

Grief: Helping Teens with Grief

- 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.

How can you 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. Listen and respond in a way that shows you're trying to understand what's being said. This may encourage your teen to 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 calmly 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 counsellors, and coaches may also be able to help your teen work through his or her grief.

Activities you can do with teens of different ages to help:

- **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.