

SUPPORTING TEENS AFTER THE DEATH OF A CLOSE FRIEND



A best friend knows you in a way no one else does. When you're a teen, this connection can be particularly unique and intense. Between school, texting, and social media, teens are in constant touch with each other. As they work to establish their identity, friends are who teens often talk to about their hopes, fears, dreams, and insecurities. When a friend who understands you on such a deep level dies, it can be devastating. For many teens, this might be their first experience with grieving someone who is part of their day-to-day life. Because they aren't officially family, teens may feel left out of the rituals and routines surrounding the death. They also may not receive the same support and care as people tend to focus on the immediate family.

As a parent, caregiver, or support person for a teen grieving the death of a close friend, what can you do to help? Grief is different for everyone, so it's difficult to talk in absolutes about what each person needs. Here is a list of suggestions we've gathered from the hundreds of teens who have attended our grief support groups.

Take care of yourself.

Self-care is often listed last, almost as an afterthought, but in this situation, it's vital that you attend to your emotional and physical needs. This will enable you to be more present and available for your teen. Even if you didn't really know the person who died, you can find yourself overwhelmed, thinking about what it would be like if your child died, or worrying about the family

of the teen who died. Try to eat nourishing food, sleep, move your body as you're able, and reach out to friends and family to talk about how you're affected.

Be honest and answer questions.

If you're the person who will tell your teen about the death, do so as soon as possible and in direct language. It might sound like, "I have some sad news. Joanna died this morning. She was in a car accident." Your teen is also likely to find out about the death on social media, from friends, or at school. Either way, it's helpful to ask what they know and if they have questions. If there is misinformation circulating, help quell rumors by clarifying what happened. It's OK to not have all the answers. Let your teen know if it's something you can try to find out.

Listen.

Even if a teen isn't talking much to you about the death, anything you can do to be a good listener is important. As an adult, one of the hardest things is to see your teen in pain. It's understandable that you might want to try and fix it, but when it comes to grief, it's more helpful to just be present. Acknowledge the urge to fix it, and



then work to listen without giving advice, dismissing their feelings, or filling the silence with platitudes.

Expect and validate frustration over how other teens are acting.

It seems almost inevitable that teens will be confused or upset by the outpouring of grief from those who weren't as close to the person who died. Between social media posts and emotional expression at school, your teen might have a strong reaction to these declarations of grief. Validate their feelings and acknowledge your teen's view of their relationship with the friend who died. After validating and acknowledging, you can also offer ideas for why other teens could be so affected. We never know someone's past, and this death might be sparking grief for them related to other losses. Knowing there are possible reasons for these reactions can help alleviate some of your teen's frustration

Talk about the impact of social media.

Teens often turn to social media to connect with others and express their thoughts and emotions about their friend who died. Social media isn't inherently good or bad when it comes to grief, but it's helpful to discuss how your teen could be affected. As perplexing as it is, there are times when people will say hurtful or untrue things about the teen who died and those who love them. Teens often post about their feelings with the hope they'll receive supportive comments. Sometimes it's an effective strategy, and other times the response



won't feel as helpful or understanding as your teen wished. If this happens, talk with your teen about what words and sentiments do meet their needs and strategize how they can ask for and access that type of support.

Dismantle stereotypes about grief.

Many teens (and adults too) struggle with what grief is supposed to look or feel like. Reassure your teen that there is no right or wrong way to grieve. It's different for everyone and will change over time. Most people expect to be overcome with tears and sadness. Sometimes that's true, but not always and not for everyone. Teens can also feel anger, numbness, confusion, relief, or something else entirely. Grief is more than just emotions. It affects us physically (tired, wired, headaches), cognitively (hard to focus, spinning thoughts, compromised memory), and spiritually (Why me? Why my friend? How could something like this happen?).

Honor the friendship.

An extremely painful aspect of having a best friend die is the assumption that you'll just make a new one. While your teen is likely to make more friends over the course of their life, each connection is unique. Assure your teen that it's possible to feel close to new people without replacing their friend who died. If your teen is open to talking, ask about their friend and what made their friendship special.

Provide opportunities for teens to get together.

When we ask teens what they need after a close friend dies, their answer is almost always, "time together." Being with others who were close to the person who died can provide community, a sense of normalcy, and an opportunity to share memories and talk about the person who died. Be sure to offer this as a choice because for some teens, being with their group of friends could highlight the absence of the friend who died and be too painful or awkward. Defer to your teen's knowledge about what type of support feels right for them.

Advocate at school.

Teens often struggle with concentration and focus after a death. You can reach out to teachers, school counselors, and administrators for flexibility with coursework and opportunities for emotional support during the school day.

Remember grief is ongoing.

The influx of support and acknowledgment that occurs immediately after the death tends to fall away pretty quickly. As soon as a week after a death, some teens encounter pressure to move on or get over their grief from teachers, friends, and others who want them to get back to how they were before the death. Checking in with teens over the long term provides reassurance that their grief and their friend are not forgotten and gives them permission to grieve as long as they need.

Seek additional support when needed.

While grief looks different for everyone, there are times when outside help such as joining a peer support group or talking with a counselor are needed. If your teen experiences ongoing difficulty with attending school, sleeping, eating, forming or maintaining friendships, or talks about wanting to harm themselves or others, it's wise to reach out to a mental health professional.

Thank you for reading this Tip Sheet. Educating yourself about grief and how it affects teens is one of the most important things you can do to be supportive. If you'd like to learn more, please visit our website for more information.



The National Grief Center
for Children & Families

Our Mission

Dougy Center provides grief support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families can share their experiences before and after a death. We provide support and training locally, nationally, and internationally to individuals and organizations seeking to assist children who are grieving.

Dougy Center Bookstore/Resources

Dougy Center has been helping children, teens, young adults and their parents cope with death since 1982. Our practical, easy-to-use materials are based on what we have learned from more than 60,000 Dougy Center participants. To order online, visit dougy.org or dougybookstore.org, or call 503.775.5683.

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