

# Teenage Grief

## Understanding Adolescent Grief



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# Summary

The teen years are often the most difficult of our lives; it is the time of the greatest change as children transition into adulthood. Add to this the death of someone close, and what was at first difficult can seem impossible.

This video explores how teens grieve, and the support they need in such a difficult time. Some teens have never dealt with death before, and may need explanations and answers that many adults take for granted as 'understood facts' of death. Through the insight of several grieving teens seen in this video, the viewer can appreciate the unique difficulties experienced with various ways of dying and losing someone close—whether that person is a friend or relative. Grief has many layers, from mental to physical ailments, which can be experienced by any grieving person—and especially teens. The support of loved ones, outside counselors, support groups, and any number of other modalities are vital for a grieving teen, and no resource should be ignored. Through this trying time, parents play a vital role. However, if a family member has died, then a bereaved parent's role becomes even more difficult. Through the experiences of the teens in this video, and the accompanying booklet, the many facets of grief in adolescents are clarified.

## Key points:

- Death is a fact of life, though many teenagers have never experienced death before—therefore, teens may have questions about death they've never had to ask before.
- Grieving teens need just as much, or more, support as adults.
- There are many mental and physical effects of grief, and each person experiences grief in their own unique way.
- The teenage years are full of change, which is often difficult—the death of someone close can make this difficult time almost unbearable for even the most 'normal' teen.
- Parents need to keep their own needs in mind when trying to help a grieving teen—no parent is super-human.
- To better help a teen through the grieving process, they should be invited to help with memorials or funeral arrangements. All people, including those who are younger, need to find closure—attending a funeral can often help during this difficult time.
- Support for a grieving teen can be found in many places—such as; friends, family, videos, through counseling, or support groups.

# When Someone Dies

These days, many people never come into contact with death until they are teenagers or young adults. As a result, many people are unsure what to expect, and how to behave, when somebody in the community dies. For a young person experiencing the death of someone close to them, this may be the first time they have come across death at all in relation to anyone they know. In addition to their grief, they are likely to feel confused, bewildered, and isolated from others who have not shared this experience.

Relatives or neighbors used to care for those who were dying, and bury or cremate the dead. Now these tasks are left to professionals. Even comforting the bereaved, and helping them to mourn, are seen as jobs for trained counselors – ordinary people may be afraid to interfere. However, distancing ourselves from death in this way can make it even more difficult to deal with.

Dying is a fact of life, and we need to accept this in order to keep in touch with reality. You don't need training to help and comfort a bereaved person, but there are things to bear in mind. Every individual reacts differently, and has to grieve in their own way—but for most people bereavement is a shock, which affects them mentally and physically. They need extra rest and care. In order to get used to what has happened, and recover, bereaved people often need to talk about it. Simple words of sympathy – “I'm sorry about your sister” - can help people to feel they are not carrying a burden entirely alone, and let them know that the death is something they can talk about. However, comments such as: “I know how you feel”, “You've got to be brave”, “You should try and forget it”, or “At least you've got another sister”, are not helpful. These negative comments all have the effect of distracting attention from what has actually happened, and putting an end to any real conversation about it.

# Grieving

When someone dies, those close to them experience all kinds of feelings and emotions: sadness and loneliness, disbelief, anger, fear, anxiety, guilt, depression, and despair. The stress that bereaved people experience may make them more likely to become ill or have accidents.

Grief can have other physical effects:

- *That night, Adam lay awake, remembering his gran. Next day, he didn't want to finish his tea.*
- *Nasreen felt as if something big and heavy had hit her in the stomach, and she could hardly breathe.*
- *Marcus felt numb. And however much he ate, he still felt empty inside.*

Personality and behavior may change as well:

- *After school Nasreen started to hang around in the park...some days, she didn't go to school at all.*
- *Marcus couldn't concentrate in lessons. He started getting into fights.*
- *Nathan didn't like going out any more. He was always checking the locks, and often woke with bad dreams.*

The reality of the loss may take some time to sink in, so grief seems only to get worse when people think they should be starting to feel better. Some people find it helpful to think of grief as a set of four tasks:

- Accepting the reality of the loss
- Experiencing the pain of grief
- Learning to live without the person who died
- Moving on with life

These tasks may take a long time. Everyone works on them in their own way, in whatever order they need to—often stopping and starting again. It may take many years before someone is eventually able to think of the death with any less pain.

