

When teens grieve

An excerpt from *Hope and Healing After Suicide*

Teens experiencing the suicide of a family member or friend may be confronting death for the first time. The teen years are marked by many firsts which is why, at times, teens seem to have dramatic reactions to life events. As with all firsts, teens don't have prior experience to draw on and are unsure about what to do with their grief. They grieve differently than adults and, because their brains are still developing, problem solving may not be a well-developed skill.

Teen mourning rituals tend to be more collaborative and less private than adults'. They may exhibit more anger and feel guilty about not knowing about the risk of suicide or doing something to prevent it. Like adults, they will ask why and try to comprehend how someone can end his or her life. At the same time, they may be acutely aware of their own self-destructive patterns.

Peer groups and other groups they may belong to (such as clubs, teams, and cultural and religious groups) can be helpful to teens. Expressing themselves through technology is common with teens and can also be useful in the grieving process (for example, writing an online journal or blog as a way to remember and celebrate the person).

Signs of teens' grief

As with adults and younger children, the ways in which adolescents express their grief will vary from teen to teen. Some common signs of teen grief include:

- appearing confused, depressed, angry or guilty
- experiencing physical complaints, such as having difficulty eating or sleeping
- changes in school work patterns, either by burying themselves in school work and doing well or by not being able to concentrate and doing poorly
- feeling different or that they no longer fit in with their peer group
- relying on friends or changing to other groups who they feel understand them more
- becoming more responsible and taking on the roles and responsibilities of the deceased (especially if the deceased was their parent), or being more helpful to their parents or the surviving parent
- becoming overly concerned with the safety of family members and friends
- feeling like they have lost their family because the dynamics have shifted.

This resource is adapted from the "Hope and healing after suicide: A practical guide for people who have lost someone to suicide in Ontario." Download the full guide at www.camh.ca/hopeandhealing.

If you are experiencing thoughts of suicide, you are deserving of help. Please explore resources at www.camh.ca/gethelp. If you feel safe in the moment, follow up with your family physician or care team. If you require immediate, in-person emergency care, call 911, or go to your nearest emergency department.

Ways to help young people cope with grief

For young people, the seriousness of the loss takes them beyond the innocence of childhood. Their world is shattered. Their once-predictable life has become uncertain and frightening. Yet grieving children and teens are amazingly resilient and, with support from loved ones, can grieve and begin healing. Children and teens need this support, regardless of how they seem to be coping. Demonstrations of love and ongoing support are the greatest gifts you can give a grieving child or teen. If you are also grieving, make sure that you have your own supports, while also supporting your children.

There are many ways you can help children and teens cope with the death and their ensuing grief. Here are some suggestions.

Talking about the death

- Be “present” and focused and listen to what they are saying—and what they are not saying.
- Do not force young people to talk about the death. Wait until they are ready.
- Create a loving and safe environment where young people can ask questions.
- Answer questions. If young people do not get their questions answered, they fill in the blanks and use their imaginations to come up with scenarios that are often worse.
- Respond only to what the young person is asking about. Do not provide more information than asked for.
- Accurately describe what has occurred with concepts and words the young person can understand. For example, do not say “Auntie is sleeping”; instead, you could say “Auntie was sick and chose to make her body stop working.”
- Encourage children and teens to express their thoughts, feelings and fears. Help them to identify these feelings.
- Make sure young people know it is okay to feel happy as well as sad. Feeling happy (or feeling better) does not mean that they are not sad about the death or that they have forgotten the person.

Keeping up routines

- Provide consistency and routines for children and teens.
- Engage young people in activities that can take their minds off what has happened or can help them celebrate the person’s life. This could include drawing, moulding clay, writing, playing with toys, making a memory picture book or a memory box with favourite mementos, framing a picture of the person, planting a tree or garden in the person’s honour, lighting a memorial candle or visiting the cemetery.

Additional resources

In this series:

- When children grieve
www.camh.ca/-/media/files/Hope_and_Healing-When_children_grieve.pdf
- When teens grieve
www.camh.ca/-/media/files/Hope_and_Healing-When_teens_grieve.pdf
- When someone close to you dies by suicide
www.camh.ca/-/media/files/Hope_and_Healing-Someone_close.pdf
- Working through the grief
www.camh.ca/-/media/files/Hope_and_Healing-Working_through_grief.pdf

Where can I get help in a crisis?

- CAMH Crisis Resources
www.camh.ca/crisisresources
- The CAMH emergency department in Toronto is open 24/7
www.camh.ca/ED

Where else can I find treatment or support?

- The Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention provides links to supports across Canada. <https://suicideprevention.ca/Need-Help>
- Bereaved Families of Ontario operates in various cities across Ontario.
<https://bereavedfamilies.net>

Where can I find more CAMH resources about suicide?

- When a Family Member is Suicidal
www.camh.ca/en/health-info/guides-and-publications/when-a-family-member-is-suicidal
- Hope and Healing after Suicide
www.camh.ca/hopeandhealing
- When a Parent Dies by Suicide... What Kids Want to Know
www.camh.ca/en/health-info/guides-and-publications/when-a-parent-dies-by-suicide