



# Understanding Teen Grief

## And Ways to Provide Support





# Grief Programs and Services for Children, Teens, and Families

Transitions GriefCare provides compassionate grief support services to children, adolescents, and families who are coping with the illness or death of a family member, friend, or loved one. Our programs provide opportunities for:

- expressing feelings, identifying coping skills, building memories, and finding healing in a safe place.
- taking part in grief-related activities through talking, music, art, and games.
- connecting with other kids and families with similar losses.

Transitions GriefCare services are open to anyone in the community, regardless of whether that family was served by Transitions LifeCare. These services are offered at no cost, though donations are gratefully accepted to allow us to continue to offer support to grieving families.

## Individual and Family Grief Counseling

- Short-term individual grief counseling for children and teens.
- Short-term family counseling designed to help family members understand and accept one another's grief while identifying ways to support one another.

## Grief Workshops

- Workshop topics based on specific areas of grief (e.g., anger, coping, ways to stay connected).
- Connect grieving children and teens with grieving peers.
- Incorporate variety of creative materials, such as games, art, and grief projects.

## Camp Reflections

- A day program in a camp-like setting with small and large group activities.
- Programming for adults in the family available during camp.

## Online and Video Resources at [transitionslifecare.org/teens#resources](https://transitionslifecare.org/teens#resources)

- Videos to help support children and teens who are coping with the progression of a loved one's illness or needing support after the death has occurred.
- Printable resources, such as family activities and talking tips.

## Lending Library

- Books and other grief- and loss-related materials for children, teens, and adults may be checked out for a two-week lending period.

## Special Workshops and Events

- Offered periodically throughout the year.
- May be customized to meet specific community or organization needs.
- Examples include: support for holiday grief in the family, expressing children's grief through music, exploring grief through creative shadowboxes.

## "Aarvy Aardvark Finds Hope" Puppet Program

- A 60-minute school-based educational puppet show and facilitated discussion for 3rd graders focusing on loss, grief, and being a caring friend.

"I've learned something to do if I'm angry, sad, lonely, and upset, and I've learned I'm never alone."  
—Middle Schooler

Grieving teens experience many of the same thoughts and feelings as grieving adults. You can use your own grief reactions as a starting point for understanding your teen's grief. However, everyone's individual grief feelings and reactions may be quite different.

Teens are at a developmentally pivotal time in their lives as their minds, bodies, and emotions grow and fluctuate. Everything is in flux (e.g., sense of identity, roles in the family, their physical self, social world, ideas and opinions) as they cope with moving beyond childhood and growing into young adults. Grief both influences and intensifies this maturation process. As a result of this fluctuating developmental period, **teens typically express their grief in short and intense episodes of emotions.**

As teens grow and continue to understand their loss in new ways, they may grieve again and understand the loss in a new way at each developmental milestone or life transition (e.g., leaving home for college or a job, graduations, special occasions). Surges in grief come unexpectedly and can catch grieving teens off guard.

"Shared joy is double joy, and shared sorrow is half sorrow."

–Swedish proverb

"It's OK to cry and I'm not the only one alone."

–Teen

Grieving teens express and work through their grief in different ways:

- Teens are more likely to talk with their friends about their grief than with their parents and caregivers. However, you as a caregiver have the opportunity to help in your teen's grief experience and be an important part of your teenager's personal growth.
- Teens yearn to discover the significance or reason behind the loss and what it means for them and their lives. Teens express their grief and find meaning through writing, drawing, listening to music, playing sports, and sharing about their loss.
- **Don't assume that because a teen isn't talking about their grief that they aren't grieving.**

### What Grieving Teens Think, Feel, and Do

#### Thoughts

- Confusion
- Feeling in a fog
- Racing thoughts
- Preoccupied with deceased
- Forgetfulness
- Asking "what did I do to cause this?"
- Wondering "why??"
- Hard time concentrating
- Wondering "how could this have been prevented?"
- Wondering if anything really matters

