



Patient & Family Guide
2021

Helping Teens Cope with Dying, Death, and Grief



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Teens are able to deal with dying, death, and grief, but their experience is different than those of children and adults. The teen years are a powerful time of change. They are in the middle of development. Their body, identity, spirituality, and emotions are developing and changing.

At the same time, they are also pulling away from their parents and are learning to live more independently. They are learning to balance their need for support from their parents and their desire to be with their friends.

Death and grief can be challenging for teens during this time of change. The help of supportive family members and friends is important.

Dying and Death

When someone is very ill

Share information about the person's illness and what to expect as soon as possible. This information can help your teen better adjust for what may come.

For example, when they are told that their grandmother will not recover from a recent stroke and has a certain amount of time to live, they may be sad or worried. Telling them what to expect before it happens will give them time to think about and prepare for life without their grandmother. To support your teen in this process, you could suggest that they may want to write or talk about what they learned from their grandmother.

Teens and their friends

While teens get a great deal of support and approval from their friends and peers, this does not always mean that they are properly emotionally supported by them. Although it is important to let teens support and care for each other, remember that their social circle may not meet all of their needs. Likewise, sometimes their peers may not encourage the most effective and helpful ways to cope.

You might ask them if they are able to talk with their friends about what is happening. Check in with them about whether they have concerns or questions about how the person's illness and death will affect them or their future.

Teens are in the middle of figuring out how to live, both as individuals and in relationships. This means they are testing out different ways of living, thinking, feeling, and acting. As an adult who has passed through these years already, you can offer a mature example of how to face life's challenges. Gently and regularly check in with your teen to see how they are doing.

Do not be afraid to share your own thoughts about living through painful experiences.

Teens are between

Remember that teens will react and respond to life and relationships with a mix of adult and child-like coping. Teens are often expected to cope as adults. They can feel pressure to act and grieve in an "organized" adult manner. They may be able to do so part of the time, but it helps to remember that they are just learning these ways of coping. Expecting and allowing for more child-like coping will help your teen feel free to move back and forth.

Teens as caregivers

Teens are able to care for others in pain, and often step into the role of parent or caregiver. During the dying process and then during grief, teens can be effective helpers. Help your teen find ways to help the person who is ill, using their interests or skills. For example, if your teen is known for their tidiness, you might suggest that they help their dying father organize his office space or workshop.

Helping can be a wonderful learning experience for a teen. It can also be a way of avoiding strong emotions. Keeping busy with tasks allows little time for grief. Parents and guardians should try to make sure that teens are reminded and given the opportunity to grieve and be cared for themselves.

When someone has died

When a family member, friend, or loved one dies, teens can find the adjustment painful and the new experience disorienting. Illness and death demand that a teen deal with complex experiences and feelings, such as mortality or learning to be vulnerable. Often, teens have never had to deal with these things before. Given how much change is happening and the emotional demands of being a teen, this can be hard for teens to manage.

Part of being a teen is maturing and becoming less self-centred. They may be starting to understand the effect that a loss will have on others, as well as themselves. But this awareness comes and goes. Sometimes they may sympathize with the dying person and their family members for the losses that they face. At other times, their only concern will be their own needs, suffering, or sadness.

Rituals

Help your teen get ready for family rituals. They may want to plan how they take part in the funeral or other ceremonies, using their own interests and strengths. For example, if your teen is interested in creative and artistic projects, they may want to make a memory book for the event or interview close family members for stories to include in the service.

Grieving teens

Hiding and showing feelings

As they come to understand themselves, teens learn how to reflect on their thoughts and feelings. Their strong thoughts and feelings of grief can easily overwhelm them. To cope with this, many teens act as if nothing happened. This helps them to feel safe, secure, and organized while they are figuring things out. This is normal.

Periods of silence and acting ‘cool’ may be followed by periods of sadness, crying, and talking. Sometimes these expressions are dramatic. Teens tend to bounce back and forth between holding their emotions inside and suddenly spilling them out.

Teens may also withhold their feelings to protect family members. They may mistakenly believe that if they are “strong” and “OK”, their grieving family members will not be further stressed by their sadness and emotional upset. Teens and children are both capable of holding in their feelings to not further upset their family. Parents may also do this, so that everyone in the family is protecting everyone else.

Give teens space to figure things out. Let them express themselves freely and without judgement. This will help them feel safe to explore their powerful feelings and thoughts of grief. Being available and reaching out to them from time to time will help them know that uncertainty, hurt, and confusion are normal parts of being human. You may wish to remind your teen that sharing feelings usually helps to make a family healthier than hiding feelings. Sharing sadness connects us and makes us feel less alone.

Modelling healthy grief and communication is the best thing you can do for a young person. Listen to their thoughts and ideas about grief without judgement. They are working things out as best they can.

School and stress

Illness, death, and grief can create stress that impacts your teen's ability to concentrate or succeed in school and other areas. Their school grades or athletic activities may be affected. This can be a big concern for teens who are applying to university or college. Some teens identify strongly with good grades, and may find that grief sets them back from success. This can cause anxiety.

You can offer to help your teen study for upcoming exams or to proofread their assignments. Let them know it is OK if they do not reach all of their educational goals while they are grieving. Sometimes life interrupts us.

Ask your teen if they would like you to tell their school about what they are going through. Ask your teen if they would like you to help make arrangements for missed assignments or tests.

The support of your teen's friends, teachers, and school staff can be very comforting.

Some teens may need extra help

Even though it can be very stressful, most teens will move successfully through their grief. Some teens, however, will cope with their pain in ways that may be troubling or frightening. Watch for these warning signs:

- Symptoms of depression (such as trouble sleeping, restlessness, and chronic (ongoing) low self-esteem)
- Poor grades or not caring about school-related activities when your teen would usually take part
- Breakdown of relationships with family members or friends
- Behaviours such as drug or alcohol abuse, self-harm or cutting, risk-taking, fighting, and new sexual activity
- Denying emotions while acting overly strong or mature

If you or your teen is experiencing a mental health emergency or crisis:

- Call 911 right away
- Go to the nearest Emergency Department
- Call the Provincial Mental Health and Addictions Crisis Line:
 - › Phone (toll-free): 1-888-429-8167
- Kids Help Phone
 - › Phone (toll-free): 1-800-668-6868
 - › Text CONNECT to 686868

Teens are often suspicious about counselling, as they fear it will expose their vulnerability. There are many options for an unsure teen who is struggling with loss. These include school counsellors, adult mentors, religious groups, chaplains, drama, music, or art therapists, and private therapists. Your teen may just need a little more time and attention from caring adults in their life, like you.

For more mental health information resources in Nova Scotia, visit:

- › <https://mha.nshealth.ca>

