

Loss and Grief

Dear Teen,

You may have been asked to read this by your parents, a teacher, or someone else. This person cares about you and wants to be helpful. We hope that this honest, straightforward information will help you deal with your loss in a healthy way.

Unfortunately, loss cannot be avoided. It comes in many forms. Sometimes we try to avoid dealing with these painful losses. We just want to ignore them. That doesn't work. A loss won't go away. Losses have to be faced and "worked through." This "working through" is a process and it takes time. In the end, you will become stronger, wiser, more empathetic, and more mature.

Often people who experience loss have trouble eating and sleeping. Time may seem to pass at a slower pace. There are some feelings that are common to most people who experience a loss. They are:

- Denial - thinking "This cannot be real."
- Shock - thinking "I can't believe this has happened!"
- Sadness - feeling sorrow
- Depression - feeling lost or hopeless
- Anger - feeling mad
- Guilt - wishing that you had done something differently
- Anxiety - being concerned about the health and safety of yourself or others
- Fears - feeling afraid that the same thing will happen again to someone else or to yourself

Facing loss is not easy, but there are some things that will help you work through the loss.

1. Remember that your body still needs food and sleep. Even if you do not feel like eating, eat a small healthy meal. Experiencing emotion can be physically exhausting. When you feel tired, rest if you are able. Sometimes people have trouble sleeping at night, so a nap during the day may help you get the sleep you need. When you lay down, tell yourself you are just resting. Don't try to force yourself to go to sleep.

2. Talk about your feelings with someone you trust and who will listen to you.

Sometimes it may be hard to express all the mixed emotions you are experiencing. Sometimes the feelings are very intense and can feel overwhelming. Do not bottle these feelings up. Find a patient person who has experienced loss, someone who will sit and talk with you. Find someone who will accept your feelings and help support you. It's important to include an adult (parent, teacher, counselor, or minister) in your conversations. Most adults have experienced loss and have learned some healthy ways of coping with loss.

3. Realize that anger is a natural emotion related to loss. Loss hurts. You may not feel like you have a choice about being angry, but use that anger in a positive way. Think of something helpful to do. Often hard physical activity is a good outlet for both anger and stress. Don't make things worse by using anger in an inappropriate, hurtful way.

4. Understand that guilt is a natural emotion related to loss. It's easy to imagine that

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you may have contributed to the loss in some way or that you missed something that may have prevented the loss. No matter the source of the guilty feelings, talk to an adult. Your parent, counselor, or minister may be able to help you find someone who has been in a similar situation to share with.

Sometimes you may find yourself hit with more than one loss at a time. It is important to understand that the combination of these losses can complicate and intensify your feelings of grief. As hard as it is for you, please remind yourself that by using healthy ways of coping and having support, you will survive.

Death creates its own kind of difficulties. Very young children don't understand that death is a permanent loss. Elementary school children tend to recover faster from these losses than teenagers because other memories cover up the loss fairly quickly. But teenagers understand that death is a "forever thing" and they experience the loss in a deeper, different way. Even if you faced the loss of a close friend or relative when you were younger, the way you think about it is different now.

For most teenagers, facing the death of a close friend is something they never had to do before, and it can be frightening. Part of the fear comes from having a more mature understanding of death. You are reminded that everyone dies. You knew that fact in your head, but now you feel it in your gut. We expect older people to die, but not someone young. This kind of death happens "out of order" and can be especially tough. And, when someone your age or younger dies, it often makes you think about your own eventual death. It's an especially tough topic for anyone!

As you work through your loss, you may not feel like your "usual" self. You may not feel well, sleep well, act friendly, or be as social as you were. That's normal. Sometimes these feelings go away after a few months. But if these feelings continue, people who care about you may want you to get talk to a counselor or be part of a support group. Please give it a try. Accepting help could be one of the best things you ever do.

