

Families grieve numerous losses and ride on a roller coaster of changes when someone close to them is living with a life-threatening illness. There are similarities and differences between the way children, teens, and adults manage this difficult time.

This guide is intended to help those supporting teens to understand and prepare for common responses to illness and death at their developmental stage and ways to help them.

Common Grief Responses in Teenagers

We have offered some examples of responses. Please note: grief responses are individual; **each teen's grief experience will be unique.**

Withdrawn & Isolated

It is not unusual for teens to withdraw from their relationships with peers, family, and/or extracurricular activities. They may not talk to parents/caregivers because they may feel uncomfortable with the adults' expressed emotions. Although teens tend to talk more with their peers at this stage in their life, many report not discussing the illness with their peers for fear of being singled out or different.

Numb & 'Normal'

Teens may feel numbness, indifference, or disbelief in response. These feelings serve a purpose as they give teens some time to let their emotions catch up with the information and thoughts they hold. The desire for acceptance by their peers may also lead grieving teens to suppress their feelings in order to appear 'normal'.

Unpredictable & Explosive

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. Behaviours such as physical fights, rudeness & defiance, or angry verbal outbursts may be seen.

The Selfie

A teen's reaction may be focused on themselves. Their concern may be on how the loss will affect their daily life. This focus on themselves is a normal part of their development as teens and may be perceived as selfish. (*Who am I? What do I believe in? Who do I want to become?*)

School & Focus

Grief impacts attention in school, participation in class and sometimes their grades. Teens seem to struggle with this more than other school-age groups. They may have trouble focusing their attention and appear restless during class, have difficulty finishing assignments, be forgetful, have changes in behaviour, and/or have erratic attendance.

Guilt

Self-blame and guilt are common feelings. It is not unusual for teens to think or say, 'if only...' and feel some sense of responsibility.

Relief

Teens may feel a sense of relief especially if a relationship was strained or abusive, or if a friend or family member is ill or dies after a long illness or experienced much suffering.

Teen Grief & Life-threatening Illness Ways we can help

Physical symptoms

Headaches, stomach aches, insomnia, changes in appetite, and general fatigue are commonly experienced in times of grief and change.

Risk taking

May include skipping school, use of alcohol and drugs, increased sexual activity, or suicidal thoughts. Risk taking behaviours are particular to this age group and usually an attempt to escape from the pain they are feeling.

How to Help a Grieving Teenager

One of the most determining factors of how teens will cope during illness and with a loss is the response of significant others in their lives. They will respond to the invitations and behaviours of those who surround them. Here are some suggestions to consider:

Be patient and available. If your teen doesn't want to share at a given moment, do not assume that they won't want to share at another time. Continue to create opportunities.

Don't protect each other. Let teens know that you are not afraid to discuss their loss with them and that it is not their role to protect you. Share your feelings about your grief or how witnessing their grief makes you feel. Be up open and honest.

Acknowledge that all feelings are okay. Provide opportunities and examples of healthy and safe ways to express feelings. Physical exercise, journaling, writing a letter, creating a scrapbook, drawing and painting are all examples of activities that encourage such expression and release. They can be experienced together or independently.

Spiritual questions: Questions such as “*What is the meaning of life?*”, “*Is there a God?*”, or “*Is there an afterlife?*” are all common.

Fear

Fear is a common and normal grief response. No matter how old we are, when our world has been shaken by the illness or death of someone we care about, we have no certainty that it won't happen again. At a time when teens are striving for independence, they are also asking themselves “*Who will take care of me now?*”

Encourage teens to tell their story.

Sometimes it's difficult to tell the whole story all at once. Ask about particular times in their relationship with the loved one (e.g., the most fun time; a time when they felt most connected; a happy time), to show you a place or an object that had special meaning to them. If they are having trouble remembering a story, share one that you witnessed.

Create safety. In helping teens identify their needs and finding ways to meet these needs, we are providing them with skills for life. If they do not talk to you, help them connect with another adult they will want to talk to. Despite their usual requests for independence, maintain or even increase boundaries and routines. Increase your connection time with your teen: it can be as simple as sitting next to each other on the couch watching TV. We don't always need to talk to each other to feel connected to one another.