A teen’s guide to coping with grief

With our sympathy
As you begin your grief journey, please accept our sympathy for your loss.

Grief is ongoing and changing. One day you may feel numb and the next day feel out of control. Life events can trigger intense feelings.

Grief is a natural reaction to the death of a loved one, but most of us are not ready for it. It can be frightening and lonely. It can be very tiring. We hope this booklet helps you understand your grief better and find tools to help you cope.

What is grief?
Grief is the pain we feel when someone we know dies. It is normal to feel grief when someone dies. Grief is unique. Everyone grieves differently. There is no right or wrong way to grieve.

Grief is a stressful, emotional roller coaster and takes time. There is no set amount of time for how long it will last.

Everybody grieves at some point and no loss is too small. Whether you have had a friend, a family member or a pet die, you have the right to grieve.

Grief is not a disease, contagious or a sign of weakness.

Some ways that grief may affect you

The way you feel

- Shock
- Numb
- Angry
- Impatient or irritable
- Regret such as “I wish I would have told them I loved them.” or “I wish I wouldn’t have had a fight with them.”
- Guilty
- Fear
- Sad or lonely
- Overwhelmed or insecure
- Relief, such as “They suffered for so long.” or “They were abusive to me so why should I feel sad?”

Your body

- Trouble sleeping
- Stomachaches or feeling sick
- Body aches or a lump in your throat
- Restless or too active
- Headaches
- No energy
- No appetite or increased appetite
- Weight loss or gain
The way you think

- Trouble making decisions
- Confused and forgetful
- Disorganized
- Dwelling on death
- Hopeless
- Disbelief that the person is dead

How you act

- Feeling different or left out
- Withdrawn
- Avoiding people or places that remind you of your loss
- Worried about being home alone

Your beliefs

- Loss of faith. Questioning your faith or angry at your faith.
- A strengthened faith.
- Wanting to connect with a church or group to feel a sense of family.
- Searching for the meaning of life.
- Feeling a connection with the person who died.
- Questioning why bad things happen.

Behaviors to watch out for

You will be able to handle most grief responses. They are temporary.

But you might notice some other behaviors that could be harmful. If you see any of these, it is important to get help. Talk with your parent, guardian, friend, school counselor or another adult who can help you.

Get help if you notice you are:

- Taking on too much responsibility.
- Feeling stressed most of the time.
- Worrying a lot about your health or the health of others.
- Isolating yourself.
- Fighting with your friends and family.
- Using sex, drugs, gambling or alcohol as a way to cope.
- Failing school.
- Refusing to go to school or stay in school.
- Having suicidal thoughts.
- Harming yourself, such as cutting.
- Not eating or binge eating.

If you don’t know who to talk with, text support is available through TXT4LIFE.

Text “LIFE” to 839863 or call 1-800-237-8255. TXT4LIFE is available in 49 Minnesota counties. Teens can also call the Essentia Health crisis line at 1-888-826-0099.
Different types of death

Expected death is caused by old age or a serious illness.

When the death is expected, some teens may start to grieve before the person has died. Sometimes there is time to get ready for the death, plan for life without that person, and say goodbye.

Sudden, traumatic death is unexpected. Sudden death can bring up many feelings. Feelings of shock and disbelief may last longer. There is often no time to say goodbye. Sudden death seems unfair, especially if the person who died is young.

If the death was traumatic, such as an accident, homicide or suicide, you may feel intense fear for no reason. You may also have recurring thoughts, dreams, or flashbacks in addition to the more common grief feelings. You might also avoid reminders of the traumatic event.

How long does grief last?

It is hard to say. Everyone grieves differently. Grief is a gradual process that takes time. Gradually you will adjust to living without the person who died. But you will always have memories of him or her.

Certain events in your life may trigger your grief. These events may be holidays, anniversaries, and birthdays. But they can also be simple things like hearing a song on the radio, visiting someplace, or certain smells.

