



# Mission Hospice Society

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## TEENAGERS WHO ARE GRIEVING

Listed are some common responses teens may have when they experience the death of someone significant in their lives. It is important to remember that every individual, no matter the age, has a unique way of responding and coping with loss, and there is **no correct way of grieving**. However, most 11-19 year olds may experience at least some of the reactions listed below:

- **ACADEMICS/WITHDRAWAL** ~ Difficulty concentrating in school and with homework. It is not uncommon for teens to withdraw after a death from activities they previously enjoyed or from friends & family. Often they do not want to be singled out as being different.
- **INITIAL REACTIONS** ~ Some common immediate responses teens have to a death may be numbness, indifference, and or disbelief. These feelings enable the teen to absorb what has happened without becoming overwhelmed. Often, adults are concerned about the response of indifference. However, this response is common because teens often want to appear 'normal' to their peers so they suppress or postpone their feelings until they feel safe to express them.
- **FEELINGS** ~ Feelings often are volatile. Protest is an important emotion. The word bereaved actually translates "to be robbed". When someone significant dies in a teen's life, they may feel 'ripped off' and have a need to protest the loss. Teens may experience intense feelings of sadness or anger which may be triggered from random events. These feelings may be directed at family members, friends, the deceased, god, or themselves and is often demonstrated through fighting, defiance or verbal outbursts. Teens also often feel self-blame and guilt when they experience a death.

It is common for teens to feel there was something they could have or should have said/done. Feelings of fear are also common. Fear of other family members dying or fear for their own well being in regards to who will care for them both physically/emotionally and financially.

- **CRYING** ~. Teens may tear up but not cry. They also may not cry publicly and it should not be assumed that they are not crying or that they should be crying.
- **EATING PROBLEMS AND DISORDERS** ~ Some teens express their grief primarily through the use of their body. It is common for teens to experience a loss of appetite and stomach aches with the loss of a loved one, however, when other unusual behaviours are present parents need to use caution; secretive eating, exiting to bathroom after meals, vomiting sounds from bathroom, withdrawal to eat even when hungry, preoccupation with conversations around feeling/looking fat, change in facial color and shape. \*If any of these are noticed parents are encouraged to contact a medical doctor or counselor.

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**NIGHTMARES AND BAD DREAMS** ~ Dreams after the death of someone is common. The dreams may bring comfort, feelings of saying goodbye, inspirational, but also can be disturbing or frightening. It is also very common for teens to believe they saw the person who has died in a public place or to hear their voice.

- **PHYSICAL REACTIONS** ~ Some of the following physical reactions may appear immediately after the death, however some may appear over weeks and may be more prolonged in their stay; weight loss/gain, headaches, anxiety/panic attacks, insomnia, fatigue, desire for increased sleep, internal pain, muscle aches, digestive problems, heart palpitations, heavy breathing, dizziness, visual changes, difficulty urinating/constipation, dehydration/dry mouth, congestion, increased risk to illness and infection.
- **PLAYING** ~ Often adults try to deem play as appropriate or not. However, such judgments do not support the teens way of grieving. Teens use play to express emotions and cope with death through; sports, video games, board games, table games, movies and hobbies or collections.

**REGRESSIVE BEHAVIOURS** ~ Reverting to younger behaviours is common when teens experience grief due to feelings of insecurity, uncertainty or anxiety about the future which are brought on by the death. Some common regressive behaviours are: clingy, clumsiness, shy/timid, thumb sucking, bed wetting, stutter or other changes in speech and immature play.

- **CHANGE IN CORE BELIEFS** ~ Teens often react self centered to a death. They feel the death is a direct or personal attack on them or their belief system. They begin to question their spiritual beliefs as they commonly felt death would not affect “their family”, and wonder where their person is now.
- **RISK TAKING BEHAVIOUR/SUICIDE** ~ An increase in risk taking behaviour is commonly seen in grieving teens. Some of these behaviours are: skipping school, use of alcohol & drugs, increased sexual activity or suicidal thoughts. Commonly these behaviours are used by teens to escape feelings caused by the death. It is important to watch for the following suicidal behaviours and contact professional help; continues or persistent talk of wanting to join the person who died, increased reckless behaviours, sudden change in attention to appearance, giving away possessions, talking about desire to die and means to do so, withdrawl from all friends and prolonged depression, abuse of substances.

