

Child and Teen Grief

Information for Parents and Caregivers

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Supporting Children and Teens through Grief

If your children are old enough to love, then they are old enough to grieve. After the death of a family member or friend, children and teens need to know what to expect and how to deal with any troubling thoughts and feelings that may surface. It is important for you to be as open as possible with whatever emotions and questions come up.

As a parent, you may be faced with the challenges of coping with your own grief at the same time your children will need support with theirs. There may be times when you find it hard to listen to their anger or sadness because it brings out your own deep emotions. Try to remember that your children are learning from you, and may benefit from being included in your grieving process.

Within families, everyone grieves in their own way and in their own time. This can present challenges and may require extra patience, understanding and compromise.

Just like adults, children and teens have a ‘grieving style’, which may lean towards a task-oriented or an emotion-oriented approach.¹ Neither one is the right way to grieve; and most people’s grieving style is a combination of both.

Children and teens who are more task-oriented may need to return to old routines or may focus on activities, such as artwork, play or sports. They may benefit from opportunities to remember the person who has died in concrete ways, such as creating a memory book or special object.

Children and teens who are more emotion-oriented tend to talk more about their feelings. Feelings such as sorrow, anger or fear can sometimes explode in loud or ‘big’ outbursts. It is important that there are opportunities for children to share these feelings and to receive comfort and support from you. If you feel unable to provide this, is there another adult who may be able to do so? This could be a family member, friend, volunteer or counsellor.

The information in this booklet is offered only as a guideline to help you anticipate and understand the changing needs of your children and teens after a death. They will grieve in ways that reflect their individual personality, developmental understanding, previous experience with loss, and the support and information available to them. Because your child’s understanding and needs may not fit within his or her particular age group, you may find it helpful to read information for children who are either older or younger than your own.

¹ Adapted from Terry L. Martin & Kenneth J. Doka. Men Don’t Cry... Women Do – Transcending Gender Stereotypes of Grief.

The Grief Journey

When a death occurs

Walking the Edges

SOCIAL

Avoidance of peers or social situations

Increased dependence on parents or caregivers

PHYSICAL

Dizziness, restlessness, and weakness
Diarrhea, constipation, vomiting or stomach ache
Changes in appetite and sleep patterns

EMOTIONAL

Withdrawal or explosive temper tantrums
Numb or flat expression
Feeling alone or scared

MENTAL

Confusion and disbelief
Poor concentration and forgetfulness
Focused on the topic of death or the person who died

SPIRITUAL

Blaming God, parents or self
Wishing to die, or to be with the person who died
No belief in the future (older children)

IMPORTANT REMINDER

Include your child in remembrance rituals.

Adjusting to loss Entering the Depths

SOCIAL

Wanting (but not asking for) the attention of parents and other important adults
Self-consciousness with friends about the loss

PHYSICAL

Continuation of earlier responses
Low energy
May have symptoms of the illness that the person died from

EMOTIONAL

Unexpected mood swings
Feeling hopeless, sad, guilty, fearful or angry
Acute sense of missing the person and yearning for the person to come back to life

MENTAL

Daydreaming, forgetfulness and confusion

Doubt or denial about the cause of death or its permanence

SPIRITUAL

Continued blaming of God, parents or self

May seek comfort in thoughts and questions about Heaven or saying prayers

IMPORTANT REMINDER

Recognize and support your child's unique style and pace through grief.

As life goes on

Mending the Heart

SOCIAL

Restored desire for independence

Interest in new activities and friendships

PHYSICAL

Reduction of previous physical responses

Renewed energy for activity

Return to usual sleep and eating patterns

EMOTIONAL

Emotions settle down and become less intense

More happiness and self confidence

Less guilt, fear and anger

MENTAL

Improved concentration and understanding

Less focus on the death and the person who died

Increased maturity

SPIRITUAL

Reconnection with faith and less blame

Able to forgive self, parents and others

IMPORTANT REMINDER

Expect periodic returns to grieving at significant transitions in your child's life.

Children Aged 3 to 5

Developmental Information

- At this age children think in magical, self-centred, physical and connected ways.

Children of this age will see themselves as the centre of most things they experience. They believe that their thoughts and behaviours are the cause of events, and that things that happen at or close to the same time are related. For example, if in a fit of anger, your child wished you dead and then you became sick, she may believe that she 'caused' your illness to happen. Unfortunately, when a child of this age gets such an idea as this it can be very difficult for her to revise her thinking. If you sense that this has happened, you will need to help your child understand that nothing she said, did or felt caused the illness or death. Often it is necessary to reassure your child more than once that she is not to blame for what has happened.

