

## Grief & Teens

In early stages of grief, overwhelm & disbelief is normal. This can look like sudden crying, shutting down, sleep disruption, trouble concentrating, brief changes in behavior or mood, and emotional dysregulation - give a lot of space for these early reactions. It's the brain, heart, and body's way of processing something painful and very unfair (the loss of a loved one).

Over the first few weeks it is normal to begin asking difficult questions that often don't have logical (or any) answers: "Why? How? How come? What if? Do you think?"

Empathetic and supportive responses that keep the communication open are helpful.

Example: "How could this have happened?"

Possible Answer: "I don't know why these things happen. We may never have an answer to some of our questions, but I'm here for you. Is there anything I can do for you? Thank you for asking me."

It's also very normal and difficult to process the statements that often come as we process through loss: "I wish.... I should have.... If only.... It's not fair...."

It's okay to have these types of thoughts. Try to meet them with empathetic, gentle answers that allow the person to complete the thought process or entertain the statement. Most often they will arrive at a place that helps them understand how to make better sense of it.

Example: "If only they had \_\_\_\_\_..."

Possible response: "I know. I find myself thinking those things too. What do you imagine would have happened if they had \_\_\_\_\_? I wish they had too. Thank you for sharing that thought with me."

Emotions like anger, disbelief, regret are also very normal in the early weeks of processing loss.

### Example: Regret

"I wish I had answered her last text..."

Possible response: "Gosh, I know you wish you had more time with her. If you could send her a text, what would it say? Do you want to talk about it? Thank you for sharing your thoughts with me."

As processing continues, it is also very normal to begin trying to find ways to remember or honor the person who had died. This is a very important aspect of grief. Grief rituals or grief activities allow for our brain and heart to "do something", and it helps the part of our brain that is trying to figure out how this person fits into the world when they are gone? The answer to that is in how we remember them. Allow them to figure out a meaningful way (or multiple ways) to remember and honor the person who has died. Ask if they need your help with their idea and do your best to support whatever it is (as long as it isn't harmful).

It's normal and healthy to keep mementos or to scroll through posts/pictures on phones or post to social media for support. It's normal and healthy to have a lot of ups and downs. Keep encouraging them to share and talk without judgement. If they are talking, they are processing. If they aren't talking, consider getting them involved in a grief group or a visit with a counselor to help them establish a healthy grieving process.

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*(Feel free to reach out to Jessica. This is what she does, and she has offered to help)*

<https://fullcirclegc.org/2022/01/26/how-to-help-a-grieving-teenager-10-tips-for-handling-teen-grief/>

## 10 Tips to Help A Teen Processing Grief

By: Catherine Brown

Source: Your Teen, For Parents

When my teen daughter experienced the death of a friend last year, I felt completely unprepared to support her in the grieving process. She seemed to want to process the loss primarily with her peers, who were impacted by the death in similar ways, and I wasn't sure what role to play. I wanted to provide support but simultaneously wanted to respect her space and grieving process. At the same time, I was working through my own feelings of shock and sadness.

All parenting situations can be challenging, but this one left me feeling particularly daunted. To better understand how parents can support their kids after an unexpected loss, I spoke with Donna Schuurman, EdD, FT, Senior Director of Advocacy & Training for the Dougy Center for Grieving Children and Families, and Allyson Drake, MEd, CT, Founder/Executive Director of Full Circle Grief Center.

Both Schuurman and Drake helped me understand how teens grieve, what parents can do to support them in the grieving process, and how parents can recognize when a teen needs outside help.

### 1. Teens encounter grief from a place that already feels complicated.

"When a teenager starts going through grief, they enter into this death or loss experience with so many different dynamics in play already just from being a teenager," Drake says. She explains that it can be difficult to determine whether a teen's behavior occurs because of their grief or

because they're experiencing the stress and hormones that go along with adolescence.

## **2. The grieving process is as individualized as each teen.**

"One quote I love is that everybody's grief is as different as their fingerprint," says Drake. "When you're looking at a family, a sports team, a class of students, they all may have experienced the same death, but everybody's going to experience it very differently." It's helpful for parents to recognize that their teen's grief will look different from their own and from the grief experienced by other teens.

## **3. Many teens want to grieve with their friends.**

"The majority of teens we've worked with for the last 30, almost 40 years now, talk about how the best way for them to grieve and express themselves is to find a friend, particularly if they are all grieving the same death." Schuurman said. She notes that the experience can be different when a teen is grieving the loss of a parent or close family member. In that case, the teen experiencing the loss may feel less inclined to grieve with friends because they may feel like their peers don't understand what they are going through.

## **4. Grief is not a linear process.**

"It can feel like in one minute teens are laughing, and half an hour later they're crying," Schuurman says. "The process involves spurts of grief and feeling like they don't have a right to be happy." Being aware that grief may ebb and flow can help parents provide support in the moment.

## **5. Asking open and honest questions helps teens feel supported.**

Schuurman explains that adults sometimes respond out of fear for their kids and unknowingly shut down conversations. Instead, it can be helpful to ask open-ended, non-judgmental questions. Schuurman says, "You can try something along the lines of, 'I want to do the right thing, but, honestly, I'm not sure what that is. I don't want to push you away by over-asking and

shutting off communication. At the same time, I don't want to be lax and act like nothing happened. Are there ways I can be helpful to you?"

## 6. It helps teens when parents normalize difficult feelings that surround grief.

Drake says that parents sometimes feel tempted to offer advice about how teens should grieve. That can lead teens to withdraw. Instead, Drake encourages parents to normalize the range of feelings that come from unexpected loss "Don't be afraid to shed tears in front of your kids," says Drake. "You're modeling a grief response, you're modeling that it's okay to talk about grief and that feelings are okay, and you're reinforcing that we all feel grief in different ways."

## 7. Keeping a person's memory alive can help with grieving.

Schuurman encourages parents to engage in conversation about the person who died. "It helps to say things like, "Tell me about them." If you knew the person well, you could share your own memories. Drake says that honoring a person through social media can also help teens manage their grief.

## 8. Social media can be both positive and negative.

Social media can provide benefits by helping teens feel connected and by offering an escape from the grieving process. It can, however, also make the grieving process more difficult. "Rumors about the death and hateful things being said can be damaging," Drake says. "Another piece I hear from teens is when people who didn't know the person post things to sensationalize the loss. That can make teens who were close to the person who died feel angry."

## 9. Teens can experience PTSD even if they weren't present when the death occurred.

"Creating visual images in their head of what happened even if they weren't there and hearing the stories of what happened can actually create a PTSD response," Drake says. "When you're seeing traumatic responses that are

interfering with normal functioning, know that kind of stress can happen for kids even if they weren't present."

## 10. When teens respond in uncharacteristic ways to their grief, consult a professional.

Schuurman encourages parents to pay attention to radical changes in behavior, like when a teen who used to enjoy being around family and friends now spends most of her time in her room. Drake also recommends looking out for lack of interest in participating in daily activities, beyond the initial first few weeks after a loss. And if a teen talks about harming themselves or wanting to be with the person who died, reach out to a professional with expertise in grief counseling.

Catherine Brown writes about parenting, the arts, eating disorders, and body image for local and national publications. She is co-editor of *Hope for Recovery: Stories of Healing from Eating Disorders* and co-host of the podcast *Eating Disorders: Navigating Recovery*. You can find her at [catherinebrownwriter.com](http://catherinebrownwriter.com), on [Facebook](#) and on Instagram (catbrown\_writer).