#### Feelings

- Sadness, deep sorrow
- Shock, stunned
- Anger, irritability, frustration
- Longing, loneliness, alienation
- Anxiety, insecurity
- Fear (of death, of others dying)
- Guilt, regret
- Hope, relief
- Powerlessness, helplessness
- Shame (at being different from peers)

#### Physical Reactions

- Headaches
- Stomachaches
- Dizziness
- Rapid heart beat
- Tiredness
- Shortness of breath
- Sweat
- Restlessness
- Tightness in chest
- Nightmares

#### Behaviors

- Hide feelings
- Withdraw
- Cry
- Fight more with friends/family
- Cling
- Improvement or drop in grades
- Listen to music
- Sleep or eat more or less frequently
- Act differently: act out, reckless, risky behaviors
- Use drugs/drinking to escape
- Journal, search for meaning

## How You Can Help Your Teenager

### Practice healthy grieving in your family

Be a role model for healthy grieving. Teens may need an adult to validate and demonstrate that it is okay to be sad, to feel angry, and to experience the myriad of feelings and thoughts that are a part of the grieving process. Acting as if everything is okay is not necessary helpful, and may result in a teen feeling alone or abnormal in their grief or that no one cares. You can share with them that though you may get tearful, you are strong enough to listen to their thoughts, feelings and words.

Remember to take care of your own grief. It is important that families grieve together in healthy ways, but there can be a fine line between this togetherness and depending on the teen to be “your rock” and providing a parent with emotional support. Seek support from friends, other adult family members, or a professional.

### Discover ways to stay connected

Remembering is an important, and lifelong, process. Find ways to honor your loved one, and to share the memories, both joyful and painful. Continue important family traditions-especially ones connected to holidays and life events, such as birthdays. Or change them to fit the needs of your family. You can talk together about how you want to celebrate these special occasions or other ways to honor your loved one.

### Connect your teen with supportive peers

Teens can benefit from the support of parents, teachers, family members, friends, counselors. Teens can heal significantly from teen grief support groups where they can find peers struggling with the death of a family member or friend, and can talk openly about their feelings, thoughts, and stories.

### Get adequate nutrition and rest

Ensure that they are getting healthy foods and a good night’s sleep, as their bodies will need nutrients and rest to support the hard work of grieving.

### Maintain routines, discipline, and boundaries

It is important to be consistent with routines, rules and schedules. Allow for some flexibility as needed. To assist with family connectedness, try to eat meals together and when possible “hang out” together. Teens need, and on some level, want, structure in their lives, especially when death brings a sense of unpredictability and turbulence. Don’t overlook bad behavior because you feel sorry for your teen.

### Help your teen learn about the death and the grief process

Teens vary in how much information they desire to know. Information about the illness, cause of death, and grief may help them make sense of all that is happening or has happened. Assist them in finding appropriate sources of information through computers, libraries, books, etc. Be sensitive to information overload. It can be helpful to read and discuss this information together.

### Let teens be teens

Let teens know that they are not expected to take on the adult roles of the house and be expected to be “grown up” and “strong.” If teens take on the “caring for the family” role, then they do not have time to be a teenager or time to grieve and mourn. Have conversations about what their household responsibilities are and are not, so they don’t have to guess about it. Invite your teen to be a part of important family decisions when appropriate.

### Develop a school plan

Be sure to contact or meet with the school counselor and/or teachers and let them know what has happened. Talk with your teen about what he/she is not looking forward to about returning to school, and find ways to cope with these situations if possible. If needed, set up tutoring with a teacher, student or friend to help your teen make up missed work. Your school may be a source for community support organizations and other resources.

## Hints on How to Talk With a Grieving Teen

- **Listen with empathy:** stop what you are doing, look at the teen, listen, find a way to understand what the teen is feeling or saying even if you disagree.
- **Provide regular opportunities to talk or check in with the teen:** teens may keep talking short or may disengage, but continue to provide the opportunities.
- **Don't interrupt:** let the teen control the conversation.
- **Keep it open:** say, "I see," "Tell me more," "Tell me about that," "I wonder."
- **Acknowledge the feelings you are hearing:** say, "I can see that really upsets you" or "You are really hurting right now."
- **Talk with them about more than just the loss:** listen for what is important to the teen in their life.

