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## Helping teens who are grieving

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#### Key points

- Know what is normal for your teen's age group. As teens grow and develop, they change the way they think about and express grief. Although each teen is different, there are some expected changes in thinking that occur during the early, middle, and late teenage years.
- Listen and watch for opportunities. If you listen closely when a teen is talking and watch his or her behavior, you will find opportunities to help the teen who is grieving.
- Don't force a teen to talk about his or her feelings. If the teen feels comfortable with you and feels that you are willing to listen, he or she will talk when ready.
- Make time to listen to a teen who wants to talk. When a teen wants to talk, give him or her your undivided attention. This will let the teen know that he or she is important and that grieving is important.

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- Grief and Grieving

### **WHAT?** What's different about teens who are grieving?

Teens express their grief differently depending on their age and emotional maturity. The teen years can be divided into 3 developmental phases: the early, middle, and late teen years. Each age group differs regarding the expression of grief.

- The early teen years (ages 12 to 14) are a time when teens search for the answer to the question, "Am I okay?" At this phase, teens are very concerned about fitting in and often act as if there is an imaginary audience watching everything they do. These teens may feel ill at ease when expressing grief. Since they usually are not concerned about what other people think unless it relates directly to them, they may have a very difficult time understanding another person's reaction to loss if it is not the same as theirs.
- The middle teen years (ages 14 to 16) are a time when teens believe that they are indestructible and that bad things won't happen to them. They cannot imagine their own death and often think they will live forever. These teens may express their grief by taking unhealthy risks, such as driving too fast or drinking alcohol.
- The late teen years (ages 16 to 18) are a time when teens search for meaningful relationships. These teens are better able to understand complex relationships and are more interested in another person's point of view. They have a better understanding of others' thoughts and feelings. Teens of this age grieve much as adults do.

### **What's different about helping teens when they are grieving?**

It may be difficult to know how to approach a teen and help him or her through the grief process. Because teens are concerned about fitting in and not calling attention to themselves, they may feel awkward talking about their feelings. They may worry about what other people think about them. In addition, because teens are searching for their own values and beliefs, they are often uncomfortable talking about their feelings with adults. They may worry that adults will try to give them answers and not listen to how they feel.

To help a teen who is grieving, you need to listen to the teen and watch his or her behavior. This will help you determine how uncomfortable the teen is about talking with you. Ask the teen to let you know how he or she feels. Do not press the teen to talk until he or she is ready. Be attentive and listen when the teen chooses to talk about his or her feelings.

### **Test Your Knowledge**

1. Young teens often express their feelings in the same way as adults do.
  - a. True

This answer is incorrect.

Young teens do not often express their feelings in the same way as adults do. Young teens may feel ill at ease when expressing grief. Young teens may have a very difficult time understanding another person's reaction to loss if it is not the same as theirs.

- b. False

This answer is correct.

Young teens do not often express their feelings in the same way as adults do. Young teens may feel ill at ease when expressing grief. Young teens may have a very difficult time understanding another person's reaction to loss if it is not the same as theirs.

2. Most teens like to share their feelings with adults.

a. True

This answer is incorrect.

Most teens do not like to share their feelings with adults. Teens often feel awkward talking about their feelings. They may worry about what other people think. Because teens are searching for their own values and beliefs, they are often uncomfortable talking about their feelings with adults. They may worry that adults will try to give them answers and not listen to how they feel.

b. False

This answer is correct.

Most teens do not like to share their feelings with adults. Teens often feel awkward talking about their feelings. They may worry about what other people think. Because teens are searching for their own values and beliefs, they are often uncomfortable talking about their feelings with adults. They may worry that adults will try to give them answers and not listen to how they feel.



### Why does a teen who is grieving need help?

The way adults help teens express their feelings often lays the foundation for how the teens will express themselves as adults. It is important to help teens grieve because even though they often act like adults, they are still developing emotionally. They need guidance to help them understand themselves, to solve their problems, and to develop clearer, more adult thinking.

### Test Your Knowledge

1. Adults need to help teens express their feelings during the grieving process because it helps teens:

a. Forget about themselves and concentrate on the feelings of other people.

