

HEHS Student Services Department

How Do Teenagers Grieve & What Can I Do? A Parent & Guardian Grief Resource

As parents, many of you may be asking yourselves the same questions during a time of an unexpected adolescent death. What is it like for teenagers when someone close to them dies? How do they respond to the death of a friend, teammate, classmate, or peer? Is my child grieving appropriately? These questions are normal and reflect your commitment to support your child during such an unexpected, challenging, and trying time in their lives. In fact, coping with the loss of a friend may be one of the hardest challenges your child faces during high school. Below are several basic strategies to consider as you support your child with an unexpected loss of a peer.

STRATEGIES FOR SUPPORTING YOUR TEEN DURING A TIME OF LOSS

- ❑ **Communicate to your teen that grief is natural and healthy.** Grief is a natural and very healthy reaction to death. However, grieving does not always feel natural as it may be difficult for your child to stay in control of their thoughts, emotions, and physical feelings during this time. In fact, a sense of a sudden loss of control may be overwhelming, confusing and scary. Communicating to your child that grief at any stage of life, including during adolescence, is natural and healthy is important. Now more than ever, take the opportunity to initiate conversations regarding grief and make yourself available to listen. It's okay to ask questions. It's also okay if your child isn't ready to talk. Don't be afraid of silence if your teen is not ready. Rather, provide comfort and care by just being there and providing space for open dialogue when they are ready.
- ❑ **Reinforce that grief is unique to every single one of us, including teens.** Grieving is a different experience for everyone, including your child, and particularly when it occurs during the sensitive time of identity formation. Teens may grieve for different lengths of time and express a variety of emotions. It is important to not compare your child's grieving process to that of their peers or your own. Encouraging your child to grieve authentically and not compare their grief process to their peers is also important as they may subtly seek out feedback. Honoring your child's healthy grieving process is very important and modeling healthy grieving is even more important.
- ❑ **Be mindful that every death is unique and is experienced differently.** Many factors can impact the way your child grieves including their personality and relationship with the deceased. In fact, your child may even react differently to the loss of a friend than to the loss of a family member. At home, your child may be grieving differently than you and their friends, which can cause tension. Each person's responses to death should be honored as his or her way of coping in that moment. Keep in mind that responses may change from day to day or even from hour to hour.
- ❑ **Reflect on the factors that may be influencing your teen's grieving process.** The impact of a death on a teen relates to a combination of factors including: social support systems, circumstances of the death, the nature of the relationship with the person who died, cultural traditions, religious beliefs, your child's emotional and developmental level, and your child's previous experiences with death. During this time, it is important to be mindful of how these factors may support your child or create additional emotional stressors.
- ❑ **Encourage your teen to engage in productive grief activities.** As a parent, it is natural to feel the need to express opinions about "right" or "wrong" ways to grieve. However, using this language with your teen may not be helpful as grief does not follow a pattern and is not a course that can be evaluated for how well one does it. Thus, consider talking with your child about productive ways to grieve and allow the grieving process to take time. Productive and healthy behaviors may include your child talking with trusted friends, talking with family members, sharing memories, journaling, creating art, and expressing emotion. If your child chooses to engage in talking, be mindful of using age appropriate information, not over-identifying ("I know how you feel"), and too much self-disclosure as the focus should remain on your child's grief.

- ❑ **Recognize and acknowledge “survivor guilt.”** Unfortunately, this type of guilt may be a reaction to a sudden loss. Thus, it is important that this be recognized and acknowledged if you hear statements such as “I wish it were me instead.” Survivor guilt may also present itself as excessive self-blame. It is important to recognize and try to understand these feelings, but also let your child know that it was not their fault.
- ❑ **Remind your teen it’s important they are still taking care of themselves.** When an unexpected loss occurs it may be very easy and seem natural to shift all of one’s energy to the grieving process. However, to engage in a healthy grieving process, one must continue to take care of their own physical and emotional needs. Encourage your child to eat healthy, exercise, and get plenty of sleep to help maintain their physical and mental health during such a challenging time. Keeping a routine is also helpful and provides a sense of control when everything may suddenly feel out of your child’s control.
- ❑ **Prepare for the future as grief is an ongoing process.** The sadness your child is experiencing may diminish over time. However, grief does not have a timeline and is not necessarily linear. Rather, it changes the way it presents and its intensity. The future may hold many expected and unexpected events that will become part of your child’s grieving journey. These events may create subtle to significant reminders of the loss. Some, seemingly daily tasks such as driving, may create fear in your child. Taking a minute to identify upcoming significant events, dates, and milestones may be important as you look ahead and anticipate ways your child may need support. Also, being mindful that your child may find comfort in using these times to honor and celebrate their friend is important too.

In addition to supporting your child through the grieving process, we also recognize that you and your child’s world has already been turned upside down and challenges related to COVID-19. As a result, the in-person social connections and gatherings, as well as the memorialization of the deceased may look different. In addition, the personal stressors and anxiety your child may have already been feeling before such an unexpected loss may be magnified. For additional information regarding supporting your child through grief during COVID-19, please consider reading the following resource published by The Dougy Center and The National Center for Grieving Children & Families: [When Your World is Already Upside Down: Supporting Grieving Children and Teens During the COVID-19 Global Health Crisis](#).

Lastly, grieving is a normal response to loss, but may require some professional support. Additional support should be considered if your child begins to present with a marked loss of interest in daily activities, changes in eating and sleeping habits, wishing to be with the deceased loved one, fear of being alone, significant decreases in academic performance and achievement, increased somatic complaint, and changes in attendance patterns (e.g., chronic absenteeism). If you have any concerns regarding your child’s mental health or safety, support is available. Below are several national and community crisis mental health hotlines available (English & Spanish speaking therapists available):

The Bridge Youth & Family Services 24-Hour Crisis Counselors (847) 776-3720 Asian Human Services
 24-Hour Crisis Line (773) 293-8488 Kenneth Young Center CARES Crisis Line (800) 345- 9049 National
 Suicide Prevention Lifeline 1-800-273-TALK National Crisis Text Line Text “START” to 741-741

And, as always, if your child is in need of any additional support or referrals at this time, please contact your student’s guidance counselor via email or at (847) 755-5630. School-based guidance counselors, psychologists, and social workers are available to support your child.

References & Resources

- [National Association of School Psychologists: Grief Brief Facts and Tips](#)
- [National Association of School Psychologist: When Grief/Loss Hits Close to Home: Tips for Caregivers](#)
- [The American Psychological Association: Grief: Coping with the Loss of Your Loved One](#)
- [The Dougy Center: How to Help a Grieving Teen](#)
- [University of Illinois Parenting Again Extension: Talking with Teens About Death](#)