## What Grieving Teens Want Parents and Adult Caregivers to Know

- Don't force me to talk ... there may be times that I'd rather be quiet.
- Check in with me sometimes. Even though I'm venturing out on my own, I still need adults and a parent around to guide me.
- Instead of saying "I know how you feel," ask "What is that like for you?" or "What are you feeling?"
- Listen to me and what my grief is like. We're all different in our grief, and I may be grieving differently from the ways you do or my siblings or friends do. Listening to me shows you respect me.
- Remember that I'm still a kid. I still want to have fun. Don't give me the duties of a parent or expect me to replace the person who died.
- Tell me stories of the ways I'm like the person who died. (But also realize that I'm unique and different and my own person.)
- Don't tell me to "be strong." I'm learning that it's OK to feel and show vulnerable emotions, and it helps when you remind me of that, too.
- Give me some space to grieve. Don't over-obsess about how I'm doing. Hovering just makes me want to pull away more.

## Late Childhood/Early Adolescence (9–13 years)

### Concepts of Death and Grief

They understand the permanence of death; death may be seen as a punishment for wrongdoings in the past; they begin to reflect on **meaning** the death will have.

- Concerned how their world will change; contemplates future without loved one
- Wants to be independent, but guidance of adults crucial
- May have delayed grief reactions
- Withdrawal from others and activities common
- Schoolwork may be affected
- Interested in ways to stay connected to the deceased
- Wonders about “how” and “why” of death
- Concerns about being different from peers
- Increased anger and guilt feelings and episodes of acting out
- Feels self-conscious about their grief

### Providing Support

- Encourage discussion about their grief thoughts and feelings
- Encourage drawing/writing; participation in sports or physical activities
- Encourage anger release in safe ways (ripping newspaper, popping bubble wrap, silent scream)
- Do not let child take over adult responsibilities (being caregiver for family members, worrying about finances, etc.)
- Allow information seeking about the death, the person who died, or grief
- Avoid cliches when talking about death (e.g., “she’s in a better place,” “God wanted her in heaven”)
- Be honest about how the person died and answer questions directly

## Adolescence/Teen (13–18 years)

### Concepts of Death and Grief

They have a concrete understanding about death; questions **meaning** the death will have

- Death is viewed as unfair, an unwelcome interruption of one’s life
- Bodily changes magnify grief
- May need permission to grieve
- Feels concerned about being “different” from peers
- Increased risk-taking/testing own mortality
- May reflect on and/or glorify death
- May act indifferent or as if nothing is bothering them
- May turn to drugs/alcohol for relief
- May experience sense of denial that the death occurred or feeling of shock

### Providing Support

- Provide gentle, consistent support, even if they say “no”
- Be available, but don’t push them to talk
- Help them find peers who are supportive
- Find other trusted adults they can talk with, such as a counselor, spiritual leader, or mentor
- Assist in relieving burden of adult responsibilities
- Work together on impulse control to reduce reckless behavior
- De-romanticize death by talking about permanence and realities of death
- Discuss feelings of helplessness
- Avoid cliches when talking about death (e.g., “she’s in a better place,” “God wanted her in heaven”)
- Normalize feelings of “nothing matters/life isn’t fair”

Adapted by Transitions GriefCare from School Psychologist’s Corner of the Anglo-American School (AAS) website <http://www.aas.ru>

