

Understanding a Grieving Teen & Helping Them Heal

by the Schoedinger Griefcare Program



Teenagers can be a challenging age group for adults wanting to help a child deal with grief. While a teen is typically mature enough to understand what death is and that death is final, they have fewer coping skills than adults. And a teenager will be facing their journey of grief during at an age that is already impacted by the emotional and physical challenges of adolescence.

Adults are often quick to offer advice, give opinions or make judgments. Experts advise parents that teens respond better to adults who choose to be **companions** on the grief journey rather than direct it.

The following Six Basic Principles of Teen Grief are adapted from Helping Teens Cope with Death by *The Dougy Center* Visit <http://www.dougy.org> for additional resources.

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 allows 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.

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.

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.

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.

“When children are not given the opportunity to grieve, they may learn to avoid love, to withdraw emotionally from others, and to build a life free of emotional turmoil so that they never experience great joy or great pain. Children who have lost a loved one can benefit from being part of a group that provides them with loving support and the safety to ask questions and find answers.” - Dr. Virginia Simpson, PhD

Parents and adults play an important role in providing children of all ages the opportunity to grieve. You can help them during this difficult time by listening, being patient, being honest and being available.