

# Tips for Supporting the Grieving Teen

from The Dougy Center: The National Center for Grieving Children & Families

If you know a teen who has experienced a death, you might be wondering, “How can I help?” Here are some tips to keep in mind. In general, if you find yourself unsure of what to do or say, remember to take your cues from the teen. It’s likely that they know, or will be able to figure out, what they need. Your willingness to listen to their concerns and questions, as well as be present with their thoughts and feelings, creates a foundation of safety, trust, and support.

## Be open and honest about the death.

One of the first questions adults have after a death is, “How and when do I tell my teenagers?” There is no magical ‘right time’ to share the news of someone’s death, but in general we recommend telling them as soon as possible, so that they hear it from someone they trust rather than from other teens or through social media. Find a safe, comfortable place and start with a short, but honest, explanation about the death. **Even though teens are better able to grasp the concept of death than younger children, it’s still good to avoid euphemisms such as *passed away*, *went to sleep*, *crossed over*, or *lost*.** Taking in such big news can be confusing, so using the words dead or died can help teens comprehend what happened. You might say something like this: “Honey, I have very sad news. Mom died today. She had a heart attack.” Let their questions guide what else to share.



Reassure teens that you are still there to take care of them and that they don’t have to shoulder so much responsibility for the family’s well-being.

## Allow for questions.

Teens may have a lot of curiosity about the details of what happened. Let them know it’s okay to ask and that **there are no wrong questions**. If your teen asks something you don’t know the answer to, tell them what you can do to find out, acknowledging that some questions may not have answers. Sometimes teens hesitate to ask questions or talk about the person who died because they worry the adults they are closest to will get upset or cry. This doesn’t mean you should hide your feelings, but it is helpful to let them know ahead of time that it’s okay to talk about the person, even if your strong emotions come up. Reassure them that you will be okay and that there are people you can go to for support. Another option is to work with your teen to identify a trusted adult - family friend, relative, coach, mentor - they are comfortable going to with questions and concerns.

## Listen.

When a teen is grieving, people can be quick to offer advice and give opinions. **What’s most helpful is to listen without judging, interpreting, advising, or evaluating.** It can be tempting to minimize their feelings, or convince them to think or feel differently than they do. If it’s a case of misinformation, it’s helpful to provide the correct details, but still allow teens to express their take on things. Sometimes the best response is to repeat what you hear them say -- called “reflecting” -- so that they know they have been heard. For example, “You really get uncomfortable when kids at school talk about hating their mom. You wish they knew what it’s like to have a mom die.” Doing this helps teens trust that you will listen, leaving them more likely to come to you when they’re hurting or needing advice.

## Be open to different ways of grieving.

Grief is as unique as we are. Teens can have a wide range of reactions and ways of expressing their grief. **Teens tend to be hard on themselves, whether for crying, not crying, being strong, being a “mess,” thinking about the person, or not thinking about the person.** There is no right or wrong way to grieve. Each grief experience is unique. You can help teens (and yourself) by letting them know all of their reactions are okay and supporting them to discover what works best for them, as long as their behavior does not hurt themselves or others.

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## **Know that grief doesn't follow a schedule.**

You may have heard that grief follows a linear course of stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. The teens at The Dougy Center have taught us that grieving may include one, all, or none of these experiences and they do not occur in any particular order. Grief does not have a timeline. Let your teen know it's common for their feelings, thoughts, and physical responses to change day to day, sometimes minute to minute!

## **Offer choices.**

Teens appreciate being able to make choices as much as adults do. The death of a family member or friend can be disorienting, bringing to light their lack of control in life. Allowing them to make choices can help re-establish a sense of power, control, and trust. These choices can be simple and everyday such as, "I know we are all picking up extra chores since dad died, would you rather be in charge of taking out the trash or emptying the dishwasher?" or more complex, such as helping to plan the memorial service or sorting through the person's belongings. Whenever possible, include teens in the decision-making process. Providing informed choices helps them know their input is valued and that they have an important role in the family.



