



HELPING TEENS WITH TRAUMATIC GRIEF: TIPS FOR CAREGIVERS

Each teen grieves in unique ways. After a sudden or violent death some teens may develop traumatic grief responses and have difficulty coping. Here are ways to recognize and help your teen with traumatic grief. Being nonjudgmental, open to compromise, and considering your teen’s point of view are important.

I want you to know that:	You can help me when you:
<p>1. I may feel sad, scared, empty, or numb but be embarrassed to show my true feelings. Also know that, I may say too much on social media.</p>	<p>1. Say that it is painful when someone you care about dies. Talk to me about your own feelings and invite me to talk about mine, but know I might not be ready. Discuss the importance of thinking about what I’m sharing on social media.</p>
<p>2. I might have behavior problems that are new or worse than before (angry outbursts, irritability, rule breaking, revenge seeking). I may be doing serious, unsafe, or harmful behaviors (self-injury, risky sexual behavior, drug or alcohol use).</p>	<p>2. Have patience and try to remain calm while setting appropriate limits on behaviors. Encourage me to get back to routines and activities with friends. For serious, risky, or harmful behaviors, offer to get me outside help.</p>
<p>3. I have trouble concentrating and paying attention or may have a change in sleep patterns, such as staying up later or sleeping all day.</p>	<p>3. Realize that I may be having scary thoughts about what happened and not tell you. Talk with me about ways to cope, like getting back to enjoyable activities, or listening to calming music, or taking a technology break to help me to sleep better.</p>
<p>4. I may have physical reactions like jumpiness, stomach aches, headaches, a pounding heart, or body aches. These may be worse after being around people, places, sounds, situations or other things that remind him of the trauma or the person who died</p>	<p>4. Recognize that I may minimize physical reactions—or do the opposite—exaggerate a minor ailment or injury. Encourage me to use physical activities to release tension or to try relaxing things like deep breathing or gentle stretching.</p>
<p>5. I may think that life is meaningless, feel guilty for being okay, or withdraw from family and friends. I also may retreat to social media or gaming.</p>	<p>5. Discuss solutions for feeling sad and mention that, while social media can be helpful, it may be better seeing friends in person. Check with other adults I trust to discuss ways to support me. If I seem very sad or guilty, seek professional help.</p>
<p>6. Sometimes I wonder if something bad will happen to me or that other important people in my life. I may express this by appearing anxious, worried, seeming not to care about the future (not studying, skipping school), or doing risky things.</p>	<p>6. Help me develop a realistic picture of the dangers in life. Talk about ways for me to take control of my safety and future (e.g. driving carefully, eating well and exercising, asking others for help).</p>
<p>7. I may talk about feeling responsible for the death.</p>	<p>7. Give honest, accurate, and age-appropriate information. Teens get information from all kinds of media, so let me know you will always tell me the truth. If I feel responsible, reassure me to not worry; that I did the best I could at the time.</p>



I want you to know that:	You can help me when you:
<p>8. Sometimes I might not want to talk about the person who died. I may try to change or reject the topic (“leave me alone”), or shrug it off. I may hide my discomfort and act as if nothing bothers me or as if I’m is doing fine.</p>	<p>8. Realize that I may think that talking about the trauma or the person who died will upset you. Even if you feel rejected, do stay involved with me and know where I am and what I’m is doing. I need your presence more than ever.</p>
<p>9. I might refuse to go places or do things that remind me of the person who died, or avoid how my life has changed since the person died.</p>	<p>9. Understand that I may be overwhelmed by upsetting feelings, but want to look strong or act as if nothing is wrong. This may be a sign of traumatic grief, and a professional can help.</p>
<p>10. I may not want to talk about or remember good things about the person who died because it brings up reminders of the their death.</p>	<p>10. Understand that I may feel angry and helpless about what has happened to my family. Help me find words to express my feelings. Acknowledge that I have lots of reasons to be angry, and that words are better than behaviors that may make me feel bad.</p>

If any of these problems get in the way of your teen’s functioning at school or home, or continue more than 1-2 months, get help from a mental health professional who has experience treating children and teens with trauma or traumatic grief.

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TIPS FOR SUPPORTING TEENS WHO ARE GRIEVING



If you know a teen who has had someone in their life die, you might be wondering, “How can I help?” Here are some tips to keep in mind. Remember to take your cues from the teen. It’s likely that they know, or will be able to figure out, what they need. Your willingness to listen to their concerns and questions, as well as be present with their thoughts and feelings, creates a foundation of safety, trust, and support.

Be open and honest about the death.