- In terms of how children aged 3 to 5 feel, there are two things to remember: they are anxious when separated from parents or primary caregivers and they are distressed by expressions of powerful emotion from adults.

At this age children will feel scared and responsible when they see a parent or other significant adult in distress (e.g., prolonged tears, loud sobbing or slamming of doors). For example, you might be driving with your children and unexpectedly be overcome with the rage and sadness that you feel about your father's sudden death. These strong feelings might affect your interactions with your children and you might find yourself crying and yelling at them about something minor. If this sort of thing happens, it is important that your children see you recover from your emotion and that you carefully and calmly explain to them what you were feeling and why.

- Children of this age tend to have little contact with systems outside the family.

Relatives and perhaps daycare or preschool staff are often the child's only contact with the world outside your family. When someone in the family is ill, this often means that your child will visit a number of new places (hospitals) and meet new people such as doctors and nurses. There are books and toys that you can use to help your child become familiar with these new situations.

When Someone is Very Ill

- Tell your child about changes in the person who is ill, and that they are caused by the disease and its treatments.

Use clear, simple words and go over this as often as new changes happen. Children of this age benefit from clear, honest information given on a regular basis that can help them to understand what they are seeing and hearing as their family member changes. For example, on your next visit to the hospital, you might show her a wheelchair or an electric bed and demonstrate to her when they are used and how. When you talk about the sick person or the illness with your child, focus on the things that she will actually see (e.g., medicines, weight loss, hair loss, equipment) and hear (e.g., breathing changes, crying, common words, such as chemo or cancer).

- Respect that your child cannot witness intense feelings for more than a brief time.

If your child sees that you are very upset, he will think that he is the cause of your grief, so careful, frequent explanations are necessary. It is common for adults to want to protect children from intense displays of emotion. However, sometimes this expectation is unrealistic. For example, you may need to tell your son that his mom is going to die, but you can't even think about it without being overcome with tears. If this is your situation, you may ask a trusted friend or hospice counsellor to explain this to him with you present. Talk together ahead of time so that this person understands your needs and exactly what you would like your son to know.

- Talk with the person who is ill about the length and frequency of visits with your child.

Sometimes the excitement and energy of a young child may be tiring or overwhelming. Plan for your child to have something interesting to do during the visit. It is a good idea to take quiet toys or other simple activities that she can play with or show to the person that you're visiting. For example, she might draw pictures or make a card for the person while you're there. Don't visit during regular nap times. Often a visit over your child's favourite take-out lunch or dinner is a comfortable way to spend time together. Be prepared to leave when she shows you, through her mood or behaviour, that she is ready to go. If you would like to stay longer than your child can manage, arrange to have a favourite person come and take her home.

- Make a regular time and place when your child can ask questions and share his feelings and thoughts about what's happening.

When someone that you love is seriously ill, it can be difficult to find time to talk about it with your children. Many adults hope that if their children aren't showing any upset, they're OK. However, even though children of this age are very aware of what is going on with you, they often do not have the words needed to let adults know about their feelings and questions. You will need to make time for these conversations with your child. For example, you might find that bedtime, when you can snuggle up together, is a good time to check out how he is doing; or you might choose mealtimes or car rides for these talks.

When Someone has Died

- Use concrete, specific details to explain to your child that the person has died.

It is helpful to clarify that when someone dies their heart doesn't beat, their ears don't hear, their body doesn't move, etc., and that the person cannot feel anything anymore. The characters and heroes of cartoons and movies aimed at children of this age often magically come back to life and this unfortunately reinforces their false and magical beliefs about death. Consequently, it may be difficult for your children to understand the permanence of death. You will likely need to explain and affirm frequently that the person who died will not be coming back to life. It may be helpful to recall a past loss that your child will remember, such as the death of a pet or another person to demonstrate that dead people don't come back. If you are able to remain calm, you might allow her to see the person after death because it may help her to understand in a very concrete way that when someone dies, their body stops working completely.

- Prepare your child for any rituals that will take place after the death.

Before attending the funeral or memorial service, explain to your child what will happen, who will be there, how people will be and what role, if any, he will have. Remember that children need concrete information and will be frightened by intense emotion. For example, if you and your son will be attending the funeral of a much loved uncle, you might tell him that many of his uncle's friends will be there and that some people, including yourself, will probably be crying because they are sad that he has died. If it is an open coffin service, you might explain that his uncle's body will be there so that people can say goodbye to him and that the coffin is used to bury the body in the ground. Ensure that you or another person will be free to take your child home if he wishes and be sure that he knows who that person will be.