This answer is incorrect.

Adults need to help teens express their feelings during the grieving process because it helps teens develop emotionally and intellectually. Even though teens may act like adults, they are still growing and developing. They do not think like adults. Adults can help teens express their feelings, develop emotionally, and develop clearer, more adult thinking. The correct answer is b.

b. Develop emotionally and intellectually.

This answer is correct.

Adults need to help teens express their feelings during the grieving process because it helps

teens develop emotionally and intellectually. Even though teens may act like adults, they are still growing and developing. They do not think like adults. Adults can help teens express their feelings, develop emotionally, and develop clearer, more adult thinking.

- c. Rely more on each other and less on adults in the future.

This answer is incorrect.

Adults need to help teens express their feelings during the grieving process because it helps teens develop emotionally and intellectually. Even though teens may act like adults, they are still growing and developing. They do not think like adults. Adults can help teens express their feelings, develop emotionally, and develop clearer, more adult thinking. The correct answer is b.

- d. Learn self-control.

This answer is incorrect.

Adults need to help teens express their feelings during the grieving process because it helps teens develop emotionally and intellectually. Even though teens may act like adults, they are still growing and developing. They do not think like adults. Adults can help teens express their feelings, develop emotionally, and develop clearer, more adult thinking. The correct answer is b.



### How can I help a teen who is grieving?

You may feel unsure about how to approach a teen who is grieving. Here are some general concepts to keep in mind:

- Let your teen react to the loss in his or her own way. Some teens are naturally quiet and may need to express their grief in private. Some teens feel so frustrated and helpless that they may react strongly, even showing intense rage. They may need reassurance that their intense feelings are normal reactions to a stressful situation.
- Allow your teen to question. Teens who experience loss often question the meaning of life, what happens after death, why does tragedy occur, and why bad things happen to good people. You can best help your teen by allowing him or her to ask questions.
- Give your teen time to adjust to a loss. Teens vary in their ability to adjust to major changes, including losses in their lives. Your teen may not be ready to respond to a loss at the same time as you or other people. Do not force your teen to grieve on your timetable.
- Reassure your teen that grieving is normal. Your teen may need reassurance that the sadness and other feelings of grief will lessen over time. Use comforting touches and hugs to help convey your understanding and love.
- Set reasonable limits on your teen's behavior. When a major loss occurs in a teen's life, rebellious behaviors may become more dramatic. This is often a sign that a teen is having intense feelings about what has just happened. Teens usually feel more comfortable when they are clear about how far they can go with their behavior. Be firm with your teen and clear about your expectations of him or her.

Here are some ways to help a teen who is grieving.

1. Teach your teen about the normal grieving process. Because teens normally have mood swings and conflicting feelings, they may need help telling the difference between normal feelings and feelings of grief. Talk with your teen about the grieving process.
2. Listen to your teen. Be prepared to drop what you are doing and listen when he or she is ready to talk about the loss. Let your teen talk about the loss in indirect ways, if he or she needs to. Listen for the feelings that your teen is expressing. Adults often want to help a teen or ease the teen's pain. Resist the urge to help your teen by talking, offering advice, or solving his or her problems. Let your teen use his or her own problem-solving skills. Practice active listening so that your teen will talk more.
3. Handle serious behavior problems appropriately. Sometimes a teen's behavior does not improve when reasonable limits have been set by adults. Start by talking with your teen about problem behavior. Seek professional counseling for your teen or for yourself if you are not able to handle problem behaviors on your own.
4. Tell other significant adults in your teen's life about the recent loss. Teachers, school counselors, and coaches may also be able to help your teen work through his or her grief.

