

TALKING TO ADOLESCENTS ABOUT DEATH

A Short Guide for Parents

For many adults, talking about death is difficult. When we speak to our own teenagers about the death of a peer, family member, or teacher, it can be even harder.

HOW AND WHAT TO TELL THEM?

It's best to tell the truth.

Provide accurate information about the death and circumstances surrounding it. Be as truthful as possible about the facts. Remember, teens cognitively understand the nature of death as adults do. Respect their knowledge and developmental stage. You don't have to give all the details, but ask the adolescents if they have any questions. If they do, answer the questions to the best of your ability.

WHAT KIND OF REACTIONS CAN I EXPECT FROM MY TEEN?

Everyone responds to death differently.

Some teens may be visibly upset, while others may appear to have little or no reaction. Still others may act out, laugh or act inappropriately. Often intense anger may be expressed before sadness. Remember any initial response to death, especially to a traumatic loss, is normal. However, it is always okay to seek professional assistance if you are concerned about your teen. Adolescents, like adults, experience a range of feelings when they hear that someone has died. Unlike adults, they are only able to deal with death emotionally as adolescents and are less able to hide unacceptable feelings.

Finally, when a death is sudden and traumatic, the focus will be on the nature of the event before the full impact of the grief is felt. It may take weeks or months before this sadness surfaces and the impact of the loss on their daily life is more apparent.

Adolescents move quickly in and out of grief.

Adolescents are striving to meet their developmental tasks, i.e., forming friendships, dating, developing interests, meeting academic expectations and making plans for the future while simultaneously working through their grief. Thus, adolescents can act moody and morose one moment and carefree and spontaneous the next.

If a classmate or teacher dies, adolescents will be particularly vulnerable to feelings of fear and guilt.

Adolescents who may have had a fight with the deceased student or teacher might feel a sense of responsibility and guilt about the death. They also may feel survivor's guilt, wondering why they are still alive. You can help by listening to their fears and normalizing their reactions. It's important to acknowledge their fears before reassuring them; otherwise adolescents will find it difficult to believe you. When an adolescent dies, they may also be angry with the adults who they may think let it happen. This is a normal reaction.

Remember that any death can awaken feelings about a past loss.

Both teens and adults who have experienced any death prior to the current situation can feel the impact of that loss again. Sometimes the feelings that surface may be about a past loss and not the recent death, or perhaps the feelings may be from a combination of both.

Adolescents may display a wide range of symptoms.

Adolescents will display a wide range of symptoms, i.e., headaches, stomach aches, a variety of fears about their health, their parents' health, or they may have difficulty eating, sleeping or concentrating. Some teens may become easily agitated or angry. You may also observe a decreased interest in school activities, a drop in grades or school attendance or an increase in risk-taking behaviors. If these symptoms are extremely severe or persist over an extended period of time, then the adolescent should be evaluated for depression. In the short term, however, these symptoms are a normal part of the grief process and they should abate. It is important to pay close attention to the severity, intensity and duration of the symptoms.

WHAT DO I DO WITH MY OWN FEELINGS?

Remember that you will also have your own feelings about the death of the student.

It is important to understand your own feelings and get support for yourself if necessary. Acknowledging your own feelings can increase your empathy for your teen, as well as help to recognize your limits. While at times it's important to express your own feelings about the loss, try to refrain from judging your teen for his/her reactions. For example, it is not helpful to dismiss the anger if you feel sad, nor is it helpful to disregard feelings of sadness if you feel angry.

WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP MY TEEN?

Acknowledge the intensity of the loss.

The death of a peer will greatly affect them, even if your teen did not know the deceased. Therefore it is important to provide a number of opportunities for the teen to express feelings of grief and loss. Rituals provide a source of continuity. For example, letters or cards to family members of the deceased can give your teen comfort. Often adolescents need to be with peers. See if the school will be providing opportunities for peer support. Encourage your teen to meet with friends. Open your home to them.

Be Attentive.

Answer your son or daughter's questions as best as you can. Don't tell them not to cry. Tell them that people feel many different things. Denial or disbelief, numbness, anger and sadness are all normal feelings. Tell them they may feel sad, and then feel happy again. That's normal too. It's okay to have moments of happiness, even when someone just died. Understand many teens may not have a need to talk about it. Avoid making judgments around the circumstances of death, i.e., suicide, drunk driving, or drug overdose, etc.

Stay Present.

When you think about it, the hardest thing we ever do in life is to sit with another person in pain and just provide comfort through our presence. By not rushing to make the pain go away, you allow healing to begin.

Provide structure.

It's important to provide a sense of continuity and stability during a time of disruption and/or crisis. Recognize that some teens may need to return quickly to a normal routine while others may need more time to grieve.

Some adolescents may become more irritable and angry at you or other family members. Gently enforce limits. Let them know that disrespect and violence are not acceptable. As stated, other adolescents may turn to alcohol or drugs or begin to engage in risky behaviors. Monitor their activities closely. Again, set clear limits and expectations with regard to substance abuse.

If your teen wants to attend the funeral or wake, discuss with them what to expect. Sometimes adolescents will want to go with their friends. Others may want to go with their family. It is best to let the individual decide. Do not pressure them either way.

Be prepared for reactions to surface prior to significant events such as prom and graduation.

At times of transition, losses are often reawakened.

There is no perfect way to handle grief.

Death is hard for all of us, and can stir up our own fear and pain. Be prepared. If you rush to comfort, tell an adolescent not to cry, or even snap at an adolescent in a moment of tension, you can always apologize and reconnect. Don't forget to use your own peers, friends and relatives for support.