- Provide your child with frequent opportunities to think and talk about the person who died.

When there has been a death in the family, children will need to talk about what happened long after the death and initial grieving period. Children look to parents and caregivers for guidance about how to grieve and if you don't talk about your loss, it is unlikely that your child will. If you continue to talk about the person who died and how you are both coping, it will help your child to understand and accept the loss. For example, if you both openly talk about the person who died, sharing memories and feelings, she will know that she is not responsible for the sadness that you both feel.

- Give your child access to objects that foster an ongoing sense of connection to the person who died.

Children at this age will long for the person who died and want them to come back. Resist the impulse to put away all the pictures and other reminders of the person who died. Keep objects or photographs of the person who died accessible to your child, as these are often a source of comfort and pleasure. For example, if your son's beloved grandpa died, he may want to keep a special picture of him in his room and wear his slippers. It might also be especially important on birthdays or special holidays to find a way to remember grandpa. Find out what helps your child feel connected to the person he grieves for.

- Remember that your child's grieving process will differ radically from your own.

Children of this age live in the moment. They don't realize the full extent of the loss and will be uncomfortable with long intense displays of emotion. They will grieve sporadically with intense brief bursts over many years. For example, your daughter may be inconsolable about her father's death one moment and happily playing the next. When this happens, accept that this is normal and that she will have feelings and questions about this loss throughout her lifetime.

Reading List

Books for children

Lifetimes. R. Ingpen & M. Bryan. (1987). A simple story about beginnings and endings in the lifetimes of plants, animals and people.

My Many Colored Days. Dr. Seuss. (1998). A useful book to help adults talk to children about emotions.

When Dinosaurs Die: A guide to understanding death. L. Krasny Brown. (1996). Engaging book that has straightforward questions and answers about death.

Old Turtle. D. Wood (1992). A beautiful story that may help with questions about spirituality, nature and God.

Children Aged 6 to 8

Developmental Information

- Between 6 and 8 years of age children are changing in the ways that they think.

Some children of this age are able to understand cause and effect; most will still think in the egocentric and magical ways of younger children. When someone in the family has died there is often tension, conflict, sadness and anger in other family members. Young children naturally will detect these feelings, even if you think that you are hiding them. When you don't explain to your child that these normal feelings are about the loss, he may think that he is the reason for the family's distress. If this happens, it is important that you talk to your child immediately about what you felt and why. At this age, drawings, short stories and play may be ways to help your child understand why the illness or death has occurred.

Use simple honest language. Avoid terms that your child may not clearly understand, such as ‘terminally ill’ or ‘passed on’.

- Children of this age usually feel free to express their emotions.

Unlike younger children, 6 to 8 year olds may remain fixated on the illness or death of a family member and can be easily overwhelmed by their own emotions. The sadness, anger, anxiety or guilt that they may feel about a family member’s illness usually shows up as a change or increase in their normal behaviour. For example, you might notice that your generally confident child is now anxious and resistant, with tears and tummy aches, when you take her to school each day. If this happens, talk to her teacher and principal about helping your child to express her feelings and feel safe when you are not available. It is common for children of this age to feel rejected and unloved when you take time and energy away from them to care for an ill family member. Since this may be unavoidable, it is important that at some point each day your child can have special time alone with you and that you regularly explain why you are leaving her.

- Although children of this age usually have made connections with school and other children, they are not self-sufficient and still need reassurance from parents and other significant adults about their importance and safety in the world.

When parents are distracted by caring for others or grieving, a child’s basic needs for nurturing and encouragement can be overlooked, and this may result in the child feeling rejected or frightened. During these times, the continuation of your child’s usual routines and the company of other caring adults may be helpful.

When Someone is Very Ill

- Tell your child about the disease, including its symptoms, treatment and what is likely to happen.

When you talk about this with your child, it is important that you use the correct name of the disease and that you clearly explain what causes it and how it affects the person who is ill. Talk about the things that your child might see (e.g. weight loss, changes in the person’s skin colour, hair loss) or hear (e.g. coughing, confusion, people awake at night), and whether the person will get well or not. It will be necessary for you to go over this information again as things change and to be honest with your child about what the changes mean. For example, you might say to your son that his auntie has cancer and the doctors aren’t able to make it go away. You could tell him that the cancer is growing too big for her to get better and that this means that she will die. You might also explain to him that before she dies she may stop eating and be too tired to stay awake when he visits with her. Since many children of this age will avoid asking questions out of fear of upsetting others or making the situation worse, it is important that you start and continue these frank discussions throughout the illness.