## General Grief & Loss Resources

- *Part of Me Died, Too* Virginia Lynn Frye
- *Tear Soup* Pat Schwiebert and Chuck DeKlyen
- *Facing Change: Coming Together and Falling Apart in the Teen Years* Donna O'Toole
- *When Nothing Matters Anymore: A Survival Guide for Depressed Teens* Bev Cobain
- *The Grieving Teen: A Guide for Teenagers and Their Friends* Helen Fitzgerald
- *Saying Goodbye When You Don't Want to: Teens Dealing with Loss* Martha Bolton
- *Help for the Hard Times* Earl Hipp
- *You Are Not Alone* Lynne Hughes
- *One You Love Has Died* J. Miller
- *Straight Talk About Death for Teenagers* Earl Grollman
- *Teenagers Face to Face with Bereavement* Karen Gravelle et al.
- *Healing Your Grieving Heart: 100 Practical Ideas for Teens* Alan Wolfelt
- *Beyond Grief: A Guide for Recovering From the Death of a Loved One* Carol Staudacher
- *The Courage to Grieve* Judy Tattelbaum
- *Fighting Invisible Tigers: A Stress Management Guide for Teens* Earl Hipp
- *I Will Remember You: A Guidebook Through Grief for Teens* Laura Dower

## Journals

- *The Chill and Spill Journal For Teens* Steffanie Lorig
- *The Creative Journal for Teens* Lucia Capacchione
- *Fire in My Heart, Ice in My Veins* Enid Samuel Traisman
- *The Healing Your Grieving Heart Journal For Teens* Alan Wolfelt

## Loss of a Parent

- *Our Dad Died: The True Story of Three Kids Whose Lives Changed* Dennison Family
- *Motherless Daughters* Hope Edelman
- *How It Feels when a Parent Dies* Jill Kremenz
- *How to Survive the Loss of a Parent: A Guide for Adults* Lois Akner
- *Losing a Parent: Passage to a New Way of Living* Alexandra Kennedy

## Loss of a Sibling

- *A Summer to Die* Lois Lowry
- *Nadia the Willful* Sue Alexander
- *Lost and Found: Remembering a Sister* Ellen Yeomans
- *Why Did She Have to Die?* Lurlene McDaniel
- *Coping With the Death of a Brother or Sister* Ruth Ann Ruiz
- *Recovering from the Loss of a Sibling* Katherine Donnelly

## Loss of a Friend

- *When A Friend Dies: A Book for Teens about Grieving and Healing* Marilyn Gootman
- *Bridge to Terabithia* Katherine Patterson
- *One You Love Has Died* J. Miller

## Suicide

- *Someone I Love Died By Suicide* D. Cammarata
- *After Suicide: Living with the Questions* Eileen Kuehn
- *A Teenager's Book about Suicide: Helping Break the Silence and Preventing Death*
- *Living When a Young Friend Commits Suicide: Or Even Starts Talking About It* Earl Grollman and M. Malikow
- *The Last Teenage Suicide* N. Geller
- *Face at the Edge of the World* Eve Bunting
- *After Suicide* John Hewett and Wayne Oates

## Violent Death/Homicide

- ***Reactions - A Workbook to Help Young People Who Are Experiencing Trauma and Grief*** Alison Salloum
- ***No Time for Goodbyes: Coping with Sorrow, Anger, and Injustice After a Tragic Death*** Janice Harris Lord
- ***Just One Tear*** K.L. Mahon
- ***When Someone You Know Has Been Killed***

## Loss of a Pet

- ***Dog Heaven*** Cynthia Rylant
- ***Cat Heaven*** Cynthia Rylant
- ***I'll Always Love You*** Hans Wilhelm
- ***The Legend of Rainbow Bridge*** William Brinton
- ***The Dead Bird*** Margaret Wise Brown

## Resources for Parents and Caregivers

- ***Bereaved Children and Teens: A Support Guide for Parents and Professionals*** Earl Grollman
- ***The Grieving Child*** Helen Fitzgerald
- ***Guiding Your Child Through Grief*** James and Mary Ann Emswiler
- ***Helping Children Grieve*** Theresa Huntley
- ***Talking About Death*** Earl Grollman
- ***When Bad Things Happen To Good People*** Harold Kushner
- ***Helping Teens Cope with Death*** Dougy Center
- ***Why Did Daddy Die? Helping Children Cope with the Loss of a Parent*** Linda Alderman
- ***The Bereaved Parent*** Harriet Schiff