For more information or support, please contact the Child and Youth Bereavement Coordinator at Mission Hospice Society at 604-826-2235 or email: [childandyouth@missionhospice.bc.ca](mailto:childandyouth@missionhospice.bc.ca)

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## Supporting Teens Who Are Grieving a Death

### *What Youth Grief Can Look Like*

- Physical symptoms
- Anger – mad easier than sad
- Sleep disturbance
- Increased need to be with peers
- Irritability
- Dysregulation
- Loss of confidence/fear
- Increased need for affection
- Difficulty concentrating
- Changes in academic performance

### *What a Grieving Youth May Be Feeling*

- Anger
- Embarrassed about showing emotions
- Shock/disbelief
- Wondering about what makes life worth living
- ‘Nothing makes sense...’
- Envious
- Isolation
- Frustrated with peers
- Alone
- Questioning spiritual/religious beliefs
- Less safe

### *Roadblocks to Communication. Try to Avoid....*

#### The Fix-It Trap

Ex/ “Everything happens for a reason...” or “At least...”

#### Advising, Giving Solutions

Ex/ “You just need to...”

#### Praising

Ex/ “You are so strong.”

#### 4. Reassuring

Ex/ “Time heals all...” or “I know how you feel...”



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## ***Supporting Grieving Youth***

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- Model healthy grief. Don't preach it
- Allow for expression of emotions.
- Cultivate ability to be with big feelings.
- Help distinguish between feelings vs. behaviors.
- Do not try to "fix" their pain – bear witness to it.
- Be aware of the struggle for independence during a time of increased vulnerability.
- Explore if there are unmet informational needs?
- Help teen identify who he/she can talk to
- Offer opportunities to connect with other teenagers in a similar situation.
- Acknowledge the situation and ask for permission to talk about it with them.
- Explore what the youth knows/understands
- Encourage youth to ask questions or share concerns, reassuring that all are okay.

## ***Signs that additional help may be needed***

- Poor relationships with peers
- Self medication through use of alcohol/drugs
- Anxiety/panic attacks
- Progressive isolation and lack of interest in previously enjoyed activities
- Chronic physical symptoms without organic findings
- Persistent denial of a death
- On-going sleep/eating disturbances
- Prolonged changes in typical behavior
- Any signs of mental health challenges
- Suicidal thoughts, comments or behaviors

## ***Key Principles for Supporting Grieving Youth***

- Show up & open the conversation
- Listen
- Be honest
- Foster an environment where youth can ask questions
- Know that it is okay to not have the answer

*Resource:* [www.andreawarnick.com](http://www.andreawarnick.com)

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## Experiencing Grief as a Teenager

Unfortunately for too many teenagers, death and the resulting grief are part of everyday life. By the end of high school, 5 percent of today's students will have lost one of their parents by the end of high school, and 20 percent will have experienced the death of someone close by age 18. When surveyed, 90% say they have experienced the death of a loved one.<sup>1</sup> From 2010 to mid-2018, more than 170 U.S. students were killed in school shootings<sup>2</sup>.

### Common Reactions of Grieving Teens

Grief is as unique as the people who experience it, but some reactions to grief are universal and considered normal or typical. Most teens who experience the death of a loved one will exhibit some of the following behaviors or feelings:

- Heaviness in the chest or tightness in the throat.
- An empty feeling in the stomach and a loss of appetite.
- Guilt over something said or done, or something left unsaid or undone.
- Anger and lashing out at others, sometimes at any time for no reason.
- Intense anger at the deceased for dying, and later feelings of guilt for being angry.
- Mood changes over the slightest things.
- Unexpected outbursts or crying.
- Feelings of restlessness and simultaneous difficulty concentrating on a task at hand.
- A feeling that the loss isn't real and didn't happen at all.
- Sensing the deceased's presence, expecting the deceased to walk through the door at the usual time, hearing his or her voice, or a sensation of "seeing" the deceased out of the corner of their eye.
- Talking to pictures.
- Conversing with the deceased in a special place.
- Sleeplessness or troubling dreams.
- Assuming mannerisms, traits or wearing clothes that were favorites of the deceased.
- Emotional regression and even bed-wetting, which can be very upsetting for teenagers.
- A need to retell and remember things about their loved one, to a point of repetition that becomes a burden to others.
- An inability to say anything, or the need to be overly responsible.
- Taking on the role of the "new" man or woman of the household, distracting themselves from their own feelings by taking care of everyone else.



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## No “Right” or “Wrong” Way to Grieve

A teen who experiences the death of a loved one needs to know that there is no “right” or “wrong” way to grieve. But there are some helpful and some not-so-helpful ways to grieve. Providing constructive ways for teenagers to express their grief will help prevent prolonged or unresolved sadness and depression. Suggest constructive ways to express their feelings—talking to someone they trust, journaling, creating art—instead of holding feelings in or turning to more destructive coping methods, such as drinking, substance abuse or antisocial or high-risk behaviors.

## The Ebb and Flow of Grief

Grief comes and goes. It is not something teens “get over,” but something they learn to live with. Although the first and second years may be especially difficult, teenagers grow up with their grief and experience their loss at different times in their development.

