

WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP?

SUPPORTING A TEEN AFTER LOSS

Grief can be overwhelming for kids and adults, and might leave you with questions about how to handle new behaviors and emotional responses. Here are some things to consider and try with your teen...

- **Give accurate information and be open to questions**

Teens have a greater general understanding of death and causes of death, but may not fully understand what happened to their person. Teens may be more hesitant to ask questions than younger children, as they often have a better understanding of the impact these questions may have on others. Ask teens what questions they have, or what is difficult to understand about the death, and continue to make space for questions to come up days, weeks, or even months later.

- **Strengthen and work with their support network**

Teens often seek out peers and others outside their family as they move toward independence and autonomy. This may increase even more after a death. Allow your teen to have choices about who they want to talk with and who can best support them (as long as these are healthy resources). Provide opportunities for them to be around friends and supportive adults as well as family members.

- **Listen**

Your teen may have a lot to say about the death, or they may avoid conversations related to this. Let them know you are there to support them, even as you may be dealing with your own grief. Try to avoid giving a lot of advice, or offering solutions to problems that may feel unfixable to your teen. Reflect back what they are saying, and allow for silence as they process their emotions.

- **Maintain routines with flexibility**

Grief creates significant changes that often feel destabilizing to teens. Regular routines can be helpful to re-introduce a sense of normalcy in a confusing or overwhelming situation. However, it's important to recognize the need for flexibility as well. For example, a teen may want to return to school, but feel overwhelmed by catching up on their work once they get there. Help teens advocate for themselves and make plans to manage their responsibilities within their current capacity.



- **Normalize a wide variety of emotions and reactions**

Teens often feel crazy or out of control as they work through the typical emotions involved in adolescence, and this is likely to intensify while they are grieving. Talk with your teen about emotions that are involved in grief in addition to sadness, such as anger, numbness, and fear, as well as physical responses such as fatigue and restlessness.

- **Offer choices and be open to ideas**

Grief often comes with feelings of helplessness and being out of control, as well as many inevitable changes. Allow your teen to make choices about grief-related things (such as involvement in memorial events or sorting through personal possessions) and other daily life events. Teens may need options to help them manage choices, or may have ideas you haven't considered.

- **Support different expressions of grief**

Your teen will likely need ways to manage the physical energy involved in grief, ways to express emotions, and ways to distract themselves from the intensity. All of these are important for healthy grief.

- **Honor a need for privacy**

As teens are processing intense emotions, sometimes at a depth they have never felt before, they may want to process more privately. Allow your teen to engage with activities that may not involve you, such as art, journaling, or talking with others outside the family. Sometimes teens communicate more readily with caregivers in a less verbal way, such as texting or using a shared notebook.

- **Remember the person who died together**

Talk about the person who died, look at pictures, and share memories of that person. While teens are likely to have more memories than children, they may also want to hear about things that took place earlier in that person's life as well. Talking about your own memories, or looking at reminders such as pictures and mementos from shared activities, can support your teen's memories of the person who died.

