Patient & Family Guide
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Helping Teens Cope with Dying, Death, and Loss

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Helping Teens Cope with Dying, Death, and Loss

Teens can experience grief and loss differently than younger children or adults.

There is no right or wrong way to grieve. Grief does not follow stages or a timeline. Grief is different for each person and can change over time.

This pamphlet can help parents, caregivers, and other trusted adults offer compassionate grief support to teens experiencing any kind of loss.

What are your questions?

Please ask a member of your health care team. We are here to help you.

- **There are many types of loss:**
  - The death of a family member, friend, or community member
  - Serious illness or medical changes
  - Changes in health, ability, or identity (who they believe they are)
  - Family separation, divorce, or changes in caregiving
  - Loss of friendships, community, culture, or sense of belonging
  - Changes in where they live or where they go to school
- **Any loss that is meaningful to a teen can be grieved.** While it is natural to judge or compare different types of losses, this may cause them to feel like their loss is not important. You can help to support them and make them feel safe to express their feelings by acknowledging their loss (recognizing how important the loss is to them).

Understanding grief in teens

- As teens develop, they are learning to balance their growing independence with their need for connection and care. When teens experience grief, it is common for them to move back and forth between wanting privacy and wanting support. This is normal. It does not mean that they do not need support.
- Some teens may talk openly about their thoughts and feelings, while others may keep their grief private or express it through actions instead of words. Although it may seem like they are avoiding their grief, they may simply be expressing it in different ways.
- Let them know you are available, while respecting their need for independence. This can help to build trust.
    - For example, tell them “I’ll check in from time to time, and you can tell me if it it’s a good time.” This can help teens feel supported without feeling pressured.

How to support a grieving teen

- Teens often want support, but not always in the ways adults expect. What feels helpful can change from day to day.
  - › Grief can be very tiring. It may help to let them choose how they want to connect (like talking, sitting quietly, doing something together, or being alone).
  - › Check in gently and regularly. Do not pressure them to talk or show their grief.
  - › Listen more than you talk. It is OK if there is silence.
  - › Reassure them that their feelings make sense and that they are not a burden.
- **Being there for them and following their lead can help.**

What to say and what to avoid

- Many adults worry about saying the wrong thing. Simple, honest, compassionate words are often enough.
- **Helpful things to say are:**
  - “I’m really glad you told me.”
  - “This must be a lot to take in. How has it been for you?”
  - “I’m here with you. We don’t have to talk if you don’t want to.”
  - “What would feel most helpful right now?”
  - “That makes sense, given what you’ve been through.”
- **Avoid saying things like:**
  - “Everything happens for a reason.”
  - “At least they’re no longer suffering.”
  - “Be strong.”
  - “You should be feeling better by now.”
- If you do not know what to say, simply tell them “I may not have the right words, but I care about you and I am here for you.”

Trauma and grief

- If a death or loss was sudden, scary, or involved an upsetting experience, a teen may experience trauma as well as grief. They may:
  - Have trouble sleeping
  - Feel jumpy or on edge
  - Avoid things or places that remind them of what happened
  - Feel numb (not feel anything) or overwhelmed (like they cannot handle what is happening)
- **It is important to try to help them feel safe.** It may help to follow a routine, reassure them, give them choices, and let them share at their own pace. It may help to get more support if their grief is:
  - Very strong
  - Not getting better or getting worse
  - Affecting their daily life

- For more information about trauma and grief, ask a member of your health care team for pamphlet 2517, *Coping with Grief and Trauma: When Tragedy Turns Life Upside Down*, scan the QR code below, or visit:
  - › www.nshealth.ca/patient-education-resources/2517

Scan the QR code below on your device (open the camera on your device, point the camera at the code, and tap the banner or border that appears)

When someone is dying

- If someone important to a teen is dying, it can help to share honest information in a way that is right for their age. **If you do not share information about what is happening, they may feel like you are keeping things from them, which may cause even more distress** (severe upset).

