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Fact sheet

Helping Teenagers Who Have Lost a Loved One

Even during the best of times, the adolescent years can be very challenging. Teenagers want to be independent and taken care of, all at the same time. They can also experience a wide range of emotions within a short period of time.

The death of a loved one only adds to the difficulty of the teen years. It presents new and unique challenges to a teenager and his or her family. Helping your teen without forgetting about your own needs is an important part of the grief process.

Here are some suggestions on how to help your teenager during this difficult time.

Each teenager's grief experience will be unique. How teens react to the death of a loved one will depend on many factors, including their relationship with the person and how the death affects their daily life.

Teenage emotions are complicated. There are a variety of responses teenagers may have to any given situation. After the death of a loved one, it can be difficult to determine whether the emotions or behaviors teens are exhibiting are a reflection of grief, or merely of their normal developmental stage. Keep in mind that teenagers may be uncomfortable with some or all of their feelings about the death.

Teenagers do not want to be different. Most of their friends and classmates probably have two living parents. The death of a parent can make teens feel different and uncomfortable. Participating in support groups, peer-to-peer networks, or supervised online chat rooms can help them understand that there are other young people going through the same difficult situation.



Teenagers struggle with the need for independence. A parent's death may make this more difficult. Encourage your teen to spend time with friends in age-appropriate activities.

Teenagers are not grown-up adults. The death of a parent will often make teens believe they should take on additional responsibilities. While this can be helpful, keep in mind that they are teenaged children. Do not allow your teen to become the "man" or "woman" of the family.

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Teenagers need consistency. Make an effort to ensure that your teen still attends regular activities and social events.

Teenagers need privacy. Your teen may or may not want to talk about the death with your immediate family. Let your teen know that he or she can talk to and receive support from other people, such as a family friend, an aunt or uncle, a teacher, or a clergy person.

Teenagers need to be included in your plans to cope with special days. Thinking about birthdays, anniversaries and holidays is often more difficult than the days themselves. Talk to your teen and make plans for how you would like to honor your loved one. Don't be afraid to try something new and different.

Take care of yourself so you can care for your teen. Grief can leave you feeling tired and vulnerable. It is important to eat and rest regularly. You cannot take care of your family if you do not take care of yourself.

Even under normal circumstances, the teenage years are characterized by a roller coaster of emotions. The death of a loved one adds additional challenges to your teen's transition from childhood to adult life. Parents need to take care of themselves and continue being a "home base" for their teen as he or she tests out being an adult. The comfort you give teenagers comes in the form of praising them, respecting their needs, and including them in your life.

The CANCERcare® Constellation of Services



CancerCare's services are provided free of charge to anyone affected by cancer

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