



Questions Grieving Teens Ask

A Special Word About Teenagers’ Concern for Parents

At the Caring Place, we have heard a number of teens tell us that they avoided talking to family members about their feelings or about the person who died. The reason for this, they said, was concern for their families, and a desire to protect them. *“Whenever I mentioned Dad, it would make Mom cry. And I don’t want to make her feel worse. So I just don’t talk about him.”*

Knowing that those closest to them are grieving as much as they are, teens are often concerned that they’ll upset Mom or Dad even more by talking about the person who died or about how they themselves are struggling with the death.

You can let a teenager know that you want to know how they are doing. Reassure them that even if you cry, you will be OK, and that connecting with them is more important to you than avoiding the tears.

“Just as you cannot protect yourself from the sorrow surrounding death, so you cannot defend your offspring. The mental health of us all is not the denial of tragedy but the frank acknowledgment of painful separation.”



—Earl A. Grollman
from *CONCERNING DEATH:
A Practical Guide for the Living*

Questions Grieving Teens Ask, and How You Might Respond to Them

Teenagers, growing in their developmental abilities, are old enough to grasp more of the implications of death, and to feel their grief and their loss very profoundly. At a time when teens are exploring independence from their families, a death forces them to cope with a loved one’s permanent absence from their lives and what that absence means for the family and for their role in it. The grief of a teenager is very real and very painful.

So treating them—their questions and their feelings—with respect is more important than having the “right answers.” Listening is more important than what we say.

Everyone’s journey of grief is his or her own journey, unique and personal. Accepting a teen’s feelings, and encouraging them in their own process, is a great gift that we can give them.

Remember that being with the teen—showing your love for them—is more important than providing answers.

1. How am I going to live my life without my loved one?

This question is an expression of the pain and anguish we all feel when someone we love dies—how can I go on without them?

It is difficult, and often impossible, for a teen (or for anyone) to imagine life without that person. The death of a parent is especially difficult. All of what was, and all they planned for the future, involved Mom or Dad. Now everything has changed.

Behind the question is the teen’s need for reassurance that it won’t always hurt so much, and for hope that the sadness won’t always be overwhelming.

Let them know that although their love for the person who died will never lessen, the pain they are now feeling can become manageable.

But there is no way around the journey of grief—at the Caring Place, teens have told us that they've found hope in the midst of their pain through being able to express their feelings of grief with other teens.

Encourage the teen to remember and to talk about their memories. Ask them how they are similar to (or different from) the person who died.

In addition, ask them what they have learned from their loved one that they will carry on into their own adulthood. This type of discussion will help the teen to realize that although their loved one is never coming back, he or she will be with the teen throughout their life—in their memory, and in who they are now and in who they will become.

2. Who am I now?

After a death, teens are faced in a bigger way than ever with how they fit in—with their family, their friends and the wider world around them.

This can affect their sense of self-identity. During the teenage years, a person's identity is emerging, and they define themselves by their relationships and their roles. They are not yet autonomous adults.

Normally, they have questions regarding developmental issues, such as physical body changes, establishing independence from their parents or family, and new roles (jobs/school/driving).

Now, they also have questions like: *"Am I still a big brother?" "Should I follow in my father's footsteps?"* or *"How am I like my mother?"* They may feel pressure (even from a sense of honor) to live out the legacy of a parent or sibling who died.

3. Will my friends at school treat me differently? What should I say to them?

Teens yearn for acceptance and want to feel like they belong to their peer group. Their friends are very important to their development.

Therefore, teens often are concerned with how to tell people at their school about their loss. They are concerned about being too vulnerable with people who might hurt them in some way.

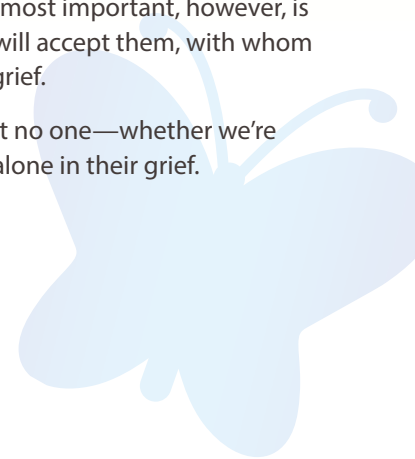
What we have heard teens say at the Caring Place is that they will be misunderstood, sometimes to a significant degree. Friends—even good friends—don't know what to say, and don't know how to handle death, because they have not yet been personally impacted.

Even though many of their schoolmates will not know how to talk about this experience, or even want to, what is important is for a teenager to find caring adults or peers whom they *can* talk to.

Being able to talk at home about the death and about their feelings may help teens in coming up with the words to say outside of the home. Doing this before the teen returns to school to face their classmates can help ease their anxiety, simply by equipping them with responses when they're asked questions about the death, or about why they missed school.

Anxiety about facing their peers back at school is a normal feeling; what is most important, however, is finding someone who will accept them, with whom they can express their grief.

What's important is that no one—whether we're 6 or 16, 36 or 66—feel alone in their grief.



4. How do I cope with everyday life (school, activities, work)?

When teens grieve, they can feel many emotions—sadness, anger, guilt, confusion, loneliness—sometimes all at once.

Grief takes a lot of energy. A teen, with fewer coping resources than an adult, can often feel overwhelmed by the many expectations on them to keep up their grades, to stay involved in their activities, to maintain a job, etc.

Encourage the teen to talk about how he or she is feeling. Help them look at the scope of their activities to see if there is anywhere they can cut back temporarily.

Teens can also be encouraged to ask for help and support from their teachers, coaches, bosses, and so on. Offer to talk to these people with the teen, if he or she would like you to.

Often, just knowing the people around them understand what they are going through is the safety net the teen needs to help them cope.

5. How do I cope with being mad?

Anger is a very common and very natural reaction after someone we love dies. Teens—just like every other age group—often feel mad at the unfairness of it all, and can feel angry at the whole world.

At times the anger can feel so intense that it's scary, so powerful that they don't know what to do with it. Teens can then also feel guilty about their anger.

It is important to reassure the teen that their anger is OK, no matter who they are angry at or what it is about—even if they are angry at you or the person who died.

Expressing feelings might be painful, but keeping them bottled up inside can end up hurting even more. It is important for teens (for all of us) not to deny their feelings, but to express their feelings (always keeping in mind, without hurting themselves or others).

Anger is normal; it's expected. Denying that feeling, or any other feeling, ultimately ends up hurting us. Providing a safe place for the expression of our feelings is one of the best gifts we can give the teenagers in our lives.

More Important Than the Answers

Being available to listen to your teen sends a message to them more important than your words.

Listening lets them know that you think their questions and feelings are important and that they matter to you even in the midst of your own grief.

Since it is impossible to make everything OK again for your teen, allowing open conversations where the teen can express how they feel and can explore their own answers to the questions they have—this can be a great support in their grief journey.

It is in the asking, not the answering, where discovery and healing take place. Be as supportive as you can be, remembering consistency, rules and boundaries are ways of creating safety for all children, including teens.

Use their questions as a chance to validate the teen during a very confusing and scary time. Now more than ever, your presence is more important than your knowledge.



About the Highmark Caring Place

The Highmark Caring Place is dedicated to making a difference in the lives of grieving children.

It is the mission of the Highmark Caring Place:

- To raise awareness of the needs of grieving children
- To provide programs to address those needs
- To equip the community to support those children who have experienced the death of a loved one



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