalize certain grief behaviour

- Teens might feel like they are going crazy or embarrassed that what they're experiencing is not normal. Help them confront their emotions and understand what to expect during grief: change in eating and sleeping patterns, anxiety, loneliness, helplessness, moodiness and physical pain (stomach ache, headache).

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### Teens may become defensive, angry and test the limits more than usual

- This is normal and expected. Parents should set appropriate limits and take the time to discuss the emotions behind the actions.
- Handle serious behavior problems in a timely and appropriate manner. Start by calmly talking about the behavior with your teen. If you are not able to handle problem behaviours on your own, then consider seeking professional support.

### Peer support groups

- Teenagers often trust their friends more than adults, who they feel “just don’t understand.” Peer groups create a comfortable atmosphere where the teen doesn’t feel embarrassed or judged. They can identify and learn from other teenagers who are also experiencing a loss just like they are.

### WARNING SIGNS

These signs may indicate that the teen needs extra attention or professional help:

- Suicidal thoughts and behavior
- Eating disorders
- Isolation and distancing from friends and activities
- Failing in school or overachievement (may indicate the teen is not focusing on anything else)
- Prolonged depression, sleeping difficulties, restlessness, low self-esteem or anger
- Risk taking behavior such as drug and alcohol abuse, violence and sexual experimentation
- Complete change in personality
- Denying pain while at the same time acting overly strong or mature

### TIPS FOR SUPPORTING A GRIEVING TEEN

To help a teen who is having a particularly hard time with their loss, explore the full spectrum of helping services in your community:

- School counsellors
- Grief Groups or Peer support groups (online / in person)
- Private Therapists
- Faith or Spiritual Groups
- Time and attention from caring adults.

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With the teen's permission, tell other significant adults about the recent loss. While some teens will benefit from formal supports, others may just need a little more time and attention from caring adults. Do not force them to participate in activities or supports that they may be uncomfortable doing. The important thing is that you help the grieving teen find safe and nurturing emotional outlets at this difficult time.

### Do friends help?

People may assume that adolescents have supportive friends who will be continually available to them. In reality, this may not be true. Many bereaved teens are greeted with indifference by their peers, unless the peers have experienced a loss themselves. Adults can help connect teens with a peer support group of other grieving teens.

### Why did this happen?

The death of someone loved is a shattering experience for an adolescent. As a result of this death their life is under reconstruction. Teens may be asking questions about the meaning of life and death: "What happens after we die?". They may be seeking philosophical or religious explanations, or be exploring their own beliefs. As a caring adult, you can encourage a teen to share their spiritual questions or views.

### Relationship with the person who died

The teen's grief may be impacted by the nature of the relationship with the person who died – harmonious, abusive, conflictual, unfinished, or communicative. As teens strive for independence, relationship conflicts with family members are a normal part of the process. Encourage the teen to share what their relationship was like with the person who died. If there was turbulence or conflict, they may need additional support and sensitivity.

### Legacy

Teens may wish to reflect on the gifts, teachings, values, or positive things they received from their relationship with the person who died. Opportunities to share stories and talk about memories now, and as the teen grows, can help support their connection to their loved one. Music, arts, sports, journaling, hobbies or special projects may become legacy activities.

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### What about the future?

Grief is a normal response to loss. Each person may mourn differently at different times. It is normal and healthy for teens to grieve and mourn at each life stage – such as when future milestones are reached without the presence of their loved one who died (graduation, etc.).

Caring adults, whether parents, family members, teachers, counsellors, or friends can help teens during this time. If adults are open, honest and loving, experiencing the loss of someone loved can be a chance for young people to learn about both the joy and pain that comes from caring deeply for others.

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