



Children and Grief

Adolescents
Ages 13 – 18

A Guide to Easing Your Child Through Loss

Supporting an adolescent who is grieving is a challenge for which Mercy would like to provide assistance. It's our hope that this information about age-appropriate grief response will be helpful in guiding your teenager to cope in a healthy way.

Every teenager is different in how they handle adversity and manage emotions, but every teen still needs support that is appropriate for his or her response to grief. What your child needs from you is for you to simply be there to listen and offer love.

How teenagers may express grief and loss.

- May view death as an interruption or the “enemy”
- Feel more vulnerable if other changes and losses occur simultaneously
- Engage in increasingly risky behaviors to reduce anxiety: for example, driving fast, experimenting with drugs, acting out sexually
- Intellectualize or romanticize death in their drawings or writing
- Act indifferent or stay in denial as a defense mechanism
- Grieving with peers rather than adults or family
- Need permission to grieve
- Suicidal thoughts. If this occurs, seek help immediately!
- Difficulty making long-term plans
- May ask questions about religious or spiritual beliefs, or question the meaning of life
- Confusion over their role in the family, especially if that role changes (for example, an elder son who feels he must be the “man of the family”)
- Increased sensitivity to noise, movement, light
- Physical symptoms, such as headache, stomachache or exhaustion

How to help.

- Reinforce the safety, stability and security of their home, even if your teen doesn’t express concerns about it
- Allow expression without trying to change, correct or take it away
- Answer questions honestly, no matter how difficult – and even if the answer is “I don’t know”
- Adjust expectations for concentration until your teen can get his or her bearings
- Help teens connect with a healthy support team (coaches, teachers, friends, ministers)
- Check in with your teenager with open-ended questions: “What is it like for you?” Listen to the answer
- Avoid adding stress and pressure. Avoid saying things like: “You have to be strong for your mom,” or “You seem to be taking this so well”

If you notice signs of self-harm, or your child has expressed suicidal thoughts, seek immediate professional help.

With time and patience, you can ease your child through the pain and confusion of loss.