

Grief and Death



How to support your teen (ages 13 to 19 years)

Grief understanding and reactions

Adolescents understand that death is not only irreversible, but also that death will eventually happen to everyone. Although adolescents have a more adult-like understanding of death their behavior can alternate from adult-like to child-like. A teen may reject adults at one moment and then appear child-like and in need of support the next moment.

Adolescents can be self-centered and may feel responsible for death. They often take on adult roles and concerns, such as:

- Childcare
- Financial issues
- House cleaning

Adolescents may be uncomfortable with death because it causes them to feel more dependent on their family during a time they are striving for independence. They also may become self-conscious about being different from peers due to grief. Sometimes adolescents will hide their feelings because they fear not being cool.

Adolescents show the signs of grief physically, emotionally and socially, including:

- Affecting school responsibilities
- Eating patterns
- Participating less with peers
- Questioning their religious beliefs
- Sleeping habits

How adults can help

Be honest in your own grieving while being available to discuss feelings and death with the teen. Be patient while recognizing the thoughts and feelings of an adolescent can be inconsistent. Recognize teens may not share their feelings with their parents out of concern for causing them more stress. It also helps to let teachers, coaches and other adults in a teen's life know about your religious beliefs. This will ensure consistency in information being provided.

It also is important to provide time for the teenager to participate in extracurricular activities with peers. Give the teenager time to balance their responsibilities with their free time. Validate the teen's feelings while helping them understand the cause of death. Help them understand they weren't responsible for the death, if this is the truth.

Expect periods of high energy or prolonged sleeping and inactivity. Let teens know that you do not expect them to take on the responsibilities of the deceased person. Support each adolescent's style of coping. Adolescents may have new feelings. Help them to understand and deal with these feelings through physical contact, listening and encouragement.