

How to Help a Grieving Teen

What is it like for teenagers when someone close to them dies? How do they respond to the death of a parent, a sibling, a relative, a friend?

In our work with teenagers, we've learned that teens respond better to adults who choose to be companions on the grief journey rather than direct it. We have also discovered that adult companions need to be aware of their own grief issues and journeys because their experiences and beliefs impact the way they relate to teens.

Six Basic Principles of Teen Grief

1. Grieving is the teen's natural reaction to a death. Grief is a natural reaction to death and other losses. However, grieving does not 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 that is often a part of grief may overwhelm or frighten some teens. Grieving is normal and healthy, yet may be an experience teens resist and reject. Helping teens accept the reality that they are grievers allow them to do their grief work and to progress in their grief journey.

2. Each teen's grieving experience is unique. Grieving is a different experience for each person. Teens grieve for different lengths of time and express a wide spectrum of emotions. Grief is best understood as a process in which bodily sensations, emotions, thoughts, and behaviors surface in response to the death, its circumstances, the past relationship with the deceased and the realization of the future without the person. For example, sadness and crying may be an expression of grief for one teen, while another may respond with humor and laughter.

"I hate it when people think I should be grieving according to the 'stages' described in some high-school health book. Since my sister's death I've learned that grief isn't five simple stages." Kimberly, 17

While many theories and models of the grieving process provide a helpful framework, the path itself is an individual one, and often lonely. No book or grief therapist can predict or prescribe exactly what a teen will or should go through on the grief journey. Adults can best assist grieving teenagers by accompanying them on their journey in the role of listener and learner, and by allowing the teen to function as a teacher.

3. There are no "right" and "wrong" ways to grieve. Sometimes adults express strong opinions about "right" or "wrong" ways to grieve. But there is no correct way to grieve. Coping with a death does not follow a simple pattern or set of rules nor is it a course to be evaluated or graded.

There are, however, "helpful" and "unhelpful" choices and behaviors associated with the grieving process. Some behaviors are constructive and encourage facing grief, such as talking with trusted friends, journaling, creating art, and expressing emotion rather than holding it inside. Other grief responses are destructive and may cause long-term complications and consequences. For example, some teens attempt to escape their pain through many of the same escape routes adults choose: alcohol and substance abuse, reckless sexual

activity, antisocial behaviors, withdrawal from social activities, excessive sleeping, high risk-taking behaviors, and other methods that temporarily numb the pain of their loss.

"My friend went crazy into drugs, sex, and skipping school after her boyfriend got killed in a skiing accident. She stopped talking about him. Now she's kicked out of school and is pregnant by a guy she hates. Since my boyfriend's car accident, I know what can happen if I make wrong choices like her." Sara, 18

4. Every death is unique and is experienced differently. The way teens grieve differs according to personality and the particular relationship they had with the deceased. They typically react in different ways to the death of a parent, sibling, grandparent, child, or friend. For many teens, peer relationships are primary. The death or loss of a boyfriend or girlfriend may seem to affect them more than the death of a sibling or grandparent.

"Expect the unexpected. Emily actually danced and sang after I told her that her mother died. I was shocked. Later I realized the relief we both felt. The relationship had been filled with her alcoholism, lies and illness." Father of Emily, 17

Within a family each person may mourn differently at different times. One may be talkative, another may tend to cry often, and a third might withdraw. This can generate a great deal of tension and misunderstanding within the already stressed family. 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.

5. The grieving process is influenced by many issues. The impact of a death on a teen relates to a combination of factors including:

- * Social support systems available for the teen (family, friends and/or community)
- * Circumstances of the death - how, where and when the person died
- * Whether or not the young person unexpectedly found the body
- * The nature of the relationship with the person who died - harmonious, abusive, conflictual, unfinished, communicative
- * The teen's level of involvement in the dying process
- * The emotional and developmental age of the teen
- * The teen's previous experiences with death

6. Grief is ongoing. Grief never ends, but it does change in character and intensity. Many grieverers have compared their grieving to the constantly shifting tides of the ocean; ranging from calm, low tides to raging high tides that change with the seasons and the years.

"I've had people say that you've got to go on, you've got to get over this. I just want to shout, 'You're wrong! Grief never ends.' I don't care what they say."

Philip, 13

Death and Grief

If someone close to you has died, you may be feeling many different emotions. You may be sad, worried, or scared. You might be shocked, unprepared, or confused. You might be feeling angry, cheated, relieved, guilty, exhausted, or just plain empty. Your emotions might be stronger or deeper than usual or mixed together in ways you have never experienced before.

