

Helping teens cope with grief

What exactly is grief?

Coping with grief is a complex issue that almost everyone will have to face at one time or another. For teenagers (who are already dealing with a confusing and challenging period in their physical and emotional development), grief can be especially difficult to come to terms with.

Firstly, what is grief? It's the pain and hurt we feel when someone or something we love is lost. Grief can make us feel afraid, sad, angry, confused, inquisitive, tired and even relieved.

How to help child survivors

Just like with adults, grief for a teen is a normal and understandable reaction to loss. And again, just like with adults, teen grief is unique to each individual. Everyone grieves in their own way, for their own reasons and for their own amount of time.

We generally associate grief with the death of a person close to us, but almost any form of loss can cause grief:

- Loss of a pet
- A friend moving to another city
- A sibling moving out of the family home
- Selling the family home and moving away

These examples may not seem as severe and tragic as the death of a loved one, but for a teen, they may feel almost as devastating and equally traumatic.

After a loss, a teen is likely to go through the 5 stages of grief as outlined by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, MD, and David Kessler:

Denial – Refusal to believe it actually happened.

Anger – The need to be mad at/blame someone or something.

Bargaining – A collection of 'If only...' or 'What if...' thoughts.

Depression – Intense sadness that seems like it may never end.

Acceptance – This is not 'feeling OK' – it's finally coming to terms with the reality of the situation.



But how can you actually help a teen who's going through the grieving process?

The individual may feel angry about many things. Anger is a normal reaction to trauma, but it can hurt relationships and make it difficult to think clearly. Anger also can be frightening. If anger leads to violent behaviour or abuse, it's dangerous. Go to a safe place and call for help straight away. Make sure that children are in a safe place as well.

It's hard to talk to someone who is angry. One thing you can do is set up a time-out system. This helps you find a way to talk even while angry. Here's one way to do this:

- Reassure them that it's OK to grieve and to express their feelings, both emotional and physical. Grief is not something that needs to be avoided or be ashamed of. Helping teens realise this may empower them to identify and address their grief reactions.
- Be a good listener. As much as they may withdraw into themselves, there may be times where your teen really wants to talk. Try to be as 'present' as you can. Let them talk for as long as they're happy to do so.
- Be patient with them. No one knows how long their grief will last. Grief doesn't have a timetable. Allow it to run its course without the pressure that they 'should be over it by now'. The grieving process may bring some unpredictable behaviour and emotions to the surface. As long as the behaviour isn't destructive, be as supportive and non-judgemental as you can. If their behaviour does become destructive, talk to them and gently try to steer them back to a more positive path. If necessary, seeking professional help may be advisable.
- Be aware that certain dates or events may act as triggers to intensify their grief, for example, birthdays, anniversaries, holidays, prom, graduation etc. Prepare yourself for the heightened emotion those days may bring.
- Be ready for anything! Allow your teen to grieve in their own unique way, but be prepared for the fact that their mood and/or behaviour may change day to day, and possibly even hour to hour!

Communication, patience and understanding are the keys to helping a teen through what may be the first major life setback they've ever experienced. The more you understand what they're going through, the more you will be able to offer them the comfort and support they need.



Critical support when you need it

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