Grief never completely ends. What some people call 'continuing bonds' - keeping the relationship alive whilst accepting the death- can bring comfort. Even when the memories are painful they are a part of the bereaved person's identity, and will always be important to them. They may still feel sadness, but will be able to rebuild their life and form new relationships.

# Being a Bereaved Teenager

Teenagers already have to cope with huge changes – in themselves, their bodies, and their roles in life. Adjusting to the loss of a close friend or family member at the same time may seem like too much to handle. They often react with intense anxiety, denial, aggressiveness, or risk-taking. Getting into trouble at school, or with the police, is not unusual. Young offenders are much more likely than the general population to have experienced the death of a close family member in the two years before their conviction.

At this time of their lives, young people are developing their own identity and emotions often run high. The natural process of growing apart from their parents means most teenagers come into conflict with their families at times, and then feel guilty or angry. If a family member dies during this unsettled period, the teenager's feelings of guilt may be unbearable. Bereavement support is often aimed only at relatives. However, for young people who are just starting to make strong relationships outside the family, the death of a friend can be devastating. If a teenager dies, their friends should be encouraged to attend the funeral and take part in the mourning process.

# Being a Bereaved Parent

Bereaved parents may put off their own grieving to concentrate on looking after the family. Sometimes their feelings overwhelm them, and everything becomes an impossible effort. Grief and shock cut people off from one another, so it can be hard for them to empathize with each other's feelings. Oftentimes, young people's reactions are different from an adult's, and parents may fail to understand them. Parents are not super-human—they can't do everything, and they sometimes get things wrong. At times in bereavement they need support, either from people they know, or from organizations such as those listed at the end of this booklet.

# What Bereaved Young People Need

There are many ways to help a teenager who is grieving. The most important contribution an adult can make is simply to be aware, to pay attention, to listen, and help them feel they are not alone. Grieving teenagers may be keeping quiet about their fears or worries, in order to protect themselves or other people. They need to talk, and be given time to ask questions; to be listened to, and taken seriously—to be encouraged to express their feelings; and to be included and involved. They may be feeling isolated and lonely. Meeting other young people who have had similar experiences can be very helpful. There may even be a group nearby. The family doctor, or one of the organizations listed at the end of this booklet, will have information. Internet sites and message boards for bereaved young people are also listed under 'For More Information'. There is some specialist support for young people who have been bereaved as a result of suicide or murder.

Taking part in memorial activities with other family members and friends can help—so can books, DVDs, and videos about bereavement. Bereaved people of all ages can be helped to express their grief through many kinds of activities, including physical exercise, or creative activities—such as; drawing, painting, writing, or playing music. Young people who are encouraged to create a book of memories, or preserve keepsakes from the person who died, may appreciate these even more as they get older. Strong feelings that are bottled up will find an outlet somehow. They may result in behavioral problems, or physical or mental illness later on. Young people often need support to express their grief, and not suppress it. However, if they can communicate their feelings openly, this will help them grow stronger.