You might also notice that your loss is affecting what you are thinking about and how you behave. If you are grieving, you might be having trouble concentrating, sleeping, eating, or feeling interested in the things you usually enjoy. You might be trying to act like you feel OK (even if you don't) because you want to be strong for someone else. And you may wonder if you will ever get over losing someone who means so much to you.

All of these emotions can be natural reactions to the death of someone close. They are part of the process of grieving.

What Is Grief?

Grief is the emotion people feel when they experience a loss. There are many different types of loss, and not all of them are related to death. A person can also grieve over the breakup of an intimate relationship or after a parent moves away from home.

Grief is a natural reaction to the loss of someone important to you. Grief is also the name for the healing process that a person goes through after someone close has died. The grieving process takes time, and the healing usually happens gradually.

Although everyone experiences grief when they lose someone, grieving affects people in different ways. How it affects you partly depends on your situation and relationship with the person who died.

The circumstances under which a person dies can influence grief feelings. For example, if someone has been sick for a long time or is very old, you may have expected that person's death. Although it doesn't necessarily make it any easier to accept (and the feelings of grief will still be there), some people find that knowing someone is going to die gives them time to prepare. And if a loved one suffered a lot before dying, a person might even feel a sense of relief when the death occurs. If the person who has died is very young, though, you may feel a sense of how terribly unfair it seems.

Losing someone suddenly can be extremely traumatic, though, no matter how old that person is. Maybe someone you know died unexpectedly - as a result of violence or a car accident, for example. It can take a long time to overcome a sudden loss because you may feel caught off guard by the event and the intense feelings that are associated with it.

Coping With Grief

The grieving process is very personal and individual - each person goes through his or her grief differently. Some people reach out for support from others and find comfort in good memories. Others become very busy to take their minds off the loss. Some people become depressed and withdraw from their peers or go out of the way to avoid the places or situations that remind them of the person who has died. Just as people feel grief in many different ways, they handle it differently, too.

For some people, it may help to talk about the loss with others. Some do this naturally and easily with friends and family, others talk to a professional therapist. Some people may not feel like talking about it much at all because it's hard to find the words to express such deep and personal emotion or they wonder whether talking will make them feel the hurt more. This is fine, as long you find other ways to deal with your pain.

A few people may act out their sorrow by engaging in dangerous or self-destructive activities. Doing things like drinking, drugs, or cutting yourself to escape from the reality of a loss may seem to numb the pain, but the feeling is only temporary. The person isn't really dealing with the pain, only masking it, which makes all those feelings build up inside and only prolongs the grief. If your pain just seems to get worse, or if you feel like hurting yourself or have suicidal thoughts, tell someone you trust about how you feel.

What to Expect

It may feel impossible to recover after losing someone you love. But grief does get gradually better and become less intense as time goes by. To help get you through the pain, it can help to know some of the things you might expect during the grieving process.

The first few days after someone dies can be intense, with people expressing strong emotions, perhaps crying and comforting each other, and gathering to express their support and condolences to the ones most affected by the loss. Family and friends often participate in rituals that may be part of their religious, cultural, community, or family traditions - such as memorial services, wakes, or funerals. These activities can help people get through the first days after a death and honor the person who died. People might spend time together talking and sharing memories about the person who died. This may continue for days or

weeks following the loss as friends and family bring food, send cards, or stop by to visit.

Many times, people show their emotions during this time. But sometimes a person can be so surprised or overwhelmed by the death that he or she doesn't show any emotion right away - even though the loss is very hard. For example, Joey's friends expected he'd be really upset at his mom's funeral, so they were surprised that he was smiling and talking with people as if nothing had happened. When they asked him about it, Joey said that seeing his friends at the funeral cheered him up because it reminded him that some things would still be the same. Joey was able to cry and talk about how he felt when he was alone with his dad after the funeral.

Sometimes, when the rituals associated with grieving end, people might feel like they should be "over it" because everything seems to have gone back to normal. When people who are grieving first go back to their normal activities, it might be hard to put their hearts into everyday things. Many people go back to doing regular things after a few days or a week. But although they may not talk about their loss as much, the grieving process continues.

It is natural to continue to have feelings and questions for a while after someone dies. It's also natural to begin to feel somewhat better. A lot depends on how your loss affects your life. It's OK to feel grief for days, weeks, or even longer, depending on how close you were to the person who died.

