

Teen Grief

Talking to Teens about Life-Threatening Illness

Common Responses

Families face numerous changes and losses, and life can feel like a roller coaster when someone close to them has a life-threatening illness. The following is a guide to help you identify common responses for the teenagers in your life. Please remember, however, that grief responses are individual and that each teen's experience will be unique.

Withdrawn and isolated

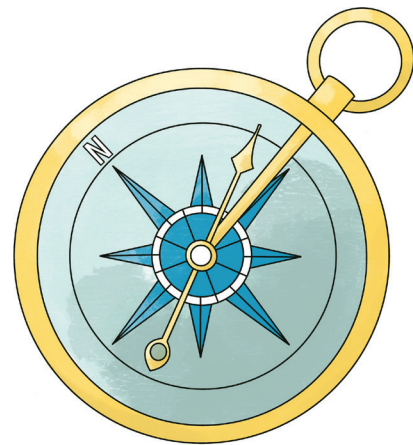
It's not unusual for teens to withdraw from their relationships with peers and family or extracurricular activities. They may not talk to parents or caregivers because they feel uncomfortable with the adult's expressed emotion. Teens tend to talk more with their peers at this stage in their life, but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

Numb and 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 to appear normal.

Unpredictable and explosive

Teens may demonstrate intense sadness or anger triggered by seemingly random events. They might direct their anger towards family members, the person who is ill or deceased, a God, friends, or themselves. You'll often see the anger expressed in behaviours like fighting, defiance, or verbal outbursts.



Self-focused

A teen's response can seem self-centred. Their focus is on how the illness and changes will impact their daily life. This turning inward is a normal part of their development as they ask themselves who they are and want to become and what they believe.

Physical symptoms

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

School and focus

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

Guilt

Self-blame and guilt are common feelings. It's 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, suffering, or dies after a long illness.



Risk-taking

Risk-taking behaviours are particular to this age group and usually an attempt to escape from the pain they feel. The behaviours may include skipping school, using alcohol and drugs, increased sexual activity, or suicidal thoughts.

Fear

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

Spiritual questions

It's common for teens to wonder about the meaning of life, whether there is a God or an afterlife, and other spiritually focused questions.

How You Can Help a Grieving Teen

One of the biggest factors determining 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 does not want to share at a given moment, don't assume that they won't want to share at another time. Continue to create opportunities.

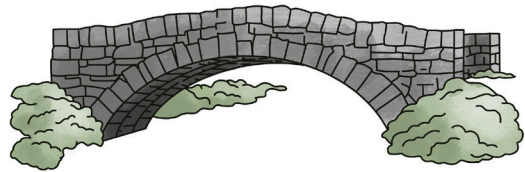
Don't protect each other

Let teens know that you are not afraid to discuss their loss with them and that it's not their role to protect you. Share your feelings about your grief or how witnessing their grief makes you feel. Be upfront, 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.



Encourage teens to tell their story

Sometimes it's difficult to tell the whole story all at once. You might ask about particular times in their relationship with the person in their life (e.g., the most fun time; a time when they felt most connected; a happy time). You could also ask them to show you a place or an object that had special meaning to them. If they're 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 don't want to talk to you, help them connect with an adult they do want to with. 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.

For more information, a consultation, or to seek support for your child, teen, and family, contact us at 403-263-4525 or info@childrensgriefcentre.ca.