

Supporting Older Teens Through Grief

CHILDREN AGES 15-17



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Developmental Information

Teens aged 15 to 17 are able to think ahead about a death and imagine how the death might affect them now and over time. An older teen may begin to grieve before the person dies, anticipating the absence of that person at important times in the future. For example, a teen who shared their dreams of becoming an architect with the terminally ill person may feel sadness, anger or disappointment that he or she will not be there to see the teen graduate and go on to become an architect.

Teens this age are usually able to understand what changes in the ill person's condition mean and to be flexible with family and personal routines. You can expect that they may have concerns about genetic or gender-related aspects of the disease. For example, if their mother and an aunt died of ovarian cancer, they may have fears they will be diagnosed with and die from the same disease.

Teens are moving away from the self-centeredness of their younger years. They begin to see and understand the effect a loss may have on others as well as themselves. However, this ability comes and goes. At times, they may clearly sympathize with the dying person and other family members for the losses they face. At other times, a teen's only concern will be their own needs, suffering or sorrow. They are usually able to express and discuss their emotions with others, including friends and caring adults. As they tend to be closest with friends, teens will talk with each other for support. They will likely worry about how people will cope with this illness and death, and how it will shape their future.

The world of 15 to 17 year olds includes current systems such as family, friends and school as well as important systems that lie ahead.

College or university ambitions, travel plans and work arrangements will impact how the teen responds to this loss. You can expect that how they deal with the loss may influence the decisions they make about their future. For example, the teen may decide that working and travelling for a year or two after the death is more important than going to college right away.

When Someone is Very Ill

Give the teen information about the person's illness and what to expect as soon as possible.

Adolescents this age will use information about the present situation to think ahead and plan for events in the future. For example, when they are told their grandmother will not recover from a recent stroke and has a certain amount of time to live, they may begin to feel the sadness of grief and start to think about and prepare for life without her. To support them in this process, you could suggest they write or talk about the things their grandmother taught them.

Encourage the teen to find ways of helping the person who is ill, using present interests or skills. Teens often want to be helpful but may not know exactly what to do or how to offer their assistance. For example, if the teen is known for their tidiness, you might suggest they help the dying individual organize their office space or workshop.

Consider the stressors the teen is experiencing and their effect on school or other performance.

It is difficult for teens this age to set aside major worries even for important projects or responsibilities. Because of this, grades at school or athletic activities may be affected. This can be a major concern for teens who are applying to get into a university or college. You might consider offering to help them study for upcoming exams or to proofread their assignments. This is an age when teens value relationships and their future. You might ask if they are able to talk with friends about what's happening and explore whether they have any concerns or questions about how this person's illness and death will affect their future.

Be alert to the teen's fears about mortality.

Although this is a concern for young people of any age, when someone in the family is ill, older teens are able to understand that some people may be prone to certain diseases because of lifestyle and genetic factors. For example, if their father has or had heart disease, talk openly with them about their chances of developing it and what they can do to prevent it. Be willing to hear their concerns about your lifestyle and what they fear could happen to you.



When Someone has Died

Prepare the teen for any rituals. At this age, teens may want to play a central role in the planning of, or participation in, the funeral or other rituals. They may want to take responsibility for particular aspects of the event that tie in with their own needs or strengths. For example, if they have an interest in creative and artistic projects, they may want to make a memory book for the event. Or they may want to help by interviewing close family members or friends for stories that could be included in the service.

Recognize the teen's need to identify with the person who died and to be able to name positive and negative parts of their relationship.

Teens may have a strong need to be like the person who died. You may notice the teen is taking on one or more characteristics or interests of that person. This behavior comes from a normal need to continue to feel connected to that person.

Be ready to be honest about the similarities and differences between the teen and the person who died. It is important to be realistic about both the strengths and the struggles of the relationship. Encourage the teen to remember everything about the person, even the things that were not so wonderful, and to talk about how this impacts their feelings, emotions, and memories.

Describe the grieving process and what to expect. A teen's grief may be much like your own. For example, in addition to the death of this person, the teen may be dealing with others' sadness or the way that lives are forever

altered by death. It may be helpful to direct them to pamphlets or books that explain the grief process in a straightforward way. You might talk about your own past and present experiences with loss.

Make sure the school knows about the death.

It is very important the teen's friends, teachers and school staff acknowledge the death and offer their condolences. This kind of support can be very comforting. Talk with the teen about who they would want this information shared with and how they would like it to be done. It may be helpful to invite classmates and teachers to the funeral.

Encourage an older teen to maintain their independence. This does not mean you show no interest or become distant, but that you encourage them to participate in activities that may take them away from or outside of the family. This may be especially difficult as grieving tends to pull people inward and home.

Suggested Books for Children 15-17 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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