- It can help to share clear, straightforward information in a calm and compassionate way. This includes what is happening, what might change, and what is known or not known at this time. **It is OK to say, "I don't know,"** and to let them know you will share updates as you learn more.
- **Let them decide how much information they want and when they want it.** They may ask many questions right away or take the information in slowly and come back later with questions. Having these conversations over time helps teens process information and feel supported as things change.
- Some teens may want to help or stay busy during this time. They may want to:
  - Help at home
  - Spend time with the person who is ill
  - Focus on school or activities
- Helping can feel meaningful and give them a sense of purpose, but it should not take the place of getting care and support themselves.

- **How to support a teen when someone is dying:**
  - Check in regularly, without pressure, and let them know you are available
  - Encourage them to take breaks from caregiving or responsibilities
  - Support their routines, rest, and time with friends
  - Ask them what feels most helpful to them right now

When someone has died

- After a death, teens may feel:
  - Sadness
  - Anger
  - Guilt
  - Confusion
  - Relief
  - Numbness
  - A mix of feelings that can change from day to day or even hour to hour
- Some teens may seem like they are not affected at times and deeply upset at others. This **movement in and out of grief is common** and does not mean they are "not grieving enough" or "grieving too much."

- Grief may show up in their thoughts, feelings, bodies, and behaviour. They may:
  - Have trouble sleeping or focusing
  - Feel more tired or restless
  - Withdraw from others
  - Express grief through their actions instead of their words

  These responses are part of adjusting to their loss.
- It can help to:
  - Check in gently and regularly, without pushing for them to talk
  - Listen with care. Avoid trying to fix or explain away their pain.
  - Reflect back what you hear, like, “That sounds really hard,” or “I’m glad you told me”
  - Reassure them that their responses make sense and that there is no right or wrong way to grieve
- Some teens prefer to talk with their friends, trusted adults outside of their family, or someone who has been through a similar loss. Others may not want to talk at all. Respecting this while still offering support can help them feel safe and understood.

- Grief often comes in waves and may return around reminders like birthdays, holidays, anniversaries, or milestones. It can help to let them know this ahead of time, so they feel less surprised or alone when their strong feelings come back. It can also help to plan how you can respond yourself and together in ways that work for them.

Culture, spirituality, and meaning

- Grief is shaped by culture, spirituality, faith, family traditions, identity, and personal beliefs. Teens may find these helpful or challenge them in different ways as they grieve. Their responses may change over time.
- Some teens find comfort in rituals, prayer, ceremony, creativity, nature, music, movement, or time with community. Others may question their beliefs, feel angry at spiritual or cultural systems, or search for new meaning after a loss. All of these responses are valid and are part of how teens make sense of what has happened.

- Grief may also affect a teen's sense of identity, including how they see themselves, their family, their culture, or their place in the world. Teens may feel different from their peers, not sure of where they belong, or feel disconnected from their traditions.
- They may:
  - Create or change personal rituals or traditions
  - Write, draw, or make music
  - Spend time in nature or meaningful places
  - Keep mementos, photos, or symbols connected to the person or loss
  - Find ways to honour or remember the person they lost privately or publicly
  - Stop taking part in traditions that no longer feel right
- For more information, see the **Resources** section on page 16 or visit:
  - www.youthgrief.ca
- **To help support them:**
  - Ask open questions, like, "What feels important to you right now?" or "Are there any traditions or practices in our family that feel helpful or not helpful?"
  - "Are there traditions or practices you'd like to explore?"

  - › Let them know that it is OK if their beliefs, values, or practices are changing.
  - › Do not try to tell them what they 'should' believe or find comforting.
  - › Respect cultural, spiritual, and identity based expressions of grief, including those that are different from your own.
  - › Help them access cultural, spiritual, or community resources if they ask.
- There is no set path for making sense of the changes caused by loss, and they may not find clarity or comfort right away. Making space for curiosity, questioning, and choice can help them feel respected and supported as they find their own way through their grief.

Friends, social media, and grief

- Friends and social media often play a big part in a teen's grief. Some find comfort in sharing memories online, while others feel overwhelmed by constantly seeing posts, comments, or graphic information.
- Friends are often a big source of comfort, though they may not always feel understood by them. It can help to encourage them to get support from both their friends and adults.