One of the first questions adults have after someone dies is, “How and when do I tell my teenagers?” There is no magical ‘right time’ to share the news of someone’s death, but in general we recommend telling them as soon as possible, so that they hear it from someone they trust rather than from other teens or through social media. Find a safe, comfortable place and start with a short, but honest, explanation about the death. **Even though teens are better able to grasp the concept of death than are younger children, it’s still good to avoid euphemisms such as *passed away*, *went to sleep*, *crossed over*, or *lost*.** Taking in such big news can be confusing, so using the words dead or died can help teens comprehend what happened. You might say something like this: “Honey, I have very sad news. Mom died today. She had a heart attack.” Let their questions guide what else to share.

Allow for questions.

Teens may have a lot of curiosity about the details of what happened. Let them know it’s okay to ask and that **there are no wrong questions**. If your teen asks something you don’t know the answer to, tell them what you can do to find out, acknowledging that some questions may not have answers. Sometimes teens hesitate to ask questions or talk about the person who

died because they worry the adults they are closest to will get upset or cry. This doesn’t mean you should hide your feelings, but it is helpful to let them know ahead of time that it’s okay to talk about the person, even if your strong emotions come up.

Reassure them that you will be okay and that there are people you can go to for support. Another option is to work with your teen to identify a trusted adult - family friend, relative, coach, mentor – they are comfortable going to with questions and concerns.

Listen.

When a teen is grieving, people can be quick to offer advice and give opinions. **What’s most helpful is to listen without judging, interpreting, advising, or evaluating.** It can be tempting to minimize their feelings, or convince them to think or feel differently than they do. If it’s a case of misinformation, it’s helpful to provide the correct details, but still allow teens to express their take on things. Sometimes the best response is to repeat what you hear them say – called “reflecting” – so that they know they have been heard. For example, “You really get uncomfortable when kids at school talk about hating their mom. You wish they knew what it’s like to have a mom die.” Doing this helps teens trust that you will listen, leaving them more likely to come to you when they’re hurting or needing advice.

Be open to different ways of grieving.

Grief is as unique as we are. Teens can have a wide range of reactions and ways of expressing their



grief. Teens tend to be hard on themselves, whether for crying, not crying, being strong, being a “mess,” thinking about the person, or not thinking about the person. There is no right or wrong way to grieve. Each grief experience is unique. You can help teens (and yourself) by letting them know all of their reactions are okay and supporting them to discover what works best for them, as long as their behavior does not hurt themselves or others.

Know that grief doesn't follow a schedule.

You may have heard that grief follows a linear course of stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. The teens at Dougy Center have taught us that grieving may include one, all, or none of these experiences and they do not occur in any particular order. Grief does not have a timeline. Let your teen know it's common for their feelings, thoughts, and physical responses to change day to day, sometimes minute to minute!

Offer choices.

Teens appreciate being able to make choices as much as adults do. The death of a family member or friend can be disorienting, bringing to light their lack of control in life. Allowing them to make choices can help re-establish a sense of power, control, and trust. These choices can be simple and everyday such as, “I know we are all picking up extra chores since dad died, would you rather be in charge of taking out the trash or emptying the dishwasher?” or more complex, such as helping to plan the memorial service or sorting through the person's belongings. Whenever possible, include teens in the decision-making process. Providing informed choices helps them know their input is valued and that they have an important role in the family.

Acknowledge a need for privacy.

Developmentally, teens are poised to explore independence and identity, which can lead them to turn more towards peers or solo endeavors such as music or journaling for comfort and support. For the adults in their lives, this can be challenging, as teens may not talk with the adults about how they are feeling or even about the person who died. For

some teens, methods of communication that aren't face to face can be easier to navigate.

One family found that passing a notebook back and forth, with the understanding that unless there was

a safety concern, nothing

written would be brought up

in person, to be a great way to open up the lines of communication. This freed up the teen and his father to talk more openly than they would otherwise.

Texting, email, short videos, or written notes - get creative and negotiate with your teen to find a way to interact that works for both of you.

Know that grief affects teens on many levels.

Grief affects us on every level and it can impact how a teen thinks, feels, and behaves. The death of a family member or friend can be physically, emotionally, and cognitively exhausting, leaving teens with little energy leftover. Some teens have trouble sleeping, especially in the first few weeks or months after the death. Lack of sleep can lead to short tempers, mood swings, and impatience. You can help your teen by modeling good self-care around sleep, food, staying hydrated, and movement. Grief can also make everyone forgetful, so your teen may need extra reminders about chores and plans. If your teen experiences difficulty concentrating in class or completing homework, reach out to their teachers to discuss ways to help your teen feel supported and successful in school.

Talk about and remember the person who died.

