

Supporting Young Teens Through Grief

CHILDREN AGES 12 TO 14



Strength
at Your Side

Developmental Information

Young teens are entering into the cognitive stage known as formal operational thought.

This means they are beginning to understand more fully the realities of dying and death. This growing comprehension means teens will experience the death of a significant person with insight, compassion and conflict. As a defense against the reality of death, they may refuse to accept that someone is dying and may insist the person will get better or that family and doctors not “give up”. For example, when you tell a child their mother is expected to die, they may react with outrage at your lack of hope and demand that you get the doctors to do something more. At this age, hope and denial work together to help them cope with the intensity of their emotional responses to the devastating news.

Since young teens are beginning to understand how much will be lost or changed when someone dies, they experience powerful feelings of sadness, anger, guilt, fear and hope.

Adolescence is normally a time of emotional extremes, and the stress of a terminal illness of a significant person is likely to exaggerate these extremes. Typically, teens are overwhelmed, threatened and embarrassed by their own and other people’s strong feelings and will prefer to be alone to express them. For example, when a young teen is told their best friend has died they might erupt with intense anger, storm out of the room, refuse to come out of their bedroom and not talk to anyone for several hours. Allow the teenager the time and space they need to take in important information. Be respectful of their need for privacy but continue to check in with them about their needs for support and information.

Although young teens begin to push for their independence and freedom from parents or guardians, they will often feel rejected and abandoned if they believe these individuals are withdrawing. Even though teens may not want to be at home with you, they may need a lot of reassurance that you still love and care about them. For example, when someone is ill you may spend a lot of time away from home or keep things to yourself. Perhaps you assume since the teen is not around, they don’t need you or aren’t interested. However, they may think your absence

means you don’t care about them or what is going on in their life. It is important that you are very clear about your expectations. Identify what isn’t negotiable and be clear about the choices they do have. Find ways to share time with the teen that helps them feel secure about your connection and interest in them.

When Someone is Very Ill

Give the teen information about the illness and any changes on a regular basis. Even though you are likely to meet resistance, it is important that you give the teen correct, up-to-date information. It is important that you give them enough information to make choices about when and how they want to spend their time. Because a teen of this age may want to avoid emotional discussions, it is important they understand why they need to hear what you have to say and that you keep calm as you say it. If, for example, you know that you are too upset to speak calmly and clearly, you might ask the doctor or a friend to explain things to them. Teens of this age may not seek out information about illness and dying. They may not know what is happening even when they lead you to think they do.

Help the teen to decide when and if they want to visit the person who is dying. Let your teen know when death is expected and be as specific as possible about the changes you are seeing. For example, describe how the person has changed since the last visit, what they might notice this time, and – if you know – whether death is minutes, hours, or days away. Anticipation of a final visit may trigger intense emotion that may be very upsetting for a young teen, and they may choose not to visit but to remember the dying person as he or she was before the illness. Once the decision has been made, be supportive, but also let them know it’s okay if they change their mind.

Talk with the teen and ask about their feelings and concerns. Although these conversations may be awkward, unwelcome or infrequent, it is important to make them happen. Don’t be misled by a teen’s apparent lack of concern and think they are unaffected by the situation. For example, you might think they are alright since they are keeping up their grades and not sad at home. However, it is more likely they find schoolwork to be a relief from the intensity of



their feelings and family life. If you sense this may be happening, let them know you are interested in how they are managing. If you don't feel comfortable doing this or they refuse to talk with you, you might ask them if there is someone else they would be comfortable talking with and assist them in connecting with that person.

Accept that the teen may be sensitive and explosive and do not get into unnecessary arguments. It is common for teens at this age to take out their stresses on parents and caregivers. Understand that the challenging behavior you may be dealing with is a part of normal conflict made worse by the illness of a significant person. The teen may not yet have the skills to communicate more sensitively. Try to be compassionate and calm in these moments. For example, you might let them know you understand they may be feeling frustrated, fearful or angry and many people have difficulty with these emotions. Explain that, although the behavior is not okay, you do realize the struggle and will help them find more reasonable ways of expressing themselves.