- Demonstrate to your child that you love her and that you will be there for her.

At this age children look to their parents for their self-worth and safety. When you are not often free to play with your child and most of your times with her are affected by your own feelings (such as despair and exhaustion about a family member’s terminal condition), your child may become insecure and resentful. Often these feelings show up as withdrawn, angry or babyish behaviour. For example, your child might stop speaking to you for a while or get into fights at school with her peers. If this happens, it will be important that you respond with love and understanding, as well as giving and following through with reasonable consequences.

- Find one or two other caregivers who are trust-worthy and can regularly take care of your child when you must be elsewhere.

When you are looking for alternate caregivers, think about who your child feels happiest and most comfortable with. It is important that these people are honest and open with him about your family member's illness in the same way that you are. If the people that you choose are uncomfortable discussing the illness with your child, you could provide them with information that you have found particularly helpful. Also, if a counsellor has been working with your family, he or she might meet with you and the caregivers to suggest ways that you might all work together to support your child through his grief process.

- Talk to teachers and other significant adults, such as coaches and group leaders.

These adults are part of your child's social world, and their care and understanding will help your child to manage the awkward moments, impossible questions and intense emotions that may lie ahead. Let these people know that there may be a temporary drop or change in your child's performance, enthusiasm and/or concentration. Let them know that this kind of change is normal and provide them with resources, such as brochures, books or videos that may help them support your child during this difficult time.

When Someone has Died

- Tell your child promptly about the death.

If your child was not present at the time of death, tell her what has happened as soon as possible afterwards. When you tell her that this person has died, explain that the person's bodily functions have all stopped (e.g. heartbeat, breathing, movement) and that he or she can no longer see, hear, eat or feel. State clearly to your child that the person will not come back to life and avoid using phrases such as 'gone to a better place' or 'with the angels' and comparisons that associate death with sleep. These common euphemisms and comparisons confuse the magical and concrete thinking of children at this age. Your child may misunderstand what you mean and become fearful. For example, instead of telling your daughter that grandma has passed away, you would say that she has died and that you knew grandma had died because she stopped breathing.

- Encourage and prepare your child to attend family rituals that will happen after the death.

If there is to be any funeral or memorial service, begin to prepare him for what to expect when he is there. Be sure that he knows what will happen, who will be there, what he will be doing at the service, and if the body of the person who died will be there. If you think your child may need support that you may be unable to provide, ask a favourite person to be available. If your child has a close relationship with other adults, such as a teacher or coach, it can be helpful if those people can attend the service. Whether your child attends the funeral or not, he might want to place a letter or drawing in the coffin as his personal goodbye to the person who has died.

- Anticipate that your child may be concerned about her health and the health of the significant adults in her life after a death.

After a death in the family, children often become quite curious and concerned about death. Your child may be constantly asking questions about whether or when different people in her life will die. She will likely also be concerned about the possibility of her own and your death. Often this kind of fear shows up in your child's body. For example, she may complain of having similar symptoms to the person who died, such as headaches or tummy aches. If your child complains in this way, she needs your loving attention, patience and understanding. Reassure her that you both are healthy by explaining in simple ways that you and she do not have what the person who died had. In the event that this is an hereditary illness that either you or she may get, it will be important to clearly explain this possibility, although now may not be the right time.

- Expect that your child may become concerned about what would happen to him if his surviving parent(s) became ill and died.

When a significant adult dies, your child will likely become more concerned that you may die. It is important that you explain to your child what would happen to him if you were to become ill and die. For example, you need to talk to him about whom you have named as his guardians and what those guardians would do for him in the event of your illness or death.

- Understand that it is normal for your child to express grief in brief bursts quickly followed by happier activities.

Your child's grief will likely happen in sudden outbursts of sadness, anger, guilt or fear. When this happens, allow your child to feel her feelings and help her to find reasonable or safe ways to express them. For example, if she is showing a lot of anger, you and she might play soccer or tag together. If she is sad, you might spend some time talking about the person who died or looking at photographs together. These moments may be especially difficult for you to get through because your own grief will be triggered. Be sure that you are allowing yourself the time and space to grieve so that you are able to support your child as she grieves. You will also need to find ways to express and share your emotions and questions with adults who can understand your pain.

