

Grieving Teens: What to Expect and What Helps

“Anyone old enough to love is old enough to grieve.” – Alan Wolfelt

The quote above shows that teens also grieve and feel sadness after someone dies. When that happens, many teens feel overwhelmed by their thoughts and feelings. It's important to have honest communication. Share information about the death with your teen, so you can start conversations about grief. Give them time and grace as you go through a painful experience together. Remember that everyone grieves in different ways, including teens. This handout lists common ways teens grieve.

Emotions

- Confused, asking “How can this be?”
- Sad or missing the person who died
- Relieved, especially if their person was very sick
- Guilty (feeling like there was something they should have said or done)
- Angry, sometimes at their person for dying without understanding why
- Anxious (worried or afraid) that they or someone else they care about will die
- Lonely, especially if they aren't part of conversations and plans or if that person gave them social and emotional support
- Overwhelmed by emotions

Changes in Thoughts and Behaviors

- Not sharing their feelings or questions, especially if they are worried about others
- Thoughts about how the loss is unfair
- A hard time focusing or becoming forgetful
- Thoughts that keep coming up about the person who died or their death
- More risk-taking behaviors (this includes trying drugs, alcohol, or sexual activity) without thinking of consequences
- Thoughts and worries of their own death or the death of others close to them
- The start or increase of nightmares
- Trouble with sleep: a hard time falling and staying asleep or sleeping too much
- Changes in appetite and eating habits



Physically and Socially

- Loss of energy and feeling tired
- Crying more or less than expected or trying not to cry in front of others
- Physical symptoms like stomach aches, headaches or catching colds more often
- Changes in how they do in school
- More clumsiness

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- Past coping skills no longer useful or accessible
- Less interest in social activities or pulling away from friends and family
- A hard time in relationships with teachers, guardians or other authority figures
- Peers bullying or saying hurtful things by mistake
- Having a harder time managing other changes in life (moving, changing schools, friendships)
- Making new friends and bonds with other grieving teens
- Feeling responsible for taking care of parents or siblings
- Wanting to be alone or to grieve by themselves

Spiritually

- Asking themselves or others where the person who died is and why this happened
- Thinking about matters of life and death, their own death and/or the death of others
- Struggling with their family's beliefs and their own ideas about the world
- Wanting to be with the person who died
- Looking to connect with the person who died
- Having dreams about the person

What Helps?

Here are some things you and your teen can do to help cope with grief.

- Talk to a trusted adult
- Go to a grief support group or camp for teens
- Share thoughts and feelings with a counselor, social worker or therapist
- Volunteer in the community
- Share memories about the person
- Find a safe physical outlet, like exercise, sports, dance, screaming into or punching a pillow
- Read teen books about grief
- Make room for fun: laughter, watching familiar TV and movies, reading for pleasure
- Artistic expression: draw, paint, write, listen to or make music
- Spend time in nature
- Have adults and peers around who are modeling good coping skills and communication about grief
- When adults take good care of their own grief, they can be present to the needs, questions, and feelings of their teens



For help understanding grief or to find support, email or call:

bereavement@chla.usc.edu | (323) 376-5083

Monday to Friday 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. and some evenings