



**A Teen's Journey through Grief**

## **Teens and Grief**

The teen years are all about change. Teenagers are in the process of moving from being children, dependent on adults to meet their needs and direct their lives, to being independent adults themselves, responsible for making their own life choices. Losing a loved one adds yet another change to this already turbulent time. Teens must balance the task of grief with the huge physical, emotional, social and cognitive changes that are central to adolescence. Having a trusted adult in their lives to turn to for support and guidance can help smooth the rough waters of a teen's journey through grief, and help them to learn important lessons about life and themselves along the way.

### **Reactions to Grief**

The grief reactions that teenagers experience are similar to that of adults. Teenagers have developed both cognitively and emotionally in ways that allow them to more fully understand death and the impact of loss. However teenagers may have less experience with intense emotions and have fewer coping skills developed to deal with them. Bereaved teenagers may also be prone to the rapid changes in mood that are commonly associated with adolescence. Teens can benefit greatly from the presence of a patient and caring adult to normalize their feelings and to help them find positive ways to express those feelings.

### **It's Ok to Grieve**

The intense emotional, mental and physical reactions that teens may experience after a loss are completely normal. Yet for a teenager, who may not yet have much experience coping with loss, the feelings that accompany grief may seem overwhelming, frightening, and decidedly un-normal. Teens also tend to be very concerned with "fitting in," and are worried about appearing different from their peers. In an effort to maintain normalcy, teens may resist expressing their grief, possibly rejecting their grief feelings altogether. It is important to let teens know that it is ok to grieve, and to encourage them to find a way to express their feelings. There is no "right" or "wrong" way to grieve; teens should be encouraged to express their feelings in whatever ways they find most comfortable and helpful. Teens may also benefit from participating in a support group with people their own age, where they can see that others are going through the same difficult experience that they themselves are facing.

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## Common Grief Responses

The grief experience is different for every person and for each loss we experience; there is no one “right” way to grieve. The following are some of the common responses to grief that your teen may experience, but the best source for understanding how your teen is dealing with a loss is to ask the teen him or herself.

- Sadness
- Anger
- Irritability
- Guilt
- Anxiety
- Shock
- Helplessness
- Sleep problems
- Changes in appetite
- Withdrawal from family
- Difficulty concentrating
- School problems

Grieving teens may also be particularly susceptible to high risk behaviors such as the use of drugs, alcohol, or unsafe sexual activity as way to cope. These behaviors may serve as a distraction from grief, an outlet for emotional pain, or a kind of defiance of death itself. While pushing boundaries and questioning rules is a normal part of a teen’s transition to adulthood, engaging in high risk behaviors is dangerous and is not an effective method of working through grief. If your teen is engaging in such behaviors, rather than punishing him or her, help your teen to find alternate, healthy ways of dealing with his or her grief feelings.



## **A Closer Look at Adolescence**

Though we've been discussing adolescents as one large group, the teen years in fact span a wide range of development. It is clear that a thirteen year old is much different physically, emotionally and mentally than a seventeen year old. While there are some characteristics of grief common among all stages of adolescence, it is useful to take a more detailed look at the experience of grief within the more specific age groups within adolescence.

### **Early Adolescence (12-14 years)**

Early adolescents have just begun the process of withdrawing from their parents and looking to peers for acceptance. They are extremely sensitive to appearing different from their peers, and often avoid any public displays of emotion. Young teens may wish to avoid knowing any details about an illness or death and are reluctant to discuss their feelings. Parents may see an early adolescent's withdrawal and lack of emotional display as selfishness and insensitivity to the loss, but these reactions are just an attempt to deal with the strong emotions of grief while still asserting independence and fitting in with peers.

### **Middle Adolescence (15-17 years)**

Middle adolescents are becoming increasingly independent and have started to develop close, supportive relationships with peers. However, contrary to their younger counterparts, middle adolescents are also sensitive to the needs of their parents and family. They may struggle to balance these needs with their own needs and wants, a task that can be overwhelming. Middle adolescents are willing to approach illness and death more directly. They have a deeper understanding of the long term consequences of loss, and may grieve longer and more intensely than younger teens. Grief can be especially difficult when the loss occurs close in time to a separation from the family, such as moving out or leaving for college.

### **No Longer a Child, Not Yet an Adult**

As children grow, they are able to take on greater and greater responsibility. Many teenagers have a job, a car, and seem practically like adults. When a loss hits a family, parents often rely on their older children to help bear the burden, to care for younger siblings, to take on extra household chores. Teens are often told to "be strong" for their parents, or, if a parent has died, that they are now the "man/ woman of the house." Some adults even rely on their teenage children for emotional support through their own grief. While teens may appear strong in the face of a loss, it is important to remember that they are not adults. Even though they may be reluctant to show it, teens are grieving and they need support.

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## **Supporting your Teen**

Adolescence is a time when teens start to distance themselves from the adults in their lives. Even teens who once shared a close relationship with their parents or other adults will start to turn more and more to their peer group for support and acceptance. This transition is a natural and important part of growing up. However, when facing grief, teens may have difficulty finding the support and assurance they need within their peer group. This is because other adolescents who have not gone through a major loss have no way to understand the grief experience. They may be awkward or uncomfortable talking about death, and wish to avoid the topic entirely. It is important for teens to have the presence of a supportive caring adult to help usher them through this difficult time in their lives.

## **Guidance and Support**

Adults can take on the role of “supportive guide” in a teen’s journey through grief. Let your teen know that you are available to talk, but don’t pressure your teen to confide in you. It is important for teens to feel comfortable sharing their feelings, so try not to judge a teen’s grief reactions or tell them how you think they “should” be grieving. Let your teen know that it is ok to grieve by letting them see you express your own feelings of loss. Even if they are not interested in talking about their loss, encourage teens to find ways to express their feelings that work for them, such as drawing, listening to music, exercising or writing in a journal. Also, encourage teens to participate in the funeral, burial and memorial activities. These events can be a great opportunity for teens to commemorate and say goodbye to their loved one. Allowing a teen to help in the decision making process ensures the service will be an important and meaningful event for them.

## **Lessons for Life**

An experience with grief in the teenage years can help prepare teens for the many challenges they will face throughout adulthood. With the help of a supportive adult, teens can learn important lessons about themselves and can discover the methods of coping that work best for them. They can also gain a more mature understanding of their own spirituality and of death as a part of life, as well as develop an appreciation for the value of life itself.

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