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## **Acknowledge a need for privacy.**

Developmentally, teens are poised to explore independence and identity, which can lead them to turn more towards peers or solo endeavors such as music or journaling for comfort and support. For the adults in their lives, this can be challenging, as teens may not talk with the adults about how they are feeling or even about the person who died. For some teens, methods of communication that aren't face to face can be easier to navigate. One family found that passing a notebook back and forth, with the understanding that unless there was a safety concern, nothing written would be brought up in person, to be a great way to open up the lines of communication. This freed up the teen and his father to talk more openly than they would otherwise. Texting, email, short videos, or written notes - get creative and negotiate with your teen to find a way to interact that works for both of you.

## **Know that grief affects teens on many levels.**

Grief is a holistic experience that can impact how a teen thinks, feels, and behaves. The death of a family member or friend can be physically, emotionally, and cognitively exhausting, leaving teens with little energy leftover. Some teens have trouble sleeping, especially in the first few weeks or months after the death. Lack of sleep can lead to short tempers, mood swings, and impatience. You can help your teen by modeling good self-care around sleep, food, staying hydrated, and exercise. Grief can also make everyone forgetful, so your teen may need extra reminders about chores and plans. If your teen experiences difficulty concentrating in class or completing homework, reach out to their teachers to discuss ways to help your teen feel supported and successful in school.

## **Talk about and remember the person who died.**

Talking about and remembering the person who died can be an important part of processing grief. You might say, "Your mom really loved classic rock music," or "Your dad was the most dedicated friend I've ever met." By sharing these memories, you help teens learn more about who the person was in the world and what they valued. When it comes to significant days such as the birthday of the person who died, the anniversary of their death, and traditional holidays like Mother's Day, Father's Day, Thanksgiving and year-end, your teen may have ideas about what to do on these days. Some families decide to light a candle, cook something the person who died loved to eat, take a trip to a favorite place, or take turns sharing memories. Invite teens to participate in making a plan, but also let them know it's okay if they don't want to.

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## Provide opportunities for recreation.

Whether it was a parent, caregiver, or sibling who died, teens can feel compelled to step in and take on extra responsibilities. Babysitting younger siblings, helping with housework, or even getting an after school job to contribute to the family's finances are some of the ways teens try to help out. While it might be necessary for them to take on a helper role, be sure to also make time for them to play and still be a kid, in whatever ways fit for them. Reassure teens that you are still there to take care of them and that they don't have to shoulder so much responsibility for the family's well-being.

## Get extra help if needed.

While most teens will ultimately return to their prior level of functioning following a death, some are potentially at risk for developing challenges such as depression, anxiety, difficulties at school, suicidal thoughts, or high risk behaviors. While friends, family, or a support group may be enough for many teens, others find additional assistance from a therapist or school counselor to be helpful. If you notice ongoing behaviors that are interfering with a teen's daily life, seek the advice of a qualified mental health professional. Don't be afraid to ask about their experience and training in grief and loss, working with teens, and their treatment philosophy and methods.



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## Find sources of support for yourself.

If you are parenting or supporting a grieving teen, one of the best ways to help is to ensure that you are taking care of yourself. Research shows us that how well a teen does after a death is linked to how well the adults in their lives are doing. You don't have to hide your grief, but be sure to establish people and activities in your life that provide comfort and inspiration. By accessing support, you model for your teens ways to take care of themselves, and provide reassurance that you will have the energy and presence to be there for them.

These are just a few tips for how to support grieving teens. Grief is unique to each person and every family, so adapt these suggestions as needed.

### *Our Mission*

The Dougy Center provides support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families grieving a death can share their experiences.

### *The Dougy Center Bookstore/Resources*

The Dougy Center has been helping children, teens, young adults and their parents cope with death since 1982. Our practical, easy-to-use materials are based on what we have learned from over 40,000 Dougy Center participants over the past three decades. To order online, visit [www.dougy.org](http://www.dougy.org) or [www.tdcbookstore.org](http://www.tdcbookstore.org) or call 503.775.5683.



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