

## Healthy Grieving for Adolescents

**Five to 11 percent of children and adolescents experience the death of a parent by the end of high school, and many more face the death of a sibling, other close family member, or close friend/boyfriend/girlfriend.**

Healthy grieving is extremely important for adolescents, but they often do not receive the support they need.

If they are told to “be strong” and “take care of the family,” they miss out on the opportunity to grieve, leading to harmful consequences later on. Many parents are too overwhelmed by their own grief to be able to help their child. Parents often do not talk to their teen about the loss they have experienced either because it causes them pain, or to try to spare their teen pain. In reality, **teens suffer more from feelings of isolation than from the loss itself.** They may also feel that no one else is grieving, leaving them angry and without validation of normal feelings of grief.

To support healthy grieving, parents should give their teen permission to grieve by talking about the loss, themselves; sharing their own personal feelings to normalize the feelings of their son or daughter; and confirming that it is OK to feel sadness and all of the other emotions that go along with grieving.

Friends, family members, adult mentors, and teachers of adolescents also struggle with knowing how to help. School counselors typically give their grieving students needed support early on, but it can be more difficult as time goes on. They **may want to enter anniversary dates of the death and the student’s name on holidays in an online calendar, so that a pop-up is a reminder to touch base with the student.** Below are some warning signs of unhealthy grieving, suggestions for healthy grieving, and the key needs of grieving teens.

### **Warning Signs of Unhealthy Grieving in Adolescents:**

- changing eating and sleeping patterns
- disinterest or decline in academic performance
- change in peer or family relationships
- increase in risk taking behaviors (including alcohol/drugs; sex; tattoos)
- denial of pain; appearance of being overly strong

### **Some Healthy Ways for Adolescents to Grieve:**

- making a photo collage of the person; using it to tell stories with others who cared for him/her
- planting a tree or plant; creating a memorial garden
- lighting a special candle for the day on birthdays, holidays, etc.
- using rituals of their faith community to acknowledge grief
- planning a fun family day in memory of the loved one on his/her birthday
- volunteering at local hospice or other agency or hospital to help other families

### **Five Key Needs of Grieving Students:**

- information and education
- opportunities to express feelings
- communication
- opportunities to remember
- opportunities to meet with grieving peers

### **Tips for What to Say:**

- “I’m sorry that your mother (or other) died.”
- “I’m here for you.”
- “How can I help?”
- “It’s okay to feel angry/guilty/sad/etc.”
- “It is also okay to laugh and be happy.”
- “It’s okay to feel overwhelmed. We’re not taught how to grieve.”
- “There are good supports to help you.”
- “Just because you feel crazy doesn’t mean you are.”

### **Tips for what not to say:**

- “I know how you feel.”
- “Time heals all wounds.”
- “God needed them in heaven/God has a plan/God never gives you more than you can handle/etc.”
- “Try not to worry about it. Focus on your school work.”
- “Grief ends at six months/one year/etc.”
- “You should be over it by now.”

(from Adolescent Counseling Services, Palo Alto, Ca., [www.acs-teens.org/resources/parent\\_tips/adolescent\\_grief.php](http://www.acs-teens.org/resources/parent_tips/adolescent_grief.php); Bereaved Families of Ontario Halton/Peel, School Connection, [www.bereavedfamilies.ca](http://www.bereavedfamilies.ca); Griefworks BC, [www.griefworksbc.com](http://www.griefworksbc.com) )

### **Other Resources**

[www.beyondindigo.com](http://www.beyondindigo.com)  
[www.griefhealing.com](http://www.griefhealing.com)  
[www.hospicenet.org/html/teenager.html](http://www.hospicenet.org/html/teenager.html)  
[www.kidshealth.org](http://www.kidshealth.org)

***Close Enough to Touch*** by Richard Peck (about a boy whose girlfriend dies)  
***Teenagers Face to Face with Bereavement*** by Gravelle & Haskins (17 young adults discuss the deaths of their parents, siblings, and friends)  
***Tiger Eyes*** by Judy Blume (fiction about a teen whose father has been killed)  
***Motherless Daughters*** by Hope Edelman (older teens)