No matter how you choose to grieve, there is no one right way to do it. The grieving process is a gradual one that lasts longer for some people than others. There may be times when you worry that you'll never enjoy life the same way again, but this is a natural reaction after a loss.

Caring for Yourself

The loss of someone close to you can be stressful. It can help you to cope if you take care of yourself in certain small but important ways. Here are some that might help:

- **Remember that grief is a normal emotion.** Know that you can (and will) heal from your grief.
- **Participate in rituals.** Memorial services, funerals, and other traditions help people get through the first few days and honor the person who died.
- **Be with others.** Even informal gatherings of family and friends bring a sense of support and help people not to feel so isolated in the first days and weeks of their grief.

- **Talk about it when you can.** Some people find it helpful to tell the story of their loss or talk about their feelings. Sometimes a person doesn't feel like talking, and that's OK, too. No one should feel pressured to talk.
- **Express yourself.** Even if you don't feel like talking, find ways to express your emotions and thoughts. Start writing in a journal about the memories you have of the person you lost and how you're feeling since the loss. Or write a song, poem, or tribute about the person who died. You can do this privately or share it with others.
- **Exercise.** Exercise can help your mood. It may be hard to get motivated, so modify your usual routine if you need to.
- **Eat right.** You may feel like skipping meals or you may not feel hungry - but your body still needs nutritious foods.
- **Join a support group.** If you think you may be interested in attending a support group, ask an adult or school counselor about how to become involved. The thing to remember is that you don't have to be alone with your feelings or your pain.
- **Let your emotions be expressed and released.** Don't stop yourself from having a good cry if you feel one coming on. Don't worry if listening to particular songs or doing other activities is painful because it brings back memories of the person that you lost; this is common. After a while, it becomes less painful.
- **Create a memorial or tribute.** Plant a tree or garden, or memorialize the person in some fitting way, such as running in a charity run or walk (a breast cancer race, for example) in honor of the lost loved one.

Other Information

You may think that you hear the deceased person's voice calling to you, or you may want to have a conversation with that person. You may experience flashbacks, such as remembering the funeral or even the moment of death itself, for no apparent reason. In addition, you may feel as if you are making progress but then suddenly feel worse, and without knowing what triggered it. Although upsetting, these are normal experiences for people who grieve.

When this feeling of numbness and shock begins to subside, you may feel as if you might be overcoming it - thinking "I'm getting back to normal." Just then, however, you unexpectedly may encounter a deeper sense of grief or sadness as reality sets in. When this occurs, you may experience symptoms of grief like those of acute depression - being unable to sleep soundly, losing your appetite, not wanting to get up in the morning, or not wanting to be around other people.

Whatever happens, understand that there is no "right" or "wrong" way to feel after someone's death. Most people's feelings, even if they seem extreme at the time, fall within a range of normal reactions.

Remember that life will never again be exactly the way it was before your loved one died. If you are expecting things to "get back to normal" after awhile, you may be disappointed or frustrated to find that the new "normal" is not like the old "normal." Your life will go on, but - precisely *because* the person was important to you - it will not be the same without him or her.

What You Can Do To Help Yourself

You can do many things on your own to handle the emotional stress of grief, and you can get help from others as well. You may need one or both forms of help to successfully restore your sense of well-being.

➔ **Allow yourself to experience the pain of grief.**

What this means is to work through your emotions in the best way you can. If this means crying, screaming, talking to the person who has died, or doing physical activity such as punching a pillow or lifting weights, do that. To heal emotionally, many people need to express their feelings. If you are embarrassed about crying in front of other family members such as your children (whether younger or adult), you may need to tell them: "It may be upsetting to you, but I need to cry and express my feelings. I need to work through this grief."

➔ **Select a person to share your grief with.**

Find a good listener who has experienced a similar loss, although it probably is best to choose someone who is not grieving over the same person as you are. Someone outside of your immediate family often is a good choice. You want someone who will let you express yourself, not someone who will try to reason you out of your feelings. Candidates might be a member of the clergy or a sympathetic friend or coworker. Although you may expect family members to be supportive, they most likely are burdened with that very same loss as well. For example, if your spouse dies and you want to share with your adult children, remember that they are grieving the loss of their parent. As a result, they may be unable to give you the compassion you need. In addition, it often is painful for an adult child to see a parent grieving, and they may want you to "get over it" so that their lives can return to some form of "normal."

Be aware that some people, even professionals such as clergy, may not be personally prepared to deal with death - perhaps because of their own grief over someone they have lost or feelings about their own mortality. If you are unable to relate to one person, find another.

Find what works for you in returning to normal routines.

