

Teen Grief

Grief: the process of experiencing the physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual responses to loss or the perception of loss.

Grief is a mix of emotions such as sadness, anger, guilt, frustration, fear and anxiety that occurs whenever we experience a loss or are anticipating a loss. The teen years are an especially difficult time to deal with the loss as young people are torn between independence and the need for support from parents and family. Teens feel conflicted and their feelings may be very intense at times, which feels even more overwhelming.

Signs of Grief in Teens:

- lack of concentration
- shock, numbness
- avoidance and retreat
- constant thoughts of the loss
- jealousy aimed at those who have what you do not
- anger
- self-blame
- confusion and feeling disoriented, feeling in a fog
- nervousness
- irritability
- declining grades (ask a teacher to help you, ask a friend to help too, as this becomes another loss)
- loss of interest in usual activities
- over-activity, acting too busy (to block out pain)
- wanting to be alone a lot
- deep sadness
- drug and/or alcohol use or abuse
- eating too much or too little (eating disorders)
- risk taking behavior (especially when guilt is involved, like in an accident that another teen was involved in)
- self-destructive, anti-social or criminal behavior
- self-harming behaviors (cutting, burning...)
- unsafe or unwanted sexual activity (often teens tell me they really only wanted someone to hold and comfort them. Be careful now as you are vulnerable)
- thinking about suicide (talk to a trusted adult)
- somatic manifestations of grief (stomach upsets, headaches, fatigue, symptoms similar to the deceased prior symptoms).

Healing in teens may look like:

- reorganizing life, gaining new insights, learning new skills
- reinvesting energy into life and perhaps getting involved in something meaningful (maybe related to the loss)
- feeling peace with the past

- ability to be alone and quiet as well as to be with others
- increased sense of inner strength and ability to listen to others
- increased empathy for others' feelings
- feelings of wellbeing and a sense of confidence in one's ability to get through challenges
- an ability to problem solve and seek help when needed
- reconnection, resiliency and hope for the future

Tips for Grieving Teens:

- Try to identify your feelings. Think about where and how you may be experiencing those feelings in your body.
- Find safe and healthy ways to express the range of those feelings.
- Write letters, poems, songs, stories and save them, share them with someone or shred them or burn them if you like.
- Arts and crafts help: finger-paints (really) pounding clay, playing with Play Doh (all my high school students love when I bring in
- Play-Doh for teens to play with while I talk to them and they always thank me profusely telling me it brought them back to a time in life when things were so much more carefree)
- Song writing and playing music or listening to music is something that helps. Many teens tell me they put on sad music or a sad movie to help them let it out. Dancing to loud and uplifting or angry music helps some teens too.
- Punch a pillow, hit a punching bag, exercise, work out. Exercise is the number one anti-anxiety and antidepressant around. Nothing like sweating after a good hard workout when feeling a lot of different feelings. Workouts especially good for coping with anger and rage.
- Shred paper, throw bottles at a recycling center into the bin, stomp on paper cups, pop bubble wrap, be creative.
- Guitar Hero or Rock Band is a great way to vent, plus it keeps your mind focused which is a grief break. You need that now.
- Eat healthy foods and snacks (it is tempting to live on chocolate and junk, but actually healthy foods help you to feel better. Drink plenty of water too. Water helps to metabolize the chemicals in your body that are caused by trauma or stress. Too much Adrenalin can cause headaches and stomachaches.
- Get enough rest and take naps if you can...grief is hard work. Many teens use sleep as a way to cope with grief too. Many teens share with me that if they are cranky and short tempered a nap will help them enormously. Rest when you can.
- Keep a journal. You don't have to write in it every day. Hide it. Write down your feelings, thoughts, concerns, fears, and your regrets. You may share them with a trusted adult or not. I know families who keep a running journal going back and forth. They keep it in a dining room or kitchen. The teen can share something personal that they want the adult to know or ask a question that feels too hard to do in person. Then leave the journal in the identified spot. Later on the adult can pick it up and read it and respond and then replace the journal in the spot. Great way to communicate tough to talk about subjects.
- Don't keep your feelings inside, find someone you trust, who won't judge you and who know how to listen. Share with them with or just hang out in their presence. You don't have to talk about it. You don't have to share everything either. You may just want to share a bit. Every teen should have five safe adults to turn to: parent, neighbor, teacher, coach, clergy person, uncle. Calling a teen hotline is also a great place to start. 2nd Floor is a national youth helpline : 1-888-222-2228. Call them 24/7 and talk about anything. They are trained counselors who are there to talk to you and to listen. If you are suicidal or homicidal they will not keep it confidential and will send help. That is good. Need you around a long time and if you need help let's get you that help.

- Try to laugh when you can. Many times after a loss, those left behind feel guilty to go on and to enjoy life. It helps though to laugh.
- Spend time with friends and family, people who care about you and who allow you to grieve in your own way and time.
- Let your friends know what you need. Some teens talk about a loss a lot, others don't want to.
- Write a letter. It can be written to the person who died, someone who hurt you or even to God. Say whatever you need to say.
- Visit the cemetery if it makes you feel better.
- Make a memory book, collage, scrap book of memories
- Remember that grief takes time, it is a process not an event.
- Let yourself off the hook. It's common to feel responsible for a loss. If you feel guilty, please talk to a counselor. Guilty, regret and anger can hurt teens if left unexpressed.
- Join a free bereavement peer support group for teens in your state by going to the Dougy Center website: www.dougy.org and go to find resources by state
- Listen to those around you who you trust. If they are concerned about some of your behaviors that may not be healthy please take time to listen. Sometimes teens don't even realize that they are harming themselves in ways that others close to them can see. If you have people telling you they are concerned listen and try calling the hotline above or talk to a trusted adult. Don't try to go this road alone.

More Tips for Teens after a Death:

- Keep promises to yourself. Be honest with yourself. If you need help ask for help and get help.
- Talk to your parents about your grief from time to time.
- Let yourself feel numb especially if the death was recent or sudden.
- Attend the funeral, wake or memorial service. Rituals help us to memorialize someone who died. Sharing the loss helps.
- Tell the story over and over if you need to with those who listen.
- Use the name of the person who died.
- Let yourself cry. Crying is a good way to express grief. It is healthy and good for you. Some say "be strong" but the truth is that crying is a sign of strength and is important on your healing journey. And if you don't feel like crying that is fine too. Don't make yourself feel badly for anyway that tears come or don't come.
- Don't let the stuff other kids say upset you too much. Try to ignore it as they don't know what to say to you. (Of course you could always enlist the help of an adult in school and invite me to your school to speak in an assembly on Teens and Grief, and then those peers will be better equipped with things to say to you and things to avoid saying).
- Be nice to yourself. Take it easy. Grief is hard work. Talk to teachers as some teens notice their grades suffer after a loss. It is often hard to focus and concentrate on studies. Some teens talk about questioning what is the point of it all especially if a young friend died. Talk to a caring adult about this as well as your teachers. Most teachers will really want to help support you to do your best academically. Studying in small spurts helps too with plenty of breaks.
- If the person who died was killed in an accident, find a safe adult to talk to about all of your "if-onlys". Otherwise those thoughts can keep you up at night and distract you during the day. Write them down and talk to someone about them. That is a normal part of the grieving process when someone died suddenly or in an accident.

More information can be found at [Grief Speaks](#)