- Ask for the support of key adults in the child's life, such as a teacher, principal, coach or group leader. Children of this age are beginning to look to other adults as well as parents to provide them with a sense of well-being, self-esteem and security. Be sure that these key people understand grief and are comfortable with it so that they can help your child deal with the awkwardness and curiosity of other children and adults.

Reading List

Books for children

Badger's Parting Gifts. S. Varley. (1992). A badger dies after a long life. His friends are sad, but remember the things he taught them.

The Tenth Good Thing about Barney. J. Viorst. (1976). When his cat dies, a boy tries to remember ten good things about him.

Gran-Gran's Best Trick – A story for children who have lost someone they love. L. Holden. (1989). When a boy's grandfather gets cancer, the boy grieves while his grandpa is dying and remembers their close relationship.

Vanishing Cookies. Doing OK when a parent has cancer. M. Goodman. (1991). A story about a child's concerns and needs when someone in the family has cancer.

Children Aged 9 to 11

Developmental Information

- At this age, children are becoming more capable of concrete operational thinking.

This means that children of this age are on a quest to gain knowledge and understand events, so they have many questions (often 'why' questions) and a need for detailed information about terminal illness and death. They use logic in their thinking and are sometimes able to modify inaccurate conclusions that they

have previously formed. For example, your child may start out by wishing that a dead loved one would 'come back to life' (which is like a younger child's more 'magical' thinking); but as things are explained, he may be able to change this thinking, to understand that coming back to life is not possible.

- Although children of this age definitely have feelings about a loved one being ill, they don't easily talk about these feelings or express them to others.

Children are now beginning to rely on their new ability for logic and to think through their feelings as well as feel them. This helps to contain powerful emotions that may seem overwhelming. For example, if your child has been told that someone is going to die and she is feeling sad or fearful about it, she may ask you questions such as "does it hurt", "what does it look like", or "when will it happen", as well as expressing her sadness or fear. It is important to remember that children who have been excluded from earlier discussions about the illness may not feel comfortable talking about their concerns now. It is common for children who have not been given enough information to feel anger, anxiety and mistrust. Find ways to speak with your child often, openly and plainly about illness, dying, death and grief.

- At this age, children are increasingly involved in activities and relationships outside of their homes and families.

Classmates, teammates and friends now take on new importance. Your children likely spend a significant amount of time with friends, sharing common interests and social experiences. However, they don't tend to talk about or look to one another for support about things like illness or death. For example, your child is unlikely to turn to a friend for answers to his questions about dying. However, doing things with friends is a major part of how children cope with stress, illness and death. It provides your child with a non-threatening and natural outlet for pent-up emotions that gives him a sense of control and competence.

When Someone is Very Ill

- Give your child information when the disease is diagnosed and let her know about each new change in the illness.

The information should include the name of the disease, any known causes and treatments. Your child will be more comfortable when she's included. Explain any changes in the sick person's behaviour or the family's routines as a result of the disease or its treatment. For example, if the sick person will lose her hair and throw up a lot from chemotherapy, it would be helpful to explain ahead of time to your child that these are normal side effects. Give basic information regularly (as it is known) to help her identify and express her feelings and thoughts before the shock of imminent death.

- Explore your child's interest in visiting and helping the person who is ill.

Your child may have a natural curiosity about the person who is ill, wanting (and fearing) to know what the ill person looks like and what's happening with him or her. Your child might like to visit and even help the sick person. Once you are sure that your child wants to visit, consider whether he would like to do anything for the person when you are visiting. For example, although a child should not be left alone to take care of an ill person, helping to prepare a meal or making a tape of the person's favourite music might be a good way for a child to be involved. Be sensible and creative when thinking about things that are reasonable for a child of his age to do. When he visits, be sure that he understands that his visit might be shorter than he hopes because the dying person may be too tired or unwell.

- Be aware of any alliances or conflicts that your child has with the person who is dying.

It is important to think carefully about how both your child and the person who is dying feel about each other. Are they best friends? Does your child go to him or her whenever something is hurting or needs fixing? Is their relationship difficult? Do they argue often? Does your child relate to the dying person because they are alike or different? Thinking about these questions will help you to understand what will be lost and where the

gaps will be for your child after this person dies. It is important to acknowledge the uniqueness of their relationship and be willing to identify any negative aspects of it that your child may struggle with.

- Allow your child to remain involved in regular after-school activities, sports and visits with friends.