If certain activities such as reading or swimming were relaxing for you before, try to pursue them now. See if that will help you to get back to a normal cycle of

living. For some people, losing a loved one is so upsetting that they cannot resume these activities until their grief subsides to some extent.

➔ **Read books or poetry on the subject.**

Many books, including those with first-person accounts, about working through and overcoming grief are available at your local public library. As with other techniques, however, this will not help everyone. Some people will react by saying, "I have enough to worry about without reading someone else's grief," while others will find direction, a sense of what is normal to experience, and a feeling of connection with others who have had this experience. Similarly, reading poetry, whether alone or aloud in a group, can help by giving artful expression to feelings that often are hard to express or even identify.

➔ **Keep a diary or journal.**

Some people find it helpful and therapeutic to write their thoughts and feelings in a diary as they proceed through the process of grieving. The British author, critic, and novelist C.S. Lewis (1898-1963), after losing his wife, kept a journal (*A Grief Observed*) of how he was feeling. A private person for whom neither a support group nor reading a book is helpful may find comfort in keeping such a journal. Some people also find it helpful to write their feelings in a letter to the person who has died, which can help to resolve unfinished business or feelings.

➔ **Encourage others to talk about the deceased.**

Friends and family frequently avoid discussing the deceased to avoid upsetting the person who is grieving. If you want to talk about the person who has died, you should reassure others that it is okay. All you have to do is say, "I'd like to talk about Dad." Reassure your visitors that while you may cry or become upset, you would rather do that than awkwardly skirt the subject, because he or she was very important to you. Most people can accept your crying or being upset if you are the one who brought up the subject.

➔ **Talk out loud to the person who has died.**

In much the same manner as the letter noted earlier, it is not unreasonable to want to resolve issues with a person who has died by holding a one-sided conversation, aloud, with the deceased. Do this if it makes you feel better.

➔ **Find out about a bereavement support group.**

Bereavement support groups can help to make the process of dealing with loss easier. Signing up for a bereavement support group may be a difficult decision, however, because many people think of their grief as something that is private.

You may feel uneasy talking with strangers about your feelings or your loved one. Keep in mind, however, that such groups have helped many people get through their grief and, therefore, may help you.

In a bereavement group, participants learn from each other about normal reactions to grief. Because of their shared experiences, group members often come to care about and to support each other emotionally, and they often share practical ideas for working through their grief as well. In addition, a support group also can help you to get through difficult times like holidays or anniversaries.

If you decide to attend a support group, understand that you may feel worse when you go home after the first session. The reason is that you are dealing with your feelings openly (as well as hearing about everyone else's). In the long run, however, this can be helpful. It also is important to realize that a support group will not restore you to the way you were before the person's death, but it will help you to cope with your new life without the deceased.

Possible Obstacles

Here are some obstacles that other caregivers have faced:

1. "People say I should be over this."

Response: Everyone deals with grief at his or her own pace. You may need to say, "We each go at our own pace. I guess my pace is slower than you expected."

2. "People give me advice that I don't want to take."

Response: Well-meaning advice is not always helpful advice. One example might be if you regularly walked with your deceased spouse and now can no longer bear the thought of walking alone. When people offer advice to take walks, do your best to be gracious and thank them, but then do what *you* feel is best.

3. "People avoid the subject of my friend when they're around me."

Response: Take charge of the conversation, and reassure them: "I want to talk about him/her, and it makes me feel better to talk about him." Your family and friends may not know that you feel this way, so it is important to tell them.

Will I Ever Get Over This?

Well-meaning friends and family might tell a grieving person they need to "move on" after a loss. Unfortunately, that type of advice can sometimes make people hesitate to talk about their loss, or make people think they're grieving wrong or too long, or that they're not normal. Every person takes his or her own time to heal after a loss. The way someone grieves a particular loss and the time it takes is very individual.

It's important for grieving people to not drop out of life, though. If you do not like the idea of moving on, maybe the idea of "keeping on" seems like a better fit. Sometimes it helps to remind yourself to just keep on doing the best you can for now. If you feel sad, let yourself have your feelings and try not to run away from your emotions. But also keep on doing things you normally would such as being with friends, caring for your pet, working out, or doing your schoolwork.

Going forward and healing from grief does not mean forgetting about the person you lost. Getting back to enjoying your life does not mean you no longer miss the person. And how long it takes until you start to feel better isn't a measure of how much you loved the person. With time, the loving support of family and friends, and your own positive actions, you can find ways to cope with even the deepest loss.