

Teen Grief: What Does it Look Like?

A checklist of common teenage responses to loss

The following is a guide to help you identify common grief reactions in teenagers who are coping with loss. It should be noted that grief responses are individual, therefore each teen will react in a unique way. However, most will experience some of the reactions listed below:

- A teen's reaction to loss is often self centred. Their concern is with how the loss will impact their daily life. They are less likely to discuss the loss with their peers for fear of being singled out or different.
- Emotions will be volatile. Teens may demonstrate intense sadness or anger triggered by seemingly random events. Anger can be directed toward family members, the person who is ill or deceased, god, friends, or themselves and is often evident in various acting-out behaviours such as physical fights, insolent and defiant behaviour, or angry verbal outbursts.
- Withdrawal is common. It is not unusual for teens to withdraw from their relationships with peers, family, and/or extracurricular activities.
- School grades and participation may be impacted. This is most true for teens than any other school age group. They may have trouble concentrating during class and appear restless, have difficulty finishing assignments, be forgetful, or may have erratic attendance.
- Teens may feel numb, indifferent, or disbelief in response to a loss. These feelings serve a purpose because they give the teen some time to let their emotions catch up with what their mind has been told. The desire for acceptance by peers also contributes to indifference. Often teens who experience a loss want to appear 'normal' so they will suppress their feelings.
- Self-blame and guilt are often strong feelings. It is common for teens to think or say, 'if only...' and feel responsible for the loss.
- When coping with the death of a friend or family member, many teens have beliefs that the deceased is still with them and not really gone. They may talk

about unusual happenings such as hearing the voice of the deceased or seeing the deceased in a crowd.

- Sometimes teens may feel a sense of relief. Teens may experience this if a relationship was strained or abusive, or if a friend or family member that was suffering and in a lot of pain dies.
- Physical symptoms are commonly experienced in times of loss and change. Headaches, stomach aches, insomnia, changes in appetite, and general fatigue are all common grief responses.
- Spiritual questions may arise. Questions such as "What is the meaning of life?", "Is there a god?", or "Is there an afterlife?" are all common.
- An increase in risk taking behaviour is often seen in grieving teens. Such behaviours might include: skipping school, use of alcohol and drugs, increased sexual activity, or suicidal thoughts. Often these behaviours are an attempt to escape from the pain caused by loss.
- Fear is a common grief response. Fears of other family members or friends getting sick or dying are normal. "Who will take care of me now?" is a common question even for teens who are striving for their independence.
- Bereaved teens, or teens coping with a family member's illness, may assume the role of the deceased or patient.
- Grieving teens may feel a great deal of anger and show signs of increased aggression. Healthy expressions of anger help to release energy that words alone cannot.



How to Help a Grieving Teen

One of the most important factors determining how a teen will cope with a loss is the response of significant others in the teen's life. A teen will not share or express feelings if in an environment that discourages such sharing. On the other hand, attempts by others to speed up the recovery process of grieving teens could be harmful. The following are some suggestions to help you create an environment in which teen will feel encouraged and supported to share their experience:

- Be patient and available. If a teen does not want to share at one moment, do not assume that he/she will never want to share.
- Let the teen know that you are not afraid to discuss their loss with them. Express your own feelings that are natural to the situation. Be up front and honest with them.
- Acknowledge that all feelings are okay. Focus on healthy, safe ways to express such feelings and provide opportunities for healthy expression. Activities that encourage such expression may be: physical exercise, journaling, writing a letter, creating a scrapbook, etc.
- Encourage the teen to tell their story. Ask to see a picture of the deceased and have the teen share a special memory.
- Ask the teen to identify what they need during this time of grief and be available to ensure that these needs are met.
- If the teen will not share or connect with you about the loss, help him/her connect with another adult that they feel okay to talk to.
- Help keep routines and discipline consistent with before the loss occurred. This consistency provides security and is reassuring to the teen.