Remember that your child is at an age when these activities are vitally important. Developing activities, interests and friendships outside of the home and family help the child to build healthy self-esteem and an extended support network. Try to maintain usual after-school routines and make play time with friends a priority.

- Educate and update the significant adults in the child's life.

Since children of this age may be unlikely to initiate discussions with adults about the disease or its progression, you might encourage other adults to bring it up. For example, you might provide them with information that you have found helpful and give them permission to raise the topic if it feels appropriate. Also, your child may be encouraged to know if these adults have lived through losses and to hear what they felt or learned.

When Someone has Died

- Encourage your child to participate in family rituals after the death.

Explain the purpose of these rituals and invite him to take part in any planning or preparation. Talk with him about the possible duties he might wish to have, such as helping to write the obituary or helping to seat guests at the funeral. You might consider whether he'd like to contribute his thoughts or feelings to a speech given at the service or other gathering. For example, he might like to make a list of his favourite memories or the things he liked most about the person who died. Find out if he would like any friends to be at the ceremony and help him to extend these invitations.

- Return to the family's former routines and prepare your child for any necessary changes in these routines.

After a death, family life is different. Usual eating, sleeping and living routines will be in disorder for a while and some may be permanently changed. This state of confusion will be difficult for your child so it is important for you to continue the routines that help her to feel secure and looked after. For example, continue with normal bed and meal times, and getting your child to school, even though you and she may not feel like it. Family meetings can provide you with a chance to bring out and talk about any upcoming changes or brewing issues. (If your family doesn't presently have family meetings, now may be a good time to begin.)

- Be aware that your child may not know how to grieve.

This may be your child's first experience of a death and he will look to you for guidance about what to do with the many reactions, feelings and questions that surface as part of his grief. This doesn't mean you need to be the perfect model of grief; but how you grieve will strongly influence how your child grieves. For example, if you leave the room whenever you cry, your child will learn that he must not cry in front of other people. Even though most children this age can stand only brief displays of emotion (whether their own or another person's) it is important that the adults around them model healthy ways to express common emotions. Spontaneous but controlled moments of crying will help your child to see that expressing and sharing emotions is normal. To help your child express her grief, it may be helpful to look at family photograph albums or visit the cemetery together.

- When a parent has died, expect changes in your child's behaviour.

A child whose parent has died will be full of emotions, particularly fear, guilt and sadness. One way your child copes with these intense feelings is to act them out. A grieving child may become unmanageable and demanding. For example, this can show up as frequent sulking, clinging or misbehaviour. Be aware that these difficult behaviours tend to be most extreme at home and directed at you as the remaining parent or caregiver. If the parent who died was the main disciplinarian, it will be important that you quickly develop your own way of maintaining order and respect in the family. If you are at a loss about how to do this, ask other parents that you respect, or teachers, coaches or school counsellors for help. Also, there are agencies in most communities that offer parenting support or information classes.

Reading List

Books for children

Charlotte's Web. E.B. White. (1999). A story of love, friendship, seasons, change and death between a young girl, a pig, and a spider.

The Education of Little Tree. F. Carter & R. Strickland. (1986). A chapter book about a young orphaned Cherokee boy who goes to live with his grandparents. Full of love, compassion, sadness and hope.

Zebra: And Other Stories. C. Potok. (2000). Short stories written for young people facing coming of age milestones such as peer pressure, grief, divorce and finding hope.

Young Adolescents Aged 12 to 14

Developmental Information

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

This means that they are beginning to understand more fully the realities of dying and death. This growing comprehension means that teens will go through the death of someone they love with insight, compassion and conflict. As a defense against the reality of death, they will often refuse to accept that someone is dying and may insist that the person will get better or that family and doctors not 'give up'. For example, when you tell your daughter that her mother is expected to die, she 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 her cope with the intensity of her emotional responses to the devastating news. Although your teen will think she knows all that there is to know, it is important that you find ways to talk to each other.

- 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 fierce hope.

Adolescence is normally a time of emotional extremes, and the stress of a terminal illness in the family 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 that his best friend has died he might erupt with intense anger, storm out of the room, refuse to come out of his bedroom and not talk to anyone (or any adults) for several hours. Allow

your teenager the time and space he needs to take in important information. Be respectful of his need for privacy but continue to check in with him about his needs for support or information.

- Although young teens must begin to push for their independence and freedom with parents, they will often feel rejected and abandoned if they believe that their parents are withdrawing.

