

How to Support a Teenager Who Is Grieving

- 1. 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.
- 2. 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.
- 3. 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).
- 4. 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.
- 5. There is no time limit for grief resolution.**
 - It is a process, not an event and is unique for each teen.
- 6. Normalize certain grief behavior.**
 - 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).
- 7. 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.
- 8. 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.

How to Support a Teenager Who Is Grieving (continued)

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, low self-esteem or anger
- Substance abuse, violence, sexual experimentation
- Complete change in personality

REFERENCES:

- Alan D. Wolfelt - *Healing the Bereaved Child: Grief Gardening, Growth Through Grief and Other Touchstones for Caregivers*. Fort Collins, CO: Companion Press, 1996. 269-286
- Helen Fitzgerald - "The Grieving Teen." *Articles-Grieving Children*. Oct 2000. American Hospice Foundation. 16Jul2007. www.americanhospice.org/index.php