

PHS Student Services Department

How Do Teenagers Grieve & What Can I Do? A Parent & Guardian Grief Resource

As parents, many of you may be asking yourselves the same questions during a time of an unexpected adolescent death. What is it like for teenagers when someone close to them dies? How do they respond to the death of a friend, teammate, classmate, or peer? Is my child grieving appropriately? These questions are normal and reflect your commitment to support your child during such an unexpected, challenging, and trying time in their lives. In fact, coping with the loss of a friend may be one of the hardest challenges your child faces during high school. Below are several basic strategies to consider as you support your child with an unexpected loss of a peer.

STRATEGIES FOR SUPPORTING YOUR TEEN DURING A TIME OF LOSS

Communicate to your teen that grief is natural and healthy. Grief is a natural and very healthy reaction to death. However, grieving does not always feel natural as it may be difficult for your child to stay in control of their thoughts, emotions, and physical feelings during this time. In fact, a sense of a sudden loss of control may be overwhelming, confusing and scary. Communicating to your child that grief at any stage of life, including during adolescence, is natural and healthy is important. Now more than ever, take the opportunity to initiate conversations regarding grief and make yourself available to listen. It's okay to ask questions. It's also okay if your child isn't ready to talk. Don't be afraid of silence if your teen is not ready. Rather, provide comfort and care by just being there and providing space for open dialogue when they are ready.

Reinforce that grief is unique to every single one of us, including teens Grieving is a different experience for everyone, including your child, and particularly when it occurs during the sensitive time of identity formation. Teens may grieve for different lengths of time and express a variety of emotions. It is important to not compare your child's grieving process to that of their peers or your own. Encouraging your child to grieve authentically and not compare their grief process to their peers is also important as they may subtly seek out feedback. Honoring your child's healthy grieving process is very important and modeling healthy grieving is even more important.

Be mindful that every death is unique and is experienced differently Many factors can impact the way your child grieves including their personality and relationship with the deceased. In fact, your child may even react differently to the loss of a friend than to the loss of a family member. At home, your child may be grieving differently than you and their friends, which can cause tension. Each person's responses to death should be honored as his or her way of coping in that moment. Keep in mind that responses may change from day to day or even from hour to hour.

Reflect on the factors that may be influencing your teen's grieving process. The impact of a death on a teen relates to a combination of factors including: social support systems, circumstances of the death, the nature of the relationship with the person who died, cultural traditions, religious beliefs, your child's emotional and developmental level, and your child's previous experiences with death. During this time, it is important to be mindful of how these factors may support your child or create additional emotional stressors.

Encourage your teen to engage in productive grief activities. As a parent, it is natural to feel the need to express opinions about "right" or "wrong" ways to grieve. However, using this language with your teen may not be helpful as grief does not follow a pattern and is not a course that can be evaluated for how well one does it. Thus, consider talking with your child about productive ways to grieve and allow the grieving process to take time. Productive and healthy behaviors may include your child talking with trusted friends, talking with family members, sharing memories, journaling, creating art, and expressing emotion. If your child chooses to engage in talking, be mindful of using age-appropriate information, not over-identifying ("I know how you feel"), and too much self-disclosure as the focus should remain on your child's grief.

Recognize and acknowledge survivor guilt. Unfortunately, this type of guilt may be a reaction to a sudden loss. Thus, it is important that this be recognized and acknowledged if you hear statements such as "I wish it were me instead." Survivor guilt may also present itself as excessive self-blame. It is important to recognize and try to understand these feelings, but also let your child know that it was not their fault.