Limit the number of new chores and caregiving tasks that you give to the teen. Although a teen may seem old enough or sensible enough to take care of the person who is ill, they are not prepared emotionally for this kind of responsibility. The teen needs to spend time with friends and in extra-curricular activities. These interests help them to grow as a person. Although it may be tempting to give various household duties to them while you are caregiving, be sure these responsibilities don't keep them from doing things that are of high importance to them.

When Someone has Died

Prepare the teen for any rituals such as the funeral. If this will be the first funeral or memorial service that the teen has attended, ensure they understand what will happen and what may be expected of them. They may want to play more of a central role than younger children in the final remembrance activities. For example, they may want to read the eulogy, gather and arrange family photographs for display or help plan how the event will unfold. It is often important to young teens that their friends, friends' parents and other important adults attend the memorial service. Be sure they know the time, place and date of the service and offer to help invite key people.

Let the teen choose special mementos from the belongings of the person who died. Even though sorting through these items may be very difficult for you, allow the teen time to choose things that have meaning for them. There is no particular time this task must be done, so choose a time and place that feels comfortable for you both. It is not uncommon for a teen whose parent has died to choose to keep and wear some of the parent's clothing. Clothing is full of memories and sometimes even the smell of the person who died. Such memories can serve as a direct link with the person who has died while they are adjusting to life without him or her.

Normalize the grief process. The intense and unexpected waves of feeling that are part of grief can be particularly distressing for adolescents who are trying to control their powerful emotions. Help them to understand what they may experience while grieving. Explain it is common to want to talk to the person who died or to have visitations or dreams of them. Let the teen know it is also common to temporarily forget the person has died and to imagine they see him or her somewhere. Help them to understand that feelings of numbness, relief or anger with the person who has died are all normal aspects of grief. Also, assure them that while they may never forget the person who died, the sadness and anger should ease over time.

Set limits to prevent destructive behavior and encourage continued growth and independence.

This is a time when your teen's need to separate from you and establish with peers usually leads to increased conflict. When grief is added, the teen may be involved in more serious acts of rebellion, such as vandalism, theft or skipping school. Pay attention to alcohol or drug use as well as big changes in their circle of friends or interests, and uphold reasonable standards, curfews and consequences. If discipline is a new role for you, get advice from teachers, other parents or counselors you respect.

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It is also possible the teen may be inclined to stay close to home out of concern for you or their own feelings of insecurity after the death. Although it may feel good to have their company, it is important for them to continue to develop interests and close relationships outside of the family. If they no longer want to see their friends, find out the reasons. For example, if it's because they cry all the time, encourage them to risk being honest about that with their closest friends or help them find ways to safely express emotion.

Help the teen identify positive outcomes.

Encourage the teen to use a journal, write stories or talk to other kids about their experience. In time, they could explore what they have learned about themselves, the person who died or grief. Teens this age often find focusing school projects or assignments on their loss experience helps them not only keep up with schoolwork but also work through their feelings and questions about it. Some teens may begin to recognize in themselves certain qualities or characteristics of the person who died and may choose to build on them as they mature. For example, if the person who died was really easy to talk to, your teen may strive to be a helpful listener to their friends.

Suggested Books for Children 12-14 Years Old

Fire in My Heart, Ice in My Veins – A Journal for Teenagers Experiencing a Loss by Enid Samuel-Traisman:

Teens can write letters, copy down meaningful lyrics, write songs and poems, tell the person who died what they want them to know, and use their creativity to work through the grieving process.

Healing A Teen's Grieving Heart by Alan Wolfelt:

A useful tool with short, practical ideas of how teens can adjust to and cope with the loss of a loved one.

Weird is Normal When Teenagers Grieve by Jenny Wheeler:

This self-help book is written by an actively grieving 14-year-old girl whose father died of cancer. She validates the experience of teens as they grieve and provides an outline for others as to what they might expect on their grief journey as teenagers.

**For questions or to speak with a member of the Unity team, please call.
For additional resources and information on Unity's grief support
programming for children and adults, please visit Unity's website.**



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