



## Supporting Grieving Teens

Adolescence is a time filled with change...high school, puberty, greater independence, and exploring sense of self and identity heading into young adulthood. Experiencing the death of a loved one during this life stage can be incredibly challenging. After finding out that someone has died, you may wonder how you as a parent or caregiver are going to support your teenager. It can feel overwhelming to talk about death when you are trying to manage your own feelings. We at the Wendy Center want to provide information to make this process feel more manageable.

### What does it look like?

At this stage of development, teens understand the finality of death and are beginning to understand the complex nature of grief. Grief is ongoing—not something we get over but something we learn to live with as a part of us. You might notice a teen's oscillation between intense pain and joy, which can feel confusing. Important events or milestones in a teen's life like prom, college tours, or graduations can intensify feelings of pain associated with grief.

Like adults, teens may struggle with the full reality that their loved one has died and find it difficult to manage intense and often uncomfortable emotions. We've included both typical responses and potential warning signs below.

### Typical grief responses

- Feeling sadness, anger, confusion, and/or fear.
- Feeling numb or wanting to avoid thinking or talking about the person who died.
- Body aches such as stomachaches, headaches, chest pain, and nausea.
- Difficulty sleeping or having nightmares.
- Feeling embarrassed or believing that they are the only teen who has experienced death.
- Difficulty concentrating/paying attention or lacking initiative.
- May prefer talking to friends about their grief instead of immediate family members.

### Things to look out for

- Risk taking behaviors such as substance misuse or unsafe sexual activities.
- Teens may be at risk for self-harm; note if they suddenly have unexplained cuts or marks on their skin or are wearing non-weather appropriate clothing such as long sleeves in the summer.
- Teens may decide to mask their feelings of grief and avoid talking about their grief with family and friends alike; sometimes because they do not want the adults in their lives to be worried about them.
- Overperformance with higher grades and perfectionist tendencies.

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## How to Talk with Teens about Grief

Do	Do Not
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Normalize grief reactions and share about <b>your own</b> experiences with grief.</li><li>- Try to be non-defensive and accepting of what your teen might share.</li><li>- Continue to set consistent limits about behavior/expectations while allowing for some freedom and choice.</li><li>- Be a companion in your teen's grief. Teens value independence and may have ideas about how they would like to grieve/remember their loved one.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Lie or withhold information in an attempt to protect your teen. Teens may later overhear a conversation with another person or find out the full story from someone else.</li><li>- Attempt to take their grief away or refrain from making space to express their feelings and reactions to loss.</li><li>- Refuse to respect the need for time alone or their time with peers.</li></ul>

### Additional Considerations

**Social Media:** Social media can be a great place to find support and connection in times of grief. It can be a place where teens feel comfortable sharing about their loved ones and the impact of their grief. It is important to note, however, that social media can also increase a teen's distress. People may choose to comment on a post and say negative things about your teen's loved one. Teens may be exposed to video content of their loved one's death if it happened in a public setting. It can be helpful to explore with your teen what they are viewing on social media and how social media is affecting their grief process, and to encourage breaks from social media. Your teen may have their own ideas about what social media boundaries would be helpful.

**Religion:** Often at this age, teens are exploring and solidifying their religious beliefs and values. The death of a loved one may impact this process. Teens may find comfort in their religious beliefs and beliefs about the afterlife. Teens may also question why death happens and this may shift how they view themselves within their religion. Teens may benefit from having an open and judgement-free conversation about their beliefs and questions.

### Conclusion

Grieving teenagers are in a unique position; they grieve similarly to adults but their grief is impacted by their stage of development. Teens benefit from having both supportive adults and supportive peers to walk alongside them in their grief. Grief can bring so many emotions and changes into your family's life. It is important that you remember to take care of yourself. If you are feeling overwhelmed by your grief, it will be hard to be present and available for your teen. Seek help and support from others. By taking care of yourself, you not only become more available for your teen, but you also model the importance of tending to self—especially during difficult times.

*[Wendt Center for Loss and Healing](#) is the Greater Washington region's premier resource for restoring hope and healthy functioning to adults, teens, and children who are coping with grief, loss, and trauma. Wendt Center Training Institute offers customized, trauma-informed [workshops](#) and [certifications](#) that equip mental health and allied professionals with skills to address grief, loss, and trauma in the communities in which they work and live.*