

NOW WHAT?

Tips for teens in foster care who are grieving



The National Grief Center
for Children & Families

We're guessing you're here because you've been separated from people you care about. Whether it was a parent, sibling, grandparent, close friend, or other family member, we're glad you found your way to this Tip Sheet.

The information here comes directly from the teens who participate in our L.Y.G.H.T. peer grief support groups for youth in foster care, because they have also been in the foster care system and understand what it's like.

Grief can get messy. When we are separated from people and places we care about, most of us don't know what to do, how to talk about it, or even how we're supposed to feel. It's confusing and strange. It can be awkward to try to connect with other people who don't know what it's like to be in foster care. Have you ever told someone that you were in foster care and they give you a weird look or ask if you're serious? Not great, right?

THE LOW DOWN ON GRIEF

One thing we've learned from other teens in foster care is that grief usually does what it wants — it doesn't follow any rules or keep to a schedule. There's no recipe and there isn't a right or wrong way to feel. What matters most is figuring out what really helps you deal with all that comes up with missing people and places and what doesn't help at all. It's up to you to decide.

ALL ABOUT CHANGES

When you enter foster care, your whole world can radically change. Some teens describe it as a hurricane or a tornado, taking out everything in its path. You're left to pick up the pieces and figure out what life will be like now that you are no longer living with your family or close to your friends. What will happen to you? How often will you get to see your family? What will you remember and what will you miss? There are no expectations for how you might think and feel about the person or people you are missing (although people might be throwing lots of "shoulds" at you). Grief can be intense and loud or quiet and barely there. Some teens aren't sure what they feel and that's okay.



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FEELINGS AND OTHER STRANGE THINGS

While no one can ever know exactly how you feel, there are some things teens in foster care seem to have in common. Sometimes your sleep gets messed up —having trouble falling asleep, waking up early, or having weird dreams. Food might not taste the same or your stomach could feel tied up in knots. Maybe your memory isn't working as well as it used to — “How did I forget my friend's birthday? When is my next visit?!” Maybe you find yourself frustrated with people talking about their day-to-day dramas. A lot of teens notice they get really upset if someone makes assumptions about them or their family. You might wonder if it's okay to feel upset, or if it's okay not to feel anything because you feel numb. You could come up against feelings of guilt, fear, anger, and sometimes shame. And then there is school...a lot of teens in foster care say it's rough to be separated from their families, friends, and/or communities because it's harder to concentrate or finish homework.




Lots of teens in foster care who are grieving find it's hard to relate to other teens who aren't in foster care. Friends, no matter how much they care, don't always know what to do or say and their attempts to make you feel better might not work very well. Honestly, when you're missing people and/or things sometimes nothing feels good or right — even things you loved before being in foster care. It can be easy to take that frustration out on the people you're closest to — maybe you're a little quicker to get irritated these days? If so, you're not alone.

TOO MANY LOSSES TO COUNT

We'd venture a guess that 99.9% of teens have experienced TONS of losses after entering and while in foster care. Have you ever said to yourself, “**No one really understands how much I have lost or has been taken from me by no fault of my own?**” When we are separated from people and places we care about, we can miss other things too: our homes, our schools, our neighborhoods, our pets, our communities, and so much more! Many teens talk about how coming into foster care also has led to questions such as: *Who am I now? What's going to happen to me? Where do I belong? Why was I not enough? Do I matter? What about my future?* These questions are normal and natural to ask yourself. Recognizing that you do matter and are not alone are important first steps.

Missing people and having so many losses can be SUPER hard. If you're grieving, it can be helpful to talk with a trusted adult or friend who knows the situation and can support you along the way. This adult might be a caregiver, sibling, grandparent, cousin, family friend, teacher, coach, pastor, or someone else who will be able to say more than “don't feel that way” and “it'll get better soon.” Having someone who understands your grief can help you in your own life and might inspire you to be a role model in the lives of other teens in foster care.



Tina hadn't seen her sister in two months and was angry. One of her peers in the foster home had a similar experience and encouraged Tina to speak with her case manager about how she was feeling. Later that day, Tina spoke to her case manager and expressed how she was missing her sister. The case manager listened attentively and ensured a visit between Tina and her sister was arranged for the following week.

CIRCLE THE THINGS PEOPLE SAY AND DO THAT BOTHER YOU:

Say “Why are you in foster care?”

Act like they know me when we only just met.

Say things like “What’s foster care like?” “Your parents must be bad people”

Say “I know how you feel.”

Say “What did you do to end up in foster care?”

Write in your own

(it’s okay if your list is longer than ours)

HOW CAN I KEEP MY MEMORIES ALIVE?

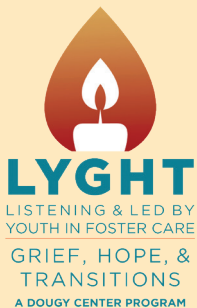
While you are in foster care, you might find yourself worrying about how to cherish good memories of life before foster care. You might be thinking about your family, your friends, your community, your culture, and other important memories. Consider creating a memory book or journal to store your memories and stories about the people or places you are missing.

Warning: you might cry, it’s okay! Who might you feel safe to share these stories with? And, remember, even though you may be apart from people you care about... no one can take away your memories.

FAMILY: GOING THROUGH IT TOGETHER & SEPARATELY

Being in foster care can change a lot of things in your world, including how you and your family connect. You might be really comfortable being open about how you are feeling, or you might find it hard to talk about or show emotions. How you feel about being separated from family members or friends might look and feel differently depending on your age, your relationship with the people you are missing, cultural expectations (maybe the adults in your life expect you to act a certain way, but it’s not how you feel), religion/spirituality, gender norms, and the expectations you or others have about what “family” means and what it means to be part of a family. You might see families in movies or on TV shows that look and act very differently than yours, and start to wonder “Does anyone else know what it feels like to be separated from their family, friends, and/or community?”

Remembering that teens from various cultures, beliefs, and communities have experienced what it is like to be in foster care and have been separated from people and places they care about might help you to feel less alone with your experiences of loss and grief. Sometimes expectations and individual ways of missing people and places can create tension or misunderstandings with the adults in your life. It can be helpful to talk with a friend or trusted adult to get clear on what you need and even ask for support.



L.Y.G.H.T. is an evidence-based peer grief support intervention that specifically addresses youth’s death and non-death losses in foster care. At the core of the L.Y.G.H.T. program, we aim to raise awareness about how youth in foster care who are grieving experience marginalization on various levels, to create ways to provide trauma-informed peer support to youth in foster care, and to promote the importance of moving the child welfare community toward a grief-informed holistic model of care. L.Y.G.H.T. is a program of Dougy Center: The National Grief Center for Children & Families. For more information, visit dougy.org/lyght or email lyght@dougy.org.