# Adam

For Adam, like most teenagers, the death of his grandparent is his first experience of bereavement. In some families, parents and other adults discuss the death among themselves, and explain it in simple terms to the younger children, but nobody talks about it much with the teenagers. Young people in this age group are assumed to be old enough to understand the issues without help, but too young to make a contribution. Plus, a parent may be unsure whether their child is being withdrawn or emotional because of grief, or just because of 'teenage mood swings'. Teenagers themselves may be unsure how to react. They may be shocked and frightened by how upset they feel. They are often self-conscious, and fear it would be childish to show their emotions, so they may hide what they are feeling. At a time when teenagers are starting to become more independent, it may seem easier for them to keep at a distance. Lack of self-confidence also may stop them asking for help, or offering to help others. However, a death affects everyone in the family, whatever their age. Teenagers may look almost grown-up, but they are still close to childhood, and most have vivid memories of their grandparents. It is also important to remember that adolescents still need reassurance, comfort, and affection. Some parents find a time like this is an opportunity to get closer to their teenage children, as they share grief and express sympathy for each other. Involving young people in funeral arrangements can build their self-esteem as well as helping them come to terms with the death.

# Emily

Emily's mum dies after a long illness, and she is left with contradictory feelings. When someone is terminally ill, they and their family have a chance to say goodbye and prepare for the death. In theory, at least, this is true—but just because the whole family knows that one of them is about to die, it doesn't necessarily mean they are going to be able to talk about it. Even for people who manage to say everything they wanted to say, and plan things in advance, the death may still come as a shock. Young people especially find it hard to imagine what life will be like without a parent. Those who are close to someone with a terminal illness often feel some degree of relief when death finally occurs—first, because the patient's suffering is over, but also because the job of looking after them is over as well. Many young people do an excellent job of caring for family members who are ill, and it is natural for them to want to enjoy themselves when they get the chance.

For parents, however, it can be hard to recognize that a young person may appear happy and cheerful and yet also be grieving deeply. All teenagers are coping with huge readjustment and change, as they work towards developing themselves and becoming independent. They need to lay their grief aside at times and put their energy into other things. This does not mean that they have stopped being affected by the bereavement. The task of grieving can simply wait for another time. Often grief returns at significant points in their life—for instance; anniversaries, special occasions or events, when they leave school, or have a child of their own.

# Nasreen

After Nasreen's father dies unexpectedly, she starts truanting from school. A sudden death in the family causes immense shock. In addition to grief, there are often painful regrets about what was left undone, what was said or unsaid. Most families with teenagers have their ups and downs, arguments and rows. Any teenager who is suddenly bereaved is likely to have regrets and guilty feelings about some recent incident in connection with the person who has died. Young people tend to keep these feelings to themselves. Sometimes they begin to think of themselves as bad, and behave in a way that fits this self-image. This can be very difficult for a parent to handle. Without condoning the 'bad' behavior, it is important to let the young person know they have the love, trust, and support of their family. Parents need to be aware that, just like younger children, teenagers may have misunderstood things that they are afraid to ask about. Children of all ages need to be encouraged to share their worries, and ask questions about any aspect of the death they may not understand.

# Marcus

Marcus is walking home from school with his sister when she is killed in a road accident. It is very important to tell school or college staff when a student has been bereaved, so they can offer support. School staff can contact the bereaved family and talk to the student about what they would find helpful, preferably before they go back to school. Teachers can also explain to the rest of the class what has happened and discuss with them the best way to support their classmate. When the student returns, he or she needs the support of their usual routines, but may not be able to concentrate on their work. Staff should be flexible about when work is handed in. Teachers need to understand that the student may not 'return to normal' in a few weeks - in many cases, recovery will take years.

Motor vehicle accidents are the leading cause of accidental death amongst teenagers in this country. In the U.S. during 2004, 4,767 teens ages 16 to 19 died of injuries caused by motor vehicle crashes [Dept. of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention]. Many young people who have been involved in, or have witnessed an automobile-related accident, suffer post-traumatic stress for a long time afterwards. This can cause severe anxiety, anger, panic, sleeping and eating disturbance, and depression. For someone witnessing a accident fatal to a close friend or family member, the grief and shock will be even more severe due to their memories of what they saw and heard, which are likely to keep returning to them as flashbacks for a long time. Specialist support may help to deal with post-traumatic stress. This kind of service can be contacted through a family doctor, health worker, or social services.