Other ways death affects you

Death can change other areas of your life. These changes can also cause grief. They may include:

- Changes in your role in the family. For example, you may have more responsibility if a parent died. You may feel that you can no longer be a child.
- Changes in your relationships with friends. These may be due to a move, having less time, or feeling that you don’t have anything in common anymore.
- Changes in your relationship with other family members.
- Feeling guilty is common. You may feel like the death was your fault or that it should have been you that died. You may wish that you had not thought or said some things.
How to deal with grief

- Find a creative outlet or activity. Express yourself with music, art or writing.
- Stay active. Play a sport, work out, take walks, join a team, ride a bike, or just play.
- Get back to your normal routines. Get back into the routines of school and home. Hang out with friends, go to work or social events. These familiar routines will help you feel more normal and give your life some structure. Remember to be patient with yourself. Old routines may feel different now.
- Share your feelings. Talk to a friend or family member who really listens. Write about it in a journal, blog, poem, song or story. Join a grief support group.
- Try to relax. Use deep breathing and meditation to calm your body.
- Scream into a pillow, scribble on paper or, rip up paper if you feel anger.
- Take a break. Let yourself take a break from grief and do something you enjoy without feeling guilty. Grief is hard work and tiring. Sometimes you just need to recharge. It’s okay to do this.
- Remember that grief can make growing up harder than usual.
- Ask for a tutor or help with your homework if you have a hard time staying focused.

- Ask for what you need. Let adults know that you:
  - Want and need to be included in important decisions.
  - Don’t want to be treated like a child.
  - Need the same space and respect as an adult.
  - Don’t want to stand out from others.
  - Have limited resources available.
  - May express your feelings for a long period of time, and then you may take a break from the feelings. This may look different from the way adults grieve.

- Honor and remember the person who died. Even though they are not with you in person, they are a part of who you are and will always be with you. You can:
  - Take part in the funeral and memorial services
  - Talk about the person who died
  - Display pictures
  - Make a photo album or memory book
  - Keep your family traditions
  - Play their favorite music
  - Eat or prepare their favorite food
  - Light a candle
  - Talk to them
  - Visit the cemetery
  - Write about them in a journal, poem, song or story
  - Plant a tree or a memory garden
  - Have a ceremony
  - Make a donation to a charity in their memory
  - Volunteer for a special cause in their honor
What help is available?

At home, talk to a family member, read books on grief and spend time with your pet.

At school, talk to a trusted teacher, coach, nurse, school counselor or friend who really “gets it.”

You can also talk to your doctor or a grief counselor.

Local resources

Essentia Health St. Mary’s Grief Support Services offers free groups for young people ages 5-8, 9-13, or 14-18 who have had a family member or friend die. The Grief Support Services also has family grief therapy.

Groups meet once a week for six weeks in Winter, Spring or Fall sessions.

For more information about Grief Support Services, please have a parent or guardian call 218-786-4402 or email griefcenter@essentiahealth.org to schedule a meeting.

Websites

www.essentiahealth.org/StMarysMedicalCenter/Grief-Support-Center.aspx
www.toodamnyoung.com
www.slaph.com
www.hellogrief.org
www.studentsofamf.org
www.rainbowbridge.com
www.mindfulnessforteens.com
www.printmandala.com

Grief Support Center Library - books for teens

Coping with the Death of a Brother or Sister by Ruth Ann Ruiz

Healing your Grieving Heart for Teens: 100 Practical Ideas by Alan Wofelt

Help for the Hard Times by Earl Hipp

Living When a Young Friend Commits Suicide by Earl Grollman and Max Malikow

Straight Talk about Death for Teenagers by Earl Grollman

What on Earth do you do when someone dies? By Trevor Romaine

When a Friend Dies by Marilyn Gootman

When Death Walks In by Marc Scriver

When Someone You Know Has Been Killed by Jay Schleifer

You are Not Alone by Lynne Hughes

Call 218-786-4402 for library hours and location.