Special days and important times may cause emotions to resurface, either through memories or what-if contemplation. Part of normal development for a teenager is to reintegrate what they have learned about their loss into their current developmental stage. For example, a high school senior may wear his deceased father’s shirt to his graduation exercises. A 19-year-old bride may propose her first toast to her deceased grandmother, a most significant figure in her life, at her wedding reception.

The teenage years can be a turbulent time, but they can be particularly turbulent for teens who have experienced the death of a relative or friend. Like the changing seasons, the grief these teens experience will be ongoing and ever-changing as they grow into adulthood.

*Resource: <https://www.vitas.com/family-and-caregiver-support/grief-and-bereavement/children-and-grief/experiencing-grief-as-a-teenager/>*

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## COMPANIONING A TEENAGER THROUGH THEIR JOURNEY OF GRIEF

A very important factor in determining how a teen will cope with the death of someone significant in his or her life is the responses of others around them. Teens commonly share their feelings in safe environments and where sharing is encouraged. However, teens commonly do not respond to being rushed into the grieving process either. Below are some suggestions that may help you to create an atmosphere in which the teen(s) feel encouraged and supported to share their feelings.

- Have **patience** and be **available**. A teen may not want to or be ready to share their feelings throughout the days and weeks, and months following a death. Gently remind the teen that you are available and then wait for them to come to you. Or, you can ask them if there is another adult they may want to speak with when they are ready.
- Teens commonly respond to adults who act as companions on their journey through grief rather than adults who attempt to direct it.
- Let the teen know you are not **afraid** to discuss death or their loss with them. Be a role model and express your own natural feelings to loss in an honest manner. **It is very important for adults to be aware of their own grief issues as this affects their relationship with grieving teens.**
- Let the teens know their feelings and responses are okay. Grief is a difficult experience and there is no right way or right length of time to experience it.
- Acknowledge each teen's unique responses to grief and provide words and expressions of comfort and affection.
- Discuss healthy and safe ways to express feelings of grief: physical exercise, journaling, writing a letter, listening to music or creating a memory CD, creating a memory box or scrapbook.
- Offer the teen the opportunity to be involved in the funeral/memorial process if they would like. Commonly teens have things they would like to do or say at memorials that adults are not aware of.



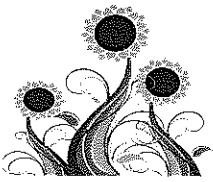
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- Encourage the teen to share their story when they are ready. Ask the teen to share special stories about the loved one and if they have any pictures or special items they would like to share.
- Ask the teen what they need from you and those around them while they are going through this difficult time. It is important you try your best to follow through with these requests when possible, as this builds an honest relationship.
- If a teen does not wish to share their loss with you, ask them if you can help them to find another adult or teen they may connect with.
- Attempt to keep routines and forms of discipline consistent as prior to the loss. Consistency commonly provides security and reassurance to all ages.
- Reassure the teen of their shared worries and concerns. Often teens will worry about changes regarding their financial situation, living arrangements and social lives after the death of a parent or significant person. Discuss honestly any changes that may or will occur so the teen feels involved but also is not surprised by more loss or changes.

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## The Grieving High School Student – Tips for Teachers

High school students are often philosophical about life and death and believe that death won't happen to them. While functioning at the formal operational stage of cognitive development, they appear to use "adult" approaches of problem solving and abstract thinking in dealing with their grief. However, it is important to remember that high school students are not yet adults. In their attempts to make sense of the world and what has happened to them, you may see depression, denial, anger, risk-taking and acting-out behaviours. You may see teens fighting against their vulnerability because they want very much to be independent.

<i>Common Behaviours to Expect</i>	<i>How to help</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Withdrawal from parents and from other adults</li><li>• Angry outbursts</li><li>• Increased risk-taking behaviours (substances, reckless driving, sexual behaviours)</li><li>• Pushing the limits of rules</li><li>• Lack of concentration; inability to focus</li><li>• Hanging out with a small group of friends</li><li>• Sad face, evidence of crying</li><li>• Sleepiness; exhaustion</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Allow for regression and dependency</li><li>• Encourage expression of feelings such as sorrow, anger, guilt, regret</li><li>• Understand and allow for variation in maturity level</li><li>• Answer questions honestly and provide factual information</li><li>• Model appropriate responses, showing the students your own grief</li><li>• Avoid power struggles and allow choices</li><li>• Help students understand and resolve feelings of helplessness</li><li>• Assign students with plans for completion of assignments</li><li>• Allow for some flexibility in assignments, eg. Be willing to adapt assignments to topics relevant to the student's current experience</li></ul>

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