Talking about and remembering the person who died can be an important part of processing grief. You might say, “Your sister really loved classic rock music,” or, “Your dad was the most dedicated friend I've ever met.” By sharing these memories, you offer teens the opportunity to reflect on who the person was in the world and what they valued. When it comes to significant days such as the birthday of the person who





died, the anniversary of their death, and traditional holidays like Mother's Day, Father's Day, Thanksgiving and year-end, your teen may have ideas about what to do on these days. Some families decide

to light a candle, cook something the person who died loved to eat, take a trip to a favorite place, or take turns sharing memories. Invite teens to participate in making a plan, but also let them know it's okay if they don't want to.

Provide opportunities for recreation.

Whether it was a parent, caregiver, or sibling who died, teens can feel compelled to step in and take on extra responsibilities. Babysitting younger siblings, helping with housework, or even getting an after-school job to contribute to the family's finances are some of the ways teens try to help out. While it might be necessary for them to take on a helper role, be sure to also make time for them to play and still be a kid, in whatever ways fit for them. Reassure teens that you are still there to take care of them and that they don't have to shoulder so much responsibility for the family's well-being.

Get extra help if needed.

While most teens will ultimately return to their prior level of functioning following a death, some are

potentially at risk for developing challenges such as depression, anxiety, difficulties at school, suicidal thoughts, or high risk behaviors. While friends, family, or a support group may be enough for many teens, others find additional assistance from a therapist or school counselor to be helpful. If you notice ongoing behaviors that are interfering with a teen's daily life, seek the advice of a qualified mental health professional. Don't be afraid to ask about their experience and training in grief and loss, working with teens, and their treatment philosophy and methods.

Find sources of support for yourself.

If you are parenting or supporting a teen who is grieving, one of the best ways to support them is to ensure that you are taking care of yourself. Research shows us that how well a teen does after a death is linked to how well the adults in their lives are doing. You don't have to hide your grief, but be sure to establish people and activities in your life that provide comfort and inspiration. By accessing support, you model for your teens ways to take care of themselves, and provide reassurance that you will have the energy and presence to be there for them.

These are just a few tips for how to support grieving teens. Grief is unique to each person and every family, so adapt these suggestions as needed.

To download this tip sheet in Spanish, visit: [Consejos Para Apoyar A Un Adolescente En Duelo](#)



**The National Grief Center
for Children & Families**

Dougy Center Bookstore/Resources

Dougy Center's practical, easy-to-use materials are based on what they have learned from more than 65,000 Dougy Center participants. To order online, visit dougy.org or dougybookstore.org, or call 503.775.5683.

About Dougy Center

Founded in 1982, Dougy Center provides grief support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families can share their experiences before and after a death. Dougy Center provides support and training locally, nationally, and internationally to individuals and organizations seeking to assist children in grief.

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Mental Health and Your Child or Teen

What to watch for and how to help

What is mental health?

Your child's overall health includes both their physical and their mental health. Physical health includes things like how well a child grows, how strong they are and how well they can recover from an infection. Mental health includes how well a child thinks, copes with feelings and behaves. A mental health disorder in childhood involves delays or disruptions in thinking, behaviors, social skills, or regulation of emotions for a child of that age. These delays or disruptions cause distress to children or interfere with how well they function at home, school or in social situations.



Just like your child's physical health, your child's mental health changes over time, getting better or worse. We can help our children build habits that help them be mentally healthy, in the same way that we teach them habits such as brushing their teeth, eating nutritious food and getting proper exercise to help them be physically healthy.

Mental health problems are common in children and teens. It is best to notice a problem early on and get the right treatment to support your child, just as you would for a broken bone. The tricky thing is that kids and teens are growing and changing all of the time. It can be hard to tell the difference between mood and behavior changes that commonly happen as children age and ones that are a sign of anxiety, depression or other mental health concerns.

Ways to support your child or teen's mental wellness

Parents can do a lot to help kids be mentally healthy and well:

- Check in with your child or teen. Ask how they're feeling and how things are going in their life. Listen to their words, and also pay attention to any changes in their behavior.
- Listen more than you talk, and truly hear what your child is saying. Be aware that your child may not want to problem-solve, they may just want to be heard and accepted. Be curious.
- Encourage your child to keep talking. Validate their feelings by saying things like: "Tell me more." "I hear you." "I understand you feel left out."
- Encourage your child to learn about and label their emotions, and to accept all emotions.
- Ask your child to come up with ideas for how to cope when they start to feel scared, mad, sad or otherwise upset. Talk with your child about their concerns. Let them take the lead, as they learn coping skills that work for them.

