



YOUNG PEOPLE AGED 14-17

WHAT TO EXPECT DURING
THE GRIEVING PROCESS



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NAVIGATING YOUR WAY AS A PARENT THROUGH YOUR CHILD'S GRIEVING PROCESS

In order to best support your child, it is important to understand what to expect during the grieving process, and how to manage different grief reactions. Adolescents who have lost someone close to them will experience a range of feelings, thoughts, physical reactions, and behaviours associated with grief over the days, months, and years that follow the loss. Their expressions of grief may be different to adults, and they may slip in and out of grief, so they may appear to be coping some days while other days they struggle greatly. Differing expressions of grief may be influenced by various factors, such as age, family situation, relation to the deceased, and how expected or unexpected the loss was to them.

1. WHAT IS GRIEF, BEREAVEMENT, AND MOURNING?

Grief refers to the natural, internal processes we experience in response to loss. This includes psychological and physiological responses a person experiences after the loss of a significant person. Bereavement is the period of time after a loss, during which grief is experienced and mourning occurs. Mourning is an external expression of adapting to a loss, often in the form of cultural customs, rituals, and ceremonies.

2. HOW ADOLESCENTS GRASP THE CONCEPT OF DEATH

Age and developmental level have considerable influence on adolescents' understanding of and reaction to loss. Adolescents are capable of abstract thinking and can conceptualise death in a more adult manner. Adolescents understand more fully that their lives will be different. They have the capacity to understand the universality, irreversibility, and inevitability of death and to grasp their own finiteness, as well as the finality of someone being deceased. Young people in this age group also have very strong bonds with friends and may seek support from them when in distress.

3. TYPICAL FEELINGS AND BEHAVIOURS EXPERIENCED BY ADOLESCENTS

Your teen child will likely experience feelings of fear, anger, vulnerability, sadness/despair, shock, longing, guilt, anxiety, and/or loneliness. They will experience a roller coaster of emotions, with unexpected mood changes. It is also common for adolescents to feel resentment that a death has come to their lives. Common behaviours include crying, social withdrawal, restless hyperactivity, absent-minded behaviours, acting out, and avoidance.



4. TYPICAL PHYSICAL REACTIONS EXPERIENCED BY ADOLESCENTS

Your adolescent may experience tightness in the chest, hollowness (pit) in the stomach, dry mouth, shortness of breath, oversensitivity to noise, weakness in muscles, lack of energy/fatigue, and appetite disturbances and/or weight loss/gain. It is also common for him or her to experience sleep disturbances, which may result in them requesting to sleep with a surviving parent or loved one for comfort, despite it seeming age inappropriate. This may be a manifestation of anxiety, depression, or nightmares, and resultant fear of feeling alone.

5. COMMON COPING MECHANISMS

- Adolescents might visit places or carry objects that remind them of the deceased.
- Avoid reminders of the deceased.
- Favour talking to adults outside the family and to peers, rather than to parents.
- Acting with bravado, as though nothing has changed and they're unaffected.
- Hiding or repressing their feelings in an attempt to feel included.
- Taking on more responsibilities, such as looking after others in the deceased person's absence.
- Acting out through risk-taking and/or "death-defying"/risk taking behaviours to provide temporary reassurance that they are invincible or that death is so far into the future.



6. HOW TO SUPPORT YOUR TEEN

- Encourage them to talk about their thoughts and feelings, and listen without judgement.
- Be available to offer care and reassurance, using active listening skills to show you're engaged and empathise with their experience.
- Resist any temptation to "fix" their grief or take away their pain.
- Allow the adolescent opportunities to feel in control.
- Set and maintain clear boundaries, offering sensitivity to their needs without becoming overly permissive.
- Provide a caring family environment, offering affection, security, trust, and strong relationships.
- Ensure continuity of their school environment, avoiding drastic changes if possible.
- Give adolescents truthful information about the process of grieving so they know what to expect.
- Help adolescents to preserve memories through stories, pictures, art, songs, etc.
- Reassure them that they will get through this difficult time, acknowledging their strengths, and courage.

7. SIGNS OF DISTRESS AND DE-ESCALATION TIPS

Common signs of distress include excessive distractibility, erratic behaviour, risk-taking behaviour, disturbed thinking, not eating and/or sleeping, frequent stomach aches, headaches, and/or complaints of nausea, increased nervous habits, and self-harm.

The following tips will help you to de-escalate your adolescent in moments of distress:

1. Approach your adolescent the actual situation in a calm manner. A calm presence will comfort your teen and will make them feel safe.
2. Offer to take your teen to another location where they may feel safer than in the environment where the reaction occurred.
3. Allow your adolescent to express their felt experience, asking what feelings are emerging and where they are feeling these emotions in their bodies (i.e., their shoulders, chest, heart, gut, etc.). Employ reflective listening to validate your adolescent's emotional experience.
4. Offer to practice a grounding technique, such as "Hand on Heart," emphasising the importance of using a coping skill when we feel big emotions. Hand on heart is a self-care and emotion regulation tool to reduce distress, with three components that helps calm the child; physical touch (comfort/nurturing), breathing (physical calming), and counting (cognitive redirection).
5. After practicing this strategy, ask your adolescent what number (from 1 to 10) he or she is in that moment on the "distress metre", or level of distress, where 1 is completely calm and collected, 5 is moderately agitated and distressed, and 7-10 is distressed enough to need a time out to practice self-care or reach out to a support person.
6. If he or she is are still distressed, encourage your teen to engage in something self-soothing, such as drawing, listening to music, going for a walk, etc.
7. Having gone through these steps and reducing their distress, adolescents develop an understanding that emotions, although powerful, can be manageable and will pass.



1 IN EVERY 20 AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN
WILL EXPERIENCE THE
DEATH OF A PARENT BEFORE
THEY REACH THE AGE OF 18.

**PROVIDING GRIEF EDUCATION AND
SUPPORT FOR BEREAVED CHILDREN
AND THEIR FAMILIES**



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