## Laura

Laura's friend Jack commits suicide and she worries that she didn't do enough to help him. Though the overall rate of suicide among youth has been declining since 1992, current rates are still unacceptably high. In the U.S., suicide is the third leading cause of death amongst young people ages 15-24, after homicide and accidental death [Dept. of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; Child Trends Data Bank].

Teenagers most at risk of suicide are those affected by the following: depression, alcohol or other drugs, bullying and/or abuse, or acute stress. For example, some young gay men and lesbians are especially at risk of suicide. Someone bereaved by suicide has even more painful and long lasting reactions than if they were dealing with a death from illness or accidental causes. They are likely to suffer intense feelings of guilt, anger, and bewilderment. Especially in the case of a young person whose parent dies in this way, they may also feel rejected and abandoned. Trying to understand why someone has chosen suicide can be a problem for survivors over months and even years afterwards. As suicide can still be seen as a socially unacceptable way to die, those bereaved in this way may get less support, and may feel reluctant to talk about the death.

## Nathan

Nathan and his sister Nicola find their mother after her ex-boyfriend killed her. A traumatic death - for instance, one caused by suicide or murder - is very hard to deal with. Someone bereaved in this way may suffer from intrusive thoughts; persistent memories; sudden feelings of panic or rage; and various kinds of unpredictable behavior. Within a bereaved family each person may mourn differently at different times, causing even more tension and misunderstanding. One person may be too anxious to go out, while another cannot bear to stay inside. One may become very quiet, another become reckless. At times like this, some young people get involved in drug abuse or crime.

If a close friend or family member dies in a violent way, young people usually need special help to deal with their feelings. If all the other people they know are also affected by what has happened, it may be important to find outside support. They need to express their grief, physically through exercise or relaxation techniques, or creatively through art, writing or music. Young people may find help through a bereavement group, or a trained counselor, or just through someone outside the family who will talk, listen, and show they care.

# Questions For Discussion

*These questions may be better discussed in small groups—role-playing should be encouraged.*

**1. Create your own case studies:**

Interact as a teen who has just lost his/her parent, or friend—each person can play different roles as support for the 'teen'. How does the situation change if the teen has never experienced death?...this is a great opportunity for role-playing to get everyone's input.

**2. Each person should discuss his or her own experiences with bereavement:**

Were you a teen at the time of the friend's or loved one's death? Do you feel you had all of your support needs met by those around you? If you were not a teen during your time of grief, how might your experience been different if you'd been an adolescent?

Practice offering words of sympathy—can you be empathetic?

**3. Imagine that you're the parent of a teen who just lost a close friend...**

How would you talk to your son/daughter about the death? What would you say if you were the person who had to let him/her know that a close friend has died? What if your teen becomes depressed, or angry, or starts getting into trouble at school?

This is another great chance to role-play!

**4. Each person should consider some homework in the case of a loved one's death:**

Does your family have a plan?

Are there any adolescents?—if so, will his/her needs be addressed?

# Teenage Grief Quiz

Circle the best available answer for each of the following:

- 1) Adam was upset because:
  - a) his mom had died
  - b) his gran had died
  - c) he'd failed a test at school
  - d) no one liked him at school
- 2) Adam started to feel better when:
  - a) he passed his test
  - b) his gran got better
  - c) he was able to help with the funeral
  - d) he started to exercise
- 3) Emily's mom had died:
  - a) suddenly
  - b) unexpectedly
  - c) the day before her birthday
  - d) after a long illness
- 4) After her mom's death, Emily had difficulty getting along with:
  - a) her dad
  - b) her classmates
  - c) her brother
  - d) her gran
- 5) Nasreen's dad passed away:
  - a) after a long illness
  - b) suddenly
  - c) in an accident
  - d) two years ago
- 6) Nasreen felt guilty because:
  - a) she thought she'd caused her dad's death
  - b) her mom told her she was to blame
  - c) she cheated on her history test
  - d) she yelled at a teacher
- 7) Marcus' friend Violet died:
  - a) in an accident
  - b) in the hospital
  - c) right in front of him
  - d) both a and c above
- 8) After a year, Marcus:
  - a) felt a lot better
  - b) was still grieving for Violet
  - c) was doing better in school
  - d) had forgotten about Violet
- 9) Laura felt guilty because:
  - a) she had failed a test in school
  - b) she had yelled at her mom
  - c) she was late getting home
  - d) her friend Jack had committed suicide
- 10) Nathan had to live with Nan and Granddad because:
  - a) his mom got divorced
  - b) his mom had died
  - c) his dad had died
  - d) his mom went to jail

