

WHAT IS NORMAL?

TEEN DEVELOPMENTAL RESPONSES TO GRIEF

Although grief is a unique and personal experience, some aspects of grief are affected by age and development. Teens will grieve differently than children or adults, and need different expectations and supports to help them manage their grief in healthy ways.

UNDERSTANDING OF DEATH:

Teens are beginning to understand abstract concepts on a deeper level, and therefore understand that death is permanent. While they may not openly talk about it, they may still have some thoughts and beliefs similar to younger children about causal factors of death, or ways they could possibly have stopped the situation from happening. Developmentally, teens are already set up to begin to explore the meaning of larger concepts such as justice, suffering, and the meaning of life and death. Experiencing the death of someone close to them may prompt them to engage more deeply or openly in their own understanding of and beliefs about these and similar concepts.

WHAT TO EXPECT:

- **Significant mood swings**
Adolescents typically experience intense shifts in mood from day to day or even hour to hour. This is often even more true when they are experiencing normal grief. Teens themselves may be surprised or confused by how fast their moods change and their intensity. Their emotional outbursts may be openly related to their grief, or may seem unrelated, particularly if they are angry or irritable.
- **Minimal emotional expression**
Teens sometimes want to avoid feeling “different” from others, or standing out, and may try to avoid showing their emotions after a death, regardless of the impact that the loss had on them.
- **More openness with peers than adults**
As teens are shifting their focus outside of the home and asserting their independence, they may avoid discussing important things, including grief, with immediate family members or other adults. Teens may also be more aware of the emotional responses of the adults in their lives, or the strain on parents or caregivers because of the death, and try to avoid adding to their responsibilities.



WHAT TO EXPECT: (cont'd)

- **Physical and cognitive expressions of grief**

Teens are likely to feel their grief in their bodies, even if they don't recognize or verbalize this. They may be more tired or have difficulty sleeping, notice change in appetite (increase or decrease), and struggle to concentrate. They may also notice more physical issues such as stomach pain, headaches, or generally not feeling well.

- **Increased risk taking**

Some teens act out strong feelings around grief by taking risks or pushing boundaries, often to numb or express their emotions. This may be mild behavior, such as staying out later with friends, or more intense behavior such as reckless driving or substance use. While some increased risk taking is normal, caregivers still need to monitor this behavior and enforce appropriate boundaries in a grief-informed way.

- **Increased caretaking**

Some teens may focus their energy on filling in the gaps created by the person who died, especially if this was a parent or caregiver, and shift into more adult behavior, rather than engaging in more typical teen activities.

- **Increased anxiety**

Teens may fear more for their own or others' safety, believe that similar things will happen again, or make great efforts to prevent this from happening.

