



**The  
Community Hospice  
Grief Center**

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# Symptoms of "Normal" Grief

## Cognitive

- Confusion, disorientation
- Difficulty concentrating
- Memory impairment
- Thoughts of wanting to join the deceased

## Physical

- Achy, stiff muscles
- Changes in appetite, weight loss or gain
- Changes in sleep patterns
- Dizziness, vertigo
- Fatigue, exhaustion
- Headaches
- Nausea, stomach aches, intestinal problems
- Pounding heartbeat, tightness in the chest
- Restlessness
- Weakened immune system

## Emotional

- Anger – at the deceased, survivors, doctors, self, God
- Anxiety, fear, panic
- Deep sadness
- Denial
- Depression
- Frustration
- Guilt
- Helplessness
- Irritability
- Loneliness, isolation
- Numbness
- Relief that deceased's suffering has ended or that a bad relationship is over
- Shame
- Shock and disbelief that the death has occurred
- Worry

## Behavioral

- Accident-proneness
- Frequent crying
- Loss of interest in usual activities
- Nightmares
- Over-activity
- "Paranormal" experiences – visions of the deceased, etc.
- Withdrawal from friends and family





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## Suggestions for Coping with Grief

### Understand Your Grief

- Grief is the natural response to loss. It is the process of learning to accept the reality of a loss, feeling the pain of the loss, and adjusting to a world without your loved one.
- Grieving is not about “getting over” the death, it is about “getting used to” your new reality and finding the way to a new meaningful life.
- Grieving is not a mental illness, but it is can be a crazy feeling. Changes in your mood, thoughts, concentration and energy are to be expected.
- Grieving takes time. Often just when you are expecting you to move forward you may feel the most intense grief. Each person’s grieving process is unique, and, if you take care of yourself, grieving lessens gradually over time.

### Take Care of Your Heart

- Expect ups and downs and be patient with yourself. You will experience the reality of a loss in different ways and times.
- Share your thoughts, feelings, and memories with others. It may feel more painful to talk about it at first, but opening the door allows for healing. Find those who are comfortable listening to you talk about it, whether old friends or other grieving people, and let them know how it helps you.

### Take Care of Your Body

- Get regular physical exercise. Whether you are starting from scratch or continuing an old routine, exercise is a significant way of keeping your biochemistry in balance. It can help keep grief from turning into lasting depression. It can also help you sleep better.
- Eat well. Appetite changes and changes in eating habits are common, but your body needs nourishment more than ever. Grief stresses your body as well as your heart and mind, so try to incorporate regular nutritious meals as much as possible.
- Consider other ways to nurture yourself. Get massage therapy, try yoga or meditation, take baths or find other self care that feels positive to you.

*Grief Support • Information & Referral • Support Groups • Education • Professional Consultation*

## **Take Care of Your Mind**

- As much as possible, postpone making major decisions. If circumstances allow, do not move, change jobs or make any large changes to your life until the intensity of your grieving subsides.
- Some people find doing purposeful work helpful. As you begin to have more ability to concentrate, use your mind. Do expect tasks to feel more difficult.
- Once some time has passed, taking opportunities to give to others is sometimes helpful. This may be as simple as sharing in a support group or may involve giving volunteer time to others.

## **Take Care of Your Spirit**

- Grieving people often feel guilt over real or imagined wrongs. Consider writing a letter to your loved one expressing your sorrow or regrets. Find ways to forgive yourself; remembering, we are all human.
- Writing in a journal is often very helpful. Over time you will begin to see the progress you have made in your adjustment.
- Use creative energies to heal. Create your own grieving rituals, prayers or poems; dance, draw, paint or sculpt.
- Find peace in your own spiritual process. For some people, religion is exceptionally helpful in the grieving process. For some, doubts are raised. Find safe avenues to explore your feelings, thoughts and questions. Take spiritual comfort where you can.

