


# Adolescent grief

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*Adolescence is a time of great change in the life of a young person. Teenagers struggle with issues of identity and independence, as they try to bridge the gap between childhood and adulthood. When a death occurs, their life can become very difficult.*

It is important to give adolescents clear and accurate information at the time of a death. They may wish to take an active part in funeral arrangements or to mark the death in their own way. Involving teens in the rituals can help them on their grief journey, but treat them in a manner appropriate to their age.

Unlike young children, adolescents fully understand the concept of death; they know that death is final and inevitable. However, they often have an exaggerated view of their own invulnerability - 'it will never happen to me'. As their life goals and dreams start coming into focus, the concept of death can appear both threatening and remote.

The research on adolescent bereavement tends to focus on the death of a parent, grandparent or sibling. Little has been written on the death of a friend, although this can be a very significant loss in adolescence. Teens can also be deeply affected by the death of someone they admire (such as a musician or actor) but do not know personally. This may be difficult for you to understand and there can be a temptation to make comments such as "but you didn't even know them!" Try to acknowledge this type of loss and not belittle it.


## Adolescent grief may show itself as:

- **confusion,**
- **withdrawal,**
- **crying,**
- **feelings of emptiness,**
- **loneliness,**
- **disturbances in sleep and eating patterns,**
- **exhaustion.**

It can be difficult to separate grief from what is normal adolescent behaviour. Sometimes you can only tease this out by talking with them. It is important that you support them in their grief and they have a caring adult who is willing to listen and to validate their loss.

## Possible concerns for a bereaved teen

- Is there something wrong with me for feeling like this?
- How do other people react?
- I don't want to get upset because people will think I am acting like a kid.
- I don't want people to pity me.
- I don't want my friends to treat me differently.
- I feel bad because I was not getting along with my Dad, Mum, guardian.
- How will this affect my life and my plans?



Most teens struggle with their parents over chores, responsibilities and going out. When a parent dies, they can be left with feelings of guilt about this. It is not unusual for teens to have very mixed feelings about a significant loss. It can be confusing to feel sad, embarrassed, angry and resentful all at the same time. A young person may have had a stormy relationship with the parent who died and this can leave them with feelings of guilt. Sometimes the teen has had a closer relationship with the parent who has died and may carry the difficult thought that the ‘wrong’ parent died.

Teens may resent that their lives have been disrupted by death, and then feel guilty for feeling like this. They may have real and valid worries about their future plans. These might include: ‘Can I still go on holidays with my friends?’ ‘Who will teach me to drive?’ ‘Will I be expected to stay home more?’ ‘Will I still be able to do the course I wanted?’ You need to reassure them that you do not expect them to take on the responsibilities of the parent who has died. However, a significant death in a family brings changes for every one and you need to discuss these with each family member.

## **Supporting a grieving adolescent**

Each young person grieves in their own way, so there is no set formula to help them cope. Adults who are willing and able to listen to teens, who accept their feelings as real and important and who model openness in discussing issues of life and death can be a resource to young people as they try to cope with loss and bereavement.

## The following may help

- Look out for opportunities to have a chat, rather than trying to set aside a particular time. Sometimes it can be easier to talk in the car or over a coffee.
- Be willing to listen openly and not judge what they have to say.
- Try not to dismiss their concerns, patronise them or assume you know what is best for them.
- If you can't answer their questions, you may be able to direct them to someone else who can.

Bereavement is a natural part of life and, like adults, most teens get through it with the support of friends and family. Vulnerable teens may find it more difficult, particularly if they suffer from low self-esteem or depression. Look out for signs that a young person is struggling with their loss and may need more professional help, such as:

- a prolonged loss of interest in daily activities,
- a prolonged change in appetite and sleep patterns,
- persistent self-blame or guilt,
- risk-taking behaviour, such as reckless driving, alcohol or drug abuse,
- self-destructive behaviour, such as cutting,
- suicidal thoughts or actions,
- withdrawal from friends, hobbies, school activities.

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*With thanks to Brid Carroll.*