Sometimes, a loss can lead to a change in our behavior. And, unhealthy coping leads to more problems and behavior like this:

- *Fighting with other kids.*
- *Disrupting class.*
- *Rejecting all authority.*
- *Running away from home.*
- *Dropping old friends and going with a new crowd.*
- *Using drugs.*
- *Being sexually promiscuous.*
- *Thinking about suicide.*

These kinds of behaviors can lead to a lot of unhappiness for you and others. If you are doing these things or are thinking about doing some of those things, it is probably time for you ask for some help. It takes some maturity to realize that you might need help. A trusted adult can help you develop more healthy coping skills.

Please remember that if someone wants you to have some professional counseling or wants you to get into a teenage support group, they are doing so because they care about you.

Please give it a try. Accepting help could be one of the best things you ever do.

One last thing, remember that just like you are working through your own loss, others may be working through theirs. Everyone's journey is different. So have patience with others and

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empathize with their journey. Expect changes and help in whatever way you can. Helping others will help you.

Useful Links

- For Teens: When Someone Dies
http://kidshealth.org/teen/your_mind/emotions/someone_died.htmlOpens a New Window.
- For Parents: When a Teen's Friend Dies
<http://www.parentmap.com/article/when-a-teens-friend-dies>Opens a New Window.
- Helping a Grieving Teen
<http://www.dougy.org/grief-resources/how-to-help-a-grieving-teen/>Opens a New Window.
- Helping a Child with Loss
http://teacher.scholastic.com/professional/bruceperry/child_loss.htmOpens a New Window.
- Helping a Grieving Child
<http://www.dougy.org/grief-resources/how-to-help-a-grieving-child/>Opens a New Window.
- American Childhood Cancer Society
<http://www.acco.org/>Opens a New Window.

Signs and Symptoms of Grief

Below is a list of signs and symptoms of grief in adolescents to help you identify students that may need additional resources and assistance.

Adolescents and Grieving

The adolescent searches for the meaning of life, which includes death. "Why" questions will be asked, many of which have no concrete answers. Often, adolescents' emotional response to death will be very intense and issues of unresolved grief of divorce of parents, etc., will emerge.

Expressions of Grief

Talking to children about death must be geared to their developmental level, respectful of their cultural norms, and sensitive to their capacity to understand the situation. Children will be aware of the reactions of significant adults as they interpret and react to information about death and tragedy. In fact, for primary grade children adult reactions will play an especially important role in shaping their perceptions of the situation. The range of reactions that children display in response to the death of significant others may include:

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- **Emotional shock** and at times an apparent lack of feelings, which serve to help the child detach from the pain of the moment;
- **Regressive (immature) behaviors**, such as needing to be rocked or held, difficulty separating from parents or significant others, needing to sleep in parent's bed or an apparent difficulty completing tasks well within the child's ability level;
- **Explosive emotions and acting out behavior** that reflect the child's internal feelings of anger, terror, frustration and helplessness. Acting out may reflect insecurity and a way to seek control over a situation for which they have little or no control;
- **Asking the same questions over and over**, not because they do not understand the facts, but rather because the information is so hard to believe or accept. Repeated questions can help listeners determine if the child is responding to misinformation or the real trauma of the event.

A Student May React To A Loss By Exhibiting...

1. A decline in school performance
2. Difficulty in mastering new material
3. Irritable, withdrawn, anxious or depressed behavior.
4. A likelihood in risk-taking behaviors from drug abuse, to attempts at suicide.

What You Can Do As A Teacher

1. Routine Is Important! During this time of crisis and uncertainty, students often find a sense of comfort in a familiar classroom with a familiar routine.
2. Get as much detailed information as possible concerning whom you should contact for questions and concerns, the child's living arrangements, etc.
3. Stay in regular contact with the student suffering from the loss. Be on the alert for personality or behavioral changes. Know the support system that is available in the school. BE A GOOD LISTENER!
4. Provide different avenues in getting required work from the student. If there is no support at home, you might have to resort to providing an extra study hall, etc. These decisions should be made with the knowledge and support of the school counselor.