



Grieving Teens

GRIEF IS THE NATURAL RESPONSE TO LOSS and yet it can be quite challenging to know the right things to do to support someone who is grieving. Many adults struggle to know how to relate to teens even on a good day. They can be amazingly mature in some ways and unexpectedly childish in others. Additionally, adolescence is a time when many young people are stand-offish, moody, and difficult to please. Here is some information that may help you to provide support in an age-appropriate manner to grieving teens.

What's typical at this age? Grief is emotionally, physically, and cognitively exhausting, leaving little energy or patience for anything else. Many teens have a difficult time sleeping after a significant loss. Lack of sleep or poor-quality sleep leads to short tempers, mood swings, difficulty making decisions, and forgetfulness. Additionally, teens may struggle in school as their grief makes it hard to concentrate and interferes with memory.

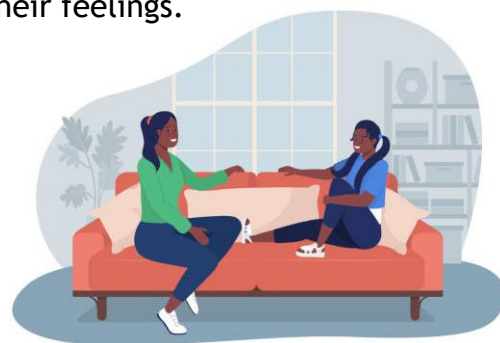
Teens may be hard on themselves for not grieving in what they think is the “right” way - not crying enough, crying too much, not being strong, or just being a mess in general. It is important to help them know that grief comes in many forms, none of which are more correct than the others.

A very common grief response involves regret. This may be a result of something that was said or done that one wishes they hadn't, or something that wasn't said or done that they believe they should have. What makes this especially painful is the lack of ability to go back and apologize or fix it.



Grief as an interpersonal experience - Adolescence is naturally a time of increasing independence and differentiation from family. Some grieving teens may spend more time with family than they did previously. Others may spend more time than ever with friends, turning to them for support and comfort. Many find that the way they relate to their friends changed and may find themselves connecting with different friends who better understand what they're going through. Still others may withdraw and isolate, preferring solitary activities such as journaling, art or music as ways to express and process their feelings.

The power of listening - Because we care, adults often are quick to jump in and try to fix things for young people. Frequently this involves pointing out what they're doing wrong or telling them what we think they should do. Teens rarely find this helpful. A more helpful way to start is to listen, carefully, without evaluation or judgement. Empathize with their struggle and validate their emotions before offering solutions.



Important things to keep in mind when you or someone you know is experiencing grief:



Death is probably the best known but not the only cause of grief. People may grieve over many different types of losses including prolonged/indefinite separation from a loved one, loss of a valued dream or goal, loss of a meaningful part of one's identity, or a dramatic change in one's way of life.



All losses are not the same and everyone doesn't grieve in the same way. It is neither healthy nor helpful to compare grief. Just because someone is not reacting the same way as you or doing the same things as you to cope, doesn't mean they aren't doing it right. What helps for one person may not help for another. If someone you know needs to tell you about a loss they've experienced, listen. Don't assume you know what they're going through just because you've been through a similar loss.



Allow yourself to feel whatever you're feeling. If you need to cry, cry. If you don't, don't. Whatever emotional reaction you have is legitimate and okay to express. It is not healthy to "put up a good front" and bottle up feelings. Emotions are not a sign of weakness, they're a reflection of love.



It takes time. Grief is not something that can be resolved in a weekend. Often the reality of the situation doesn't even begin to sink in for quite some time. For many people, it takes a full cycle of all four seasons and all the holidays before all aspects of the loss are evident. Don't allow anyone to pressure you to speed things up (e.g. "Aren't you over that yet?") if you're not ready. Similarly, don't let anyone hold you back when you are ready to move on.



Find ways to remember the past while engaging with the present and finding hope for the future. It is important to find ways of honoring those who have died (or are no longer actively part of our lives for other reasons). They don't stop mattering to us or having an impact on us. We are challenged to honor their memory and the life they led without sacrificing the ability to move forward in our own lives. If your grief is not for a person but for a way of life, the loss of a dream, the loss of a personal identity, or another form of loss, this is still applicable. Starting a new chapter of your life does not negate the relevance of the chapters that came before. The challenge for you is to incorporate some element of those past ways, identities, and dreams into your newly evolving reality. It means continuing to love, to grow, to learn, to laugh, and to live.



If the pain of grief has become so intense that life no longer seems worth living, help is available. Call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 1-800-273-8255, the Crisis Center 330-452-6000, or send a text to 741741. It can get better.