- **Support may include:**
  - Talking about how social media is affecting them. Help them find out if social media is making them feel better or worse
  - Encouraging breaks or helping them adjust the privacy settings on their social media accounts
  - Reminding them that they do not have to read or reply to everything
  - Offering support if something online hurts or upsets them
- Some smartphones and social media accounts have "reminders" of past events and pictures. These reminders can be surprising and upsetting. It may help to adjust the settings, as needed.
- Loss can make them feel even more uncertain in a time that is already complex. It can help to make them feel safer both online and offline.

School, daily life, and expectations

- Grief can affect focus, memory, motivation, energy, and taking part in school and other activities. These changes may be signs of grief, not failure.

- **It may help to:**
  - Be flexible with deadlines and workload
  - Choose a trusted school contact (like a teacher, a guidance counsellor, a coach) who can help to support them through their loss and grief
  - Set aside a quiet space for when their emotions feel overwhelming
  - Plan ahead for difficult dates, like anniversaries or milestones
- Small changes can help to lower stress and help them stay connected to school and daily life while they grieve.

Supporting yourself

- Supporting someone who is grieving can be demanding, especially if you are grieving too. It is important to take care of yourself and ask for support when needed.
- It is OK to:
  - Acknowledge your own feelings
  - Ask for help or guidance
  - Give examples of healthy ways to cope and express emotions
- **You are not alone.** See the **Resources** section on the next page.

Some of the most powerful ways to support someone include being with them, listening with care, and showing that grief is welcome, not rushed or judged.

You do not need to have the right words. Being there for them matters.

Resources

Kids and teens grief

YouthGrief.ca

- Practical, Canadian based guidance for supporting grieving youth and teens, including information for caregivers and professionals.
  - › www.youthgrief.ca

KidsGrief.ca

- Information and resources for children, teens, families, and professionals.
  - › https://kidsgrief.ca

Children and Youth Grief Network

- › www.childrenandyouthgriefnetwork.com

Kids Help Phone

- Support for young people by phone or text, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
  - › Phone (toll-free): 1 800 668 6868
  - › Text: CONNECT to 686868
  - › https://kidshelpphone.ca/

Grief and coping

Let's Talk About Grief

› www.nshealth.ca/patient-education-resources/2516

Coping with Grief and Trauma: When Tragedy Turns Life Upside Down

› www.nshealth.ca/patient-education-resources/2517

About Grief

- Canadian Grief Alliance
  › https://aboutgrief.ca/

MyGrief.ca

- Canadian Virtual Hospice
  › www.MyGrief.ca

Life Changes

- Nova Scotia Health
  › www.nshealth.ca/lifechanges

To find grief support in your area:

› Visit www.nshealth.ca and search "grief"

Bereavement Support Services – IWK Health

› https://iwkhealth.ca/clinics-programs-services/bereavement-support-services

211 Nova Scotia

- › Phone: 211
- › Phone (toll-free): 1-855-466-4994
- › https://ns.211.ca

Healing Pathways – Grieving Well™

- Nova Scotia Hospice Palliative Care Association
  - › https://grievingwell.nshpca.ca

You may also find support from:

- › School counsellors or trusted teachers
- › Primary health care providers (family doctor or nurse practitioner)
- › Cultural or spiritual supports
- › Community grief programs

Reaching out is a sign of care and connection, not failure.

If it is an emergency:

- **Call the Provincial Mental Health and Addictions Crisis Line** 24 hours a day, 7 days a week:
  - › Phone (toll-free): 1-888-429-8167
  - › Phone: 902-429-8167

Notes:

This pamphlet is for educational purposes only. It is not intended to replace the advice or professional judgment of a health care provider. The information may not apply to all situations. If you have any questions, please ask your health care provider.

Find all patient education resources here:
www.nshealth.ca/patient-education-resources

Connect with a registered nurse in Nova Scotia any time:
Call 811 or visit: https://811.novascotia.ca

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Learn more:
https://library.nshealth.ca/patient-education-resources