Even though your teens may not want to be at home or with you, they will 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 that since your teen is not around, she doesn't need you or isn't interested. However, it is possible that she will think your absence means that you don't care about her or the goings on of her life. It is important that you are very clear about your expectations. Identify what isn't negotiable and be clear about the choices that she does have. Find ways to share time with your teen that help her to feel secure about your love and interest in her.

When Someone is Very Ill

- Give your teen information in a formal detailed way.

Even though you are likely to meet resistance, it is important that you give your teen correct, up-to-date information. Since family is not always a priority for teens, it is important that you give him enough information to make choices about when and how he wants to spend his time. Because a teen of this age may want to avoid emotional discussions, it is important that he understands why he needs 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 him. Remember that teens of this age will not seek out information about illness and dying. He may not know what is happening even when he leads you to think that he does.

- Help your teen to decide when and if she wants to visit the person who is dying.

Let your teen know when death is expected and be as specific as possible about the changes that you are seeing. For example, describe how the person has changed since her last visit, what she might notice this time, and – if you know – whether death is hours, days or minutes away. Anticipation of a final visit may trigger intense emotion that may be very upsetting for a young teen, and she may choose not to visit but to remember the dying person as he or she was before the illness. Once your daughter has made her decision, be supportive. For example, if she decides not to go, you might suggest that she could write a note instead and you could read it to the person when you visit. It will be important to let her know that even though she doesn't visit, the dying person accepts her choice, feels her love and that you both accept her reasons for not going. If possible, give her a way to change her mind.

- Talk with your teen and ask about his feelings and concerns.

Although these conversations may be awkward, unwelcome or infrequent, it is important that you make them happen. He may fear rejection by his friends if he speaks about his upcoming loss and be holding his true feelings inside. Don't be misled by your son's apparent lack of concern and think that he is unaffected by the situation. For example, you might think that since he is keeping up his grades and not sad at home that he is all right. However, it is more likely that he finds that schoolwork provides him with relief from the intensity of his feelings and family life. If you sense that this may be happening, let him know that you are interested in how he's managing. If you don't feel comfortable doing this or he refuses to talk with you, you might ask him if there is someone else that he would be comfortable talking with. Teen support groups (in person or on-line), mentors and counsellors, rather than friends and parents, may be your teen's preferred source of support.

- Accept that your teen may be sensitive and explosive and do not get into unnecessary arguments.

It is common for teens of this age to take out their stresses on parents and caregivers. Understand that the challenging behaviour that you are dealing with is a part of normal conflict made worse by the illness of a beloved family member. Remember that your 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 her know that you understand her frustration, fear or anger and also that you have difficulty with it. Explain that, although her behaviour is not okay, you do realize her struggle and will help her find more reasonable ways of expressing herself.

- Limit the number of new chores and caregiving tasks that you give to your teen.

Although your son may seem old enough or sensible enough to take care of the person who is ill, he isn't prepared emotionally for this kind of responsibility. Your teen needs to spend time with friends and in extra-curricular activities. These interests help him to grow as a person. Although it may be tempting to give various household duties to him while you are caregiving, be sure that these responsibilities don't mean he cannot do the things that are most important to him.

When Someone has Died

- Prepare your teen for family rituals such as the funeral.

If this will be the first funeral or memorial service that your teen has attended, ensure that she understands what will happen and what may be expected of her. She may want to play more of a central role than your young children in the final remembrance activities. For example, this may involve reading the eulogy, gathering and arranging family photographs for display or helping you to plan how the event will unfold. Remember that it is often important to young teens that their friends, friends' parents and other important adults attend the memorial service. Be sure that she knows the time, place and date of the service and offer to help her invite these key people.

- Let your 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 your teen time to choose things that have meaning for him. Remember that there is no particular time at which this task must be done, so choose a time and pace 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 your son is 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 your daughter to understand what she may experience while grieving. Explain to her that it is common to want to talk to the person who died, or to have visitations or dreams of him or her. Let your daughter know that it is also common to temporarily forget that the person has died and to imagine that she sees him or her somewhere. Help your daughter to understand that feelings of numbness, relief or anger with the person who has died are all normal aspects of grief. Also, assure her that while she may never forget the person who died, the sadness and anger should ease over time.

- Set limits to prevent destructive behaviour and encourage continued growth and independence.

This is a time when your teen's need to separate from you and establish herself with peers usually leads to increased family conflict. When grief is added, your teen may be involved in more serious acts of rebellion, such as vandalism, theft or skipping school. Pay attention to alcohol or drug use, big changes in your

daughter's 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 and counsellors that you respect.

