



TEENAGERS WHO ARE GRIEVING

Common Responses

Listed are some common responses teens may have when they experience the death of someone significant in their lives. It is important to remember that every individual, no matter the age, has a unique way of responding and coping with loss, and there is **no correct way of grieving**. However, most 11-19 year olds may experience at least some of the reactions listed below:

- **ACADEMICS/WITHDRAWAL** ~ Difficulty concentrating in school and with homework. It is not uncommon for teens to withdraw after a death from activities they previously enjoyed or from friends & family. Often they do not want to be singled out as being different.
- **INITIAL REACTIONS** ~ Some common immediate responses teens have to a death may be numbness, indifference, and or disbelief. These feelings enable the teen to absorb what has happened without becoming overwhelmed. Often, adults are concerned about the response of indifference. However, this response is common because teens often want to appear 'normal' to their peers so they suppress or postpone their feelings until they feel safe to express them.
- **FEELINGS** ~ Feelings often are volatile. Protest is an important emotion. The word bereaved actually translates "to be robbed". When someone significant dies in a teen's life, they may feel 'ripped off' and have a need to protest the loss. Teens may experience intense feelings of sadness or anger which may be triggered from random events. These feelings may be directed at family members, friends, the deceased, god, or themselves and is often demonstrated through fighting, defiance or verbal outbursts. Teens also often feel self-blame and guilt when they experience a death. It is common for teens to feel there was something they could have or should have said/done. Feelings of fear are also common. Fear of other family members dying or fear for their own well being in regards to who will care for them both physically/emotionally and financially.



- **CRYING** ~. Teens may tear up but not cry. They also may not cry publicly and it should not be assumed that they are not crying or that they should be crying.
- **EATING PROBLEMS AND DISORDERS** ~ Some teens express their grief primarily through the use of their body. It is common for teens to experience a loss of appetite and stomach aches with the loss of a loved one, however, when other unusual behaviours are present parents need to use caution; secretive eating, exiting to bathroom after meals, vomiting sounds from bathroom, withdrawal to eat even when hungry, preoccupation with conversations around feeling/looking fat, change in facial color and shape. *If any of these are noticed parents are encouraged to contact a medical doctor or counselor.
- **NIGHTMARES AND BAD DREAMS** ~ Dreams after the death of someone is common. The dreams may bring comfort, feelings of saying goodbye, inspirational, but also can be disturbing or frightening. It is also very common for teens to believe they saw the person who has died in a public place or to hear their voice.
- **PHYSICAL REACTIONS** ~ Some of the following physical reactions may appear immediately after the death, however some may appear over weeks and may be more prolonged in their stay; weight loss/gain, headaches, anxiety/panic attacks, insomnia, fatigue, desire for increased sleep, internal pain, muscle aches, digestive problems, heart palpitations, heavy breathing, dizziness, visual changes, difficulty urinating/constipation, dehydration/dry mouth, congestion, increased risk to illness and infection.
- **PLAYING** ~ Often adults try to deem play as appropriate or not. However, such judgments do not support the teens way of grieving. Teens use play to express emotions and cope with death through; sports, video games, board games, table games, movies and hobbies or collections.



- **REGRESSIVE BEHAVIOURS** ~ Reverting to younger behaviours is common when teens experience grief due to feelings of insecurity, uncertainty or anxiety about the future which are brought on by the death. Some common regressive behaviours are: clingy, clumsiness, shy/timid, thumb sucking, bed wetting, stutter or other changes in speech and immature play.
- **CHANGE IN CORE BELIEFS** ~ Teens often react self-centered to a death. They feel the death is a direct or personal attack on them or their belief system. They begin to question their spiritual beliefs as they commonly felt death would not affect “their family”, and wonder where their person is now.
- **RISK TAKING BEHAVIOUR/SUICIDE** ~ An increase in risk taking behaviour is commonly seen in grieving teens. Some of these behaviours are: skipping school, use of alcohol & drugs, increased sexual activity or suicidal thoughts. Commonly these behaviours are used by teens to escape feelings caused by the death. It is important to watch for the following suicidal behaviours and contact professional help; continues or persistent talk of wanting to join the person who died, increased reckless behaviours, sudden change in attention to appearance, giving away possessions, talking about desire to die and means to do so, withdrawal from all friends and prolonged depression, abuse of substances.

adapted from [Helping Teens Cope with Death](#), The Dougy Center (1999), Hospice Calgary Society & [Teen Age Grief Inc](#), Linda Cunningham (1990).