## **Accept Help**

- Many friends and family members do not know what to do to help. As much as possible, let them know what you need and what you find helpful.
- Consider a support group or grief counseling. Often just a few sessions can be helpful. Your local Community Hospice Grief Center provides support groups, counseling and referrals.



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**The Ways Teens Grieve  
and  
Ways to Help**

For all of us, regardless of age, grief is a natural reaction to the death of a loved one. Each person's experience of grief is unique -- there is no right or wrong way to grieve. There is no set time limit or duration to grief. Many factors\* influence grief:

- circumstances of the death: who, how, when, where
- relationship with deceased
- available support systems: family, friends, community
- griever's unique personality
- *age at the time of loss*
- griever's emotional and developmental level
- concurrent stressors
- cultural factors: ethnicity, religion, financial resources
- prior experience with death and loss

Like adults, teens are able to understand the concept of death as something natural, irreversible, and universal. They are able to consider the long-term impact of a death. However, teens are consumed by their own lives and, as a result, tend to think of death as something that affects other people. They don't consider the possibility that death may abruptly end their lives, or the life of someone they know.

Adolescence involves change. Teens struggle with core questions like, "Who am I?" "Where do I fit in?" "Why is life this way?" They feel pressured by conflictual feelings of wanting independence, yet needing support. Peers, school, and grades add to the pressure of adolescence. The extraordinary upheaval introduced by a death intensifies the normal challenges presented by the teenage years.

Many teens are unwilling to discuss feelings about sensitive issues with a parent. Nevertheless, keep lines of communication open. Offer to listen, even if you previously have been refused countless times. Provide a variety of resources like books, movies, etc. to help address grief. Model positive coping behaviors. Keep to structure and routine, and maintain your normal expectations about behavior and consequences. Predictability means a lot to someone who is coping with a loss.

Teens can be experts at hiding their grief. Many teens have no one they feel comfortable talking with about the intense feelings related to the death of a loved one. They should know that, even if they can talk with their friends about the death, counseling and support groups are extremely helpful for dealing with grief. Encourage other healthy outlets for feelings, for example, sports, music, writing, or art. Let them know you will help them find a counselor or group that is right for them. Let them know you are there for them, and be patient. They will grieve in their own time.



\*Adapted from Helping Teens Cope with Death, (1999). The Dougy Center: Portland, Oregon

## **BILL OF RIGHTS FOR TEENS EXPERIENCING GRIEF**

Although many people will give you advice, always keep in mind that you have basic rights as you experience your grief.

You have the right to your own feelings. Your feelings are neither right nor wrong. But they are your feelings.

You have the right to express your grief and be comforted. If you do not get comfort, you have the right to request additional support.

You have the right to continued loving care, but you must understand that it may sometimes be difficult for those who love you to provide that care.

You have the right to help plan and participate in the funeral ceremony, as much or as little as you wish.

You have the right to ask any questions and expect thoughtful, honest answers.

You have the right to be treated as an interested and important individual, not as someone's "kid."

If you are a surviving sibling, you have the right to maintain your own identity. You are yourself, and you cannot take the place of your dead sister or brother.

You have the right to grieve for days or years, however long it takes you to feel good again. There is no set time to feel better.

You have the right to be free from guilt or continued grief, and you have the right to counseling if you need or want it.

You have the right to be a comfort to others who are grieving, and to share your grief with them.



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# Communicating With Grieving Teens

Open communication is extremely valuable to bereaved teens. In fact, allowing grieving persons to express their thoughts and feelings is the most important assistance you can offer them:

- Information reduces fear.
- Information can return a sense of control.
- Talking things out now can help prepare teens for future losses.