To Learn More

- Visit our Mental Health Resource Hub for more on supporting your child or teen's mental wellness, and when and how to get professional help: seattlechildrens.org/health-safety/mental-health-resources



Your child is likely to pick up on your healthy and unhealthy habits, so try to start adding more healthy habits to your family's daily routine. These include getting enough sleep and exercise, choosing healthy foods and drinks, and reducing and managing stress. These habits are important for physical and mental health. Ask your doctor for support if you need help creating healthier habits and enlist your whole family to make small changes together.

Here are some examples of other things that might boost your family's mental wellness:

- Build a strong and positive parent-child relationship. Respond to your child's emotional and physical needs.
- Establish a weekly family time to share an activity, like game night or cooking a meal together.
- Make time for child-directed play, one-to-one play in which your child leads.
- Decrease stress and conflict while still supporting normal activities.
- Establish daily routines that support healthy habits to help children and teens know what to expect and depend on. Include regular sleep and wake times, family meals, and clear responsibilities and consequences as part of your family's way of life.
- Work on your own coping and wellbeing so that you are a powerful role model for your child; you can even talk through how you handle big emotions in healthy ways as they happen.
- Limit time with screens.
- Get outside; spend time in nature.
- Get creative with art time (music, drawing, writing in a journal).
- Reflect on what you're thankful for.
- Learn a new hobby or build more mastery in a hobby you already have.
- Build friendships, connections and community supports for your child and your family.

Signs of a mental health problem

Mental health problems affect thinking, emotions and behavior. Parents, teachers, coaches and others can help identify early signs of mental health issues. Notice if a child:

- Is feeling very sad or withdrawn for 2 or more weeks.
- Has severe mood swings.
- Shows big changes in behavior.
- Often has problems in friendships and other relationships.
- Has a sudden overwhelming fear or worry that does not match the situation.
- Seems unusually irritable.
- Displays explosive anger.
- Has trouble sleeping.
- Changes their eating habits.
- Loses weight.

- Spends so much time alone that it gets in the way of doing other activities, or starts hanging out with peers who are an unhealthy influence.
- Is taking new risks, like using drugs or alcohol.
- Has lots of stomachaches or headaches.
- Avoids school or stops doing as well as they used to in school.

If a child is showing one or more of these signs, talk with their parent right away. If it's your child, contact their doctor, and be specific about which behaviors you, teachers and others have noticed. Getting the right treatment will help your child improve their mental health. In the meantime, talk with your child about a plan for coping and managing strong emotions to prevent a crisis.

Signs of a possible mental health crisis or suicide

Some things a child says or does can be a sign that they are in immediate danger. Watch for a child or teen who:

- Talks or “jokes” about death.
- Begins giving away items that they love.
- Says goodbye to friends, including on social media.
- Talks about hurting themselves or wanting to die.
- Says they feel like they're a burden and it would be better if they were gone.
- Stops wanting to do things they used to enjoy.
- Engages in self-harm behaviors.

What to do if a child or teen shows signs of being in a mental health crisis

If a child or teen shows these signs, ask them directly if they are thinking about suicide.

Asking does not increase the risk of suicide. Stay calm if they say they are thinking about suicide and:

- Contact the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline for help. Call or text them at 988. Chat is available at 988lifeline.org/chat. You can contact the service with your child or teen or on your own to get support.
- Reduce the risk of suicide by removing pills and firearms from your home. If you can't remove them, place them in a safe, lockbox or other secure place.
- If they are in immediate danger of harming themselves, don't leave them alone. Take your child to the closest Emergency Department (ED). If you cannot safely transport your child, please call 911. Tell them you have a mental health emergency and need your child taken to the ED. You can also use your county crisis line for help with problem-solving.

Give your teen tips to notice and help peers

Teens spend a lot of in-person and online time with peers. They can notice friends and peers who may be dealing with mental health challenges before adults notice.

- Teach your teen about mental health warning signs and urge them to tell an adult if they think they know someone who may have a mental health problem.
- Tell them to never keep it a secret if someone they know is thinking about suicide or harming others.
- Have your teen put the Crisis Text Line in their phone contacts: 741-741. Anyone can text the word “Home” to that number to be connected live with a trained crisis counselor. This service is free and confidential.

Avoid blame and shame

Childhood and adolescence are times of big changes, and it’s normal for all kids to experience emotional ups and downs. But at least 1 in 5 kids will have a diagnosable mental health problem that needs treatment.

If your child develops a mental health problem, know it is not you or your child’s fault. Please get help just as you would for a physical health problem. Don’t let blame or shame stop you. Effective help is available and can make an important difference in your child or teen’s development and life.