Following are some activities you can do with the different ages of teens to help when they are grieving:

- **Early teens:** Since these teens may feel ill at ease when expressing grief, ask your teen to draw a picture, make a picture collage, or write a story or poem about his or her loss. Talk about the feelings that are expressed in the activity.
- **Middle teens:** Since they cannot imagine their own death and often think that they will live forever, middle teens need activities that express their feelings in a healthy way. Look at photographs, watch a sad movie, or listen to sad songs with your teen. Use the time to let your teen talk or just sit quietly.
- **Late teens:** Although late teens grieve more like adults, they may not want to participate in the activities associated with a major loss. For example, they may not be able to help other people after a natural disaster or attend a service for a deceased relative. Respect your teen's position. Do not force your teen to participate in activities that he or she feels uncomfortable doing. It may interfere with his or her ability to grieve. Your teen will grieve on his or her own time. Help your teen find activities to express his or her grief, such as a private service at home for the loved one who died.

### Test Your Knowledge

1. If a young teen is not able to talk about his or her feelings, set up an appointment for the teen with a psychologist.

a. True

This answer is incorrect.

If a young teen is not able to talk about his or her feelings, you may not need to set up an appointment for the teen with a psychologist. Offer to draw a picture, make a picture collage, or write a story or poem with him or her.

b. False

This answer is correct.

If a young teen is not able to talk about his or her feelings, you may not need to set up an appointment for the teen with a psychologist. Offer to draw a picture, make a picture collage, or write a story or poem with him or her.

2. Middle teens may need help understanding that death happens to everyone.

a. True

This answer is correct.

Middle teens may need help understanding that death happens to everyone. Many middle teens cannot imagine their own death and often think that they will live forever. They need help from adults to understand that death happens to everyone.

b. False

This answer is incorrect.

Middle teens may need help understanding that death happens to everyone. Many middle teens cannot imagine their own death and often think that they will live forever. They need help from adults to understand that death happens to everyone.

3. Adults may need to demand that older teens help make funeral or memorial service arrangements for family members who have died.

a. True

This answer is incorrect.

Adults should not demand that older teens help make funeral or memorial service arrangements for family members who have died. Demanding that an older teen participate in activities that he or she feels uncomfortable doing may interfere with his or her ability to grieve.

b. False

This answer is correct.

Adults should not demand that older teens help make funeral or memorial service arrangements for family members who have died. Demanding that an older teen participate in activities that he or she feels uncomfortable doing may interfere with his or her ability to grieve.



**Where to go from here**

Now that you have read this information, you are ready to help a teen who is grieving.

### **Talk with a health professional**

If you have questions about this information, take it with you when you visit your health professional. You may want to use a highlighter to mark areas or make notes in the margins of the pages where you have questions.

If you would like more information about helping teens deal who are grieving, the following resources are available:

### **Organizations**

#### **National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization**

1700 Diagonal Road  
Suite 625  
Alexandria, VA 22314

Phone: 1-800-658-8898  
(703) 837-1500  
Fax: (703) 837-1233  
E-mail: [nhpco\\_info@nhpco.org](mailto:nhpco_info@nhpco.org)  
Web Address: <http://www.nhpco.org>

The U.S. National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization (NHPCO) offers information on local hospice and palliative care programs across America. NHPCO is committed to improving end-of-life care and expanding access to hospice care with the goal of improving quality of life for dying people and their loved ones.

#### **Hospice Association of America**

228 Seventh Street, S.E.  
Washington, DC 20003

Phone: (202) 546-4759  
Fax: (202) 547-9559  
Web Address: <http://www.hospice-america.org>

The Hospice Association of America (HAA) seeks to heighten the public visibility of hospice services. HHA offers a number of helpful, practical publications for people who are considering hospice, including consumer guides, fact sheets, historical perspectives, and other background information. The Web site offers information from the legislative, regulatory, research, legal, and public relations departments, including "Hospice Facts and Statistics."

### **Support Group**

**Rainbows**

2100 Golf Road

Suite 370

Rolling Meadows, IL 60008-4231

Phone: 1-800-266-3206  
(847) 952-1770  
Fax: (847) 952-1774  
E-mail: [info@rainbows.org](mailto:info@rainbows.org)  
Web Address: <http://www.rainbows.org>

Rainbows is an international organization that offers peer support for children and adults who are grieving a death, divorce, or other painful transition in their families. Groups are led by trained adults. This organization provides an online newsletter, information, and referrals.

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