## Barriers to effective communication

- Our discomfort with death and grief
- Our fear of intense feelings
- Our desire to protect teens from the reality of death
- Our desire to “fix” things
- Our fear of “saying the wrong thing” or “making things worse”
- Our own grief

## Techniques for successful communication

- Create a safe, non-judgmental environment, free of interruptions.
- Listen, listen, listen. Don’t interrupt, interpret their feelings, or offer advice.
- Do provide accurate information as needed. Identify and counter misconceptions about the death itself. Be honest and factual and use age-appropriate language.
- Use the name of the person who has died.
- General, simple words of condolence are always appropriate:
  - I am sorry for your pain.
  - I really miss (name of the deceased).
  - He (or she) was a special person.
  - I’m here if you need to talk, or cry, or just have quiet company.
  - I’ve never experienced this before, and I just don’t know what to say.
- Ask open questions to get them talking:
  - What was your relationship with (the deceased) like?
  - Can you tell me what this has been like for you?
  - How are you doing?
  - How is your family doing?
  - Is there anything you can think of that I can do to help you?
- Accept and validate whatever feelings are expressed – do not argue with or minimize their feelings. If appropriate, suggest constructive outlets for strong feelings.
- Normalize their feelings and thoughts. Reassure the teen that difficulty concentrating, lack of enjoyment, anger, decreased energy, and so on are all normal parts of the grief process and will abate over time.
- Leave room for a conflicted or ambiguous relationship with the deceased – do not idealize the dead.

## What Not to Do:

- Don't avoid the issue. Avoidance causes the issues to go “underground,” resurfacing later in potentially harmful ways
- Don't try to “rescue” the teen from his or her feelings. Grief involves feelings that make us uncomfortable, but successfully resolving grief requires that we work through these feelings in our own way and at our own pace. Witness their pain without trying to change it, hurry it, make it better, or minimize it.
- Don't use euphemisms. It suggests to the teen that you can't handle the reality of death, and may cause them to worry that they have to protect you. Use the “d” words instead: dying, death, dead.
- Avoid clichés. Try to imagine what they would sound like to you if you were the one grieving.
- Don't lie to protect the family or community image. When the teen finds out the truth, they will have another loss to grieve for – their trust in you.
- Don't impose your own religious beliefs. Teens often go through spiritual crisis or existential questioning after a death. Be supportive, but let them find their own way.

## Other Things Adults Can Do To Help Grieving Teens

- Respect the teen's privacy.
- Model positive coping behaviors.
- Maintain regular routines and structure as much as possible – minimize disruptions.
- Maintain normal expectations of behavior and appropriate consequences for negative behavior – this helps teens maintain or regain a sense of consistency.
- Encourage the teen to eat healthy foods, to drink plenty of water, and to sleep – physical health affects emotional well-being.
- Encourage and facilitate age-appropriate activities:
  - Memory book
  - Journaling, letter writing
  - Artistic or musical expression
  - Physical outlets such as sports or other active recreation
  - Memorial rituals
- Give teens choices and options to help counter feelings of helplessness.
- Introduce grieving teens to others who have also been through difficult losses – peer support can be a powerful resource for adolescents.
- Reassure the teen that love for the deceased can be expressed through other emotions than sadness. Feeling joy and happiness about life events is often experienced by the teen as being somehow disloyal to the person who has died. Reassure the teen that it is okay for them to continue to enjoy their lives.
- Explore if school assignments can be modified to allow grieving teens to channel their emotions and energy into writing, drawing, or other expressive outlets – this may allow students to keep up with school while they work through their grief. Have a buddy who will help the teen with homework, or assign a tutor who can help the student. Step in if needed to advocate for the teen at school.
- Teens often benefit from having a safe way to physically express anger. You can give grieving teens appropriate things for them to unleash their anger on, such as telephone books or magazines to rip up, pillowcases full of clean cloths to wrestle with and hit, paper cups to smash, paper bags to blow up and pop, golf tees to hammer into thick Styrofoam, or clay to manipulate, pound, and smash.
- Be available over time. Many grieving people report that their support system rallies well at the time of the death but then vanishes two or three months later – long before their grieving is over.
- Be aware of “anniversary dates” which can reactivate grief; acknowledge these special days and assist the teen in making the connection between approaching “anniversary dates” and their renewed feelings of grief.
- Be patient. Grief takes time.