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

- Help your teen to identify positive outcomes.

Encourage your son to use a journal, write stories or talk to other kids about his experience. In time he could explore what he has learned about himself, the family, the person who died or grief. Teens of 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 son may strive to be a helpful listener to his friends.

Reading List

Books for young teens

Mick Harte was Here. B. Park (1996). A young teenage girl's brother is killed in a bicycling accident and she copes with his death and her feelings of grief.

Getting Near to Baby. A. Coulombis. (2000). While their mother is grieving, a young teen and her little sister who are staying with an aunt cope with their own feelings after the death of their baby sister.

What on Earth Do You Do When Someone Dies? T. Romain & E. Verdick. (1999). A book to help young people identify their questions, needs and feelings.

Older Adolescents Aged 15 to 17

Developmental Information

- At this age, teens are able to think ahead about a death and also to imagine how the death might affect them now and over time.

Your older teen will 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 her 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 of 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 your daughter may have concerns about genetic or gender-related aspects of the disease. For example, if a girl's mother and an aunt died of ovarian cancer, she may have fears that she 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 that a loss will 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 that 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 both friends and caring adults. As they tend to be closest with friends, these teens will talk with each other for support. They are likely to 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 your son responds to this loss. You can expect that how he deals with the loss may influence the decisions he makes about his future. For example, your son 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 your teen information about the person's illness and what to expect as soon as possible.

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

- Help your teen to find ways of helping the person who is ill, using present interests or skills.

At this age, teens often want to be helpful but may not know exactly what to do or how to offer. For example, if your son is known for his tidiness, you might suggest that he help his dying father organize his office space or workshop.

- Consider the number of stresses for your teen and their effect on school or other performance.

At this age, it is difficult for teens 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 university or college. It might be helpful to offer to help your daughter study for upcoming exams or to proofread her assignments. This is an age when relationships and the future are very important. At this time, you might ask if she's able to talk with friends about what's happening and explore whether she has any concerns or questions about how this person's illness and death will affect her future.

- Be alert to your teen's fears about his and your 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 your son's father has or had heart disease, talk openly with your son about his chances of developing it and what he can do to prevent it. Be willing to hear his concerns about your lifestyle and what he fears could happen to you.

When Someone has Died

- Prepare your teen for family rituals.

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

- Recognize your 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 that your teen is taking on one or more characteristics or interests of that person. Understand that this behaviour comes from a normal need to continue to feel connected to that person.

Be ready to be honest about the similarities and differences between your teen and the person who died. If the relationship that your teen had with the person who died was difficult or abusive, it will be important to be realistic about both the strengths and the struggles of the relationship. For example, the son of a transient mother who died after a drug overdose might be deeply sad and grieving his loss of hope that someday they'd have a healthy relationship, and at the same time, full of anger and hatred toward her because she didn't love him enough to stop abusing drugs.

- Describe the grieving process and what to expect.

At this age, your teen's grief may be much like your own. For example, in addition to death of this person, your daughter may be dealing with other related issues: i.e. others' sadness, the questions that arise in the face of death, or the way that lives are forever altered by death. It may be helpful to direct her 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 that the school knows about the death.

At this age it is very important that your teen's friends, teachers and school staff acknowledge the death and offer their condolences. This kind of support can be very comforting. Encourage your teen to contact the school principal and/or a teacher to inform them of the death and talk with them about how he would like this information to be shared. It may be helpful to invite classmates and teachers to the funeral. Teachers might help to organize classmates to find a creative way to express their sympathy and to help your teen keep up with schoolwork.

- Support your teen to be independent.

This does not mean that you show no interest or become distant, but that you encourage them 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. However, it is a priority for teens of this age to start to find a way for themselves outside the family.

Reading List

Books for OLDER teens

The Grieving Teen – A guide for teenagers and their friends. H. Fitzgerald. (2000). This book provides information about a wide variety of situations and emotions and gives tools for teens to work through their pain and grief.

Fire In My Heart, Ice In My Veins: A journal for teenagers experiencing a loss. E. Samuel Traisman. (1992). A guide to journaling for teens.

When a Friend Dies: A Book for Teens about Grieving and Healing. M. Gootman, P. Espeland & D. Stith. (1994). This compassionate, easy to read book provides information on normal grief.

Living When a Young Friend Commits Suicide – Or Even Starts Talking about It. E. Grollman & M. Malikow. (1999). A good resource on the issue of suicide, this book contains information and practical advice.

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