# Teenage Grief

## Quiz Answer Key

Circle the best available answer for each of the following:

- 1) Adam was upset because:
  - a) his mom had died
  - b) his gran had died**
  - c) he'd failed a test at school
  - d) no one liked him at school
  
- 2) Adam started to feel better when:
  - a) he passed his test
  - b) his gran got better
  - c) he was able to help with the funeral**
  - d) he started to exercise
  
- 3) Emily's mom had died:
  - a) suddenly
  - b) unexpectedly
  - c) the day before her birthday
  - d) after a long illness**
  
- 4) After her mom's death, Emily had difficulty getting along with:
  - a) her dad**
  - b) her classmates
  - c) her brother
  - d) her gran
  
- 5) Nasreen's dad passed away:
  - a) after a long illness
  - b) suddenly**
  - c) in an accident
  - d) two years ago
  
- 6) Nasreen felt guilty because:
  - a) she thought she'd caused her dad's death**
  - b) her mom told her she was to blame
  - c) she cheated on her history test
  - d) she yelled at a teacher
  
- 7) Marcus' friend Violet died:
  - a) in an accident
  - b) in the hospital
  - c) right in front of him
  - d) both a and c above**
  
- 8) After a year, Marcus:
  - a) felt a lot better
  - b) was still grieving for Violet**
  - c) was doing better in school
  - d) had forgotten about Violet
  
- 9) Laura felt guilty because:
  - a) she had failed a test in school
  - b) she had yelled at her mom
  - c) she was late getting home
  - d) her friend Jack had committed suicide**
  
- 10) Nathan had to live with Nan and Granddad because:
  - a) his mom got divorced
  - b) his mom had died**
  - c) his dad had died
  - d) his mom went to jail

## For More Information...

1. About.com: Parenting of Adolescents  
<http://parentingteens.about.com/od/grief/>
2. The Prevention Researcher – Teens and grief  
<http://www.tpronline.org/articles.cfm?articleID=131&CFID=75574&CFTOKEN=29068636>
3. Grief – How to help teens deal with loss  
<http://www.earthlingcommunication.com/a/grief/helping-teenagers-cope-with-grief-loss.php>
4. New York Online Access to Health – Teens and Grief  
<http://www.noah-health.org/en/mental/disorders/grieving/what/teen.html>
5. The Dougy Center - for grieving children and families  
<http://www.dougy.org/>
6. The Healing Place – Grief Support for Children and Teens  
<http://www.thehealingplaceinfo.org/>
7. Teen Grief – a safe place for teens to express and share when someone close has died  
<http://www.newhope-grief.org/teengrief/>
8. Helping Teens Work Through Grief  
<http://wnyafn.com/teengrief/>
9. Children's Grief Education Association - Navigating Children's Grief  
<http://www.childgrief.org/teenspage.htm>
10. Teens Health – answers and advice  
[http://www.kidshealth.org/teen/your\\_mind/emotions/someone\\_died.html](http://www.kidshealth.org/teen/your_mind/emotions/someone_died.html)
11. The Grieving Teen – American Hospice Foundation  
<http://www.americanhospice.org/griefzone/articles/grievingteen.htm>
12. MADD – How are you feeling? – A teen's guide to loss, grief, and healing  
<http://www.madd.org/victims/0,1056,9769,00.html>