

Learning to Live Through Loss: For Teens Facing Loss¹

Carolyn S. Wilken²

If you are like most teens, your experience with death and loss has been limited to music, movies, and TV. You understand death, but it may not have seemed real—until now. This fact sheet will give you information about what you can expect as you grieve the loss of someone you love.

What You Can Expect in Yourself

Intense emotions are a normal part of grief. You may feel confused, helpless, angry, sad, lonely, afraid, and guilty. Sometimes you may wish you were just a child again. You may find yourself on an emotional roller coaster for the next year or so. There will be intense hurtling down into an abyss, a slow climb to the top, a moment of calm, then another unexpected plunge.

You may wonder, “Will I ever feel okay again? Am I going crazy?” Yes, you will feel okay again, but it takes a while. Strong feelings are a good sign that you are healing from the pain of your loss. People heal when they allow themselves to feel the pain grief brings.

Many people, like you, have trouble expressing these feelings. Such strong emotions make us all feel out of control, vulnerable, even scared. But expressing your feelings is essential to start healing. Hiding from your feelings is denial, and it is unhealthy. So is expressing nothing but anger. When denial or anger crowd out any other feelings, this leads to greater depression and more pain.

Give yourself permission to face your loss and allow emotions to heal. It is okay to cry. It is okay to hurt. It is okay to be angry. It is okay to mourn the loss of all you looked forward to with the person and the dreams you had together.

If you lost a family member, you may be feeling extra guilt. Many people are a little rebellious or withdrawn. Now you may regret some of your behavior before the death or feel you are somehow responsible. You are not responsible; you did not cause the death. But be aware that these circumstances can make mourning more difficult and grief more painful. Allow yourself longer to recover, and find someone to talk with.

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2. Carolyn S. Wilken, PhD, M.P.H., associate professor, Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, IFAS, University of Florida, Gainesville FL 32611. We would like to thank Cheryl Bailey, LMHC, Haven Hospice of North Central Florida, for her comments and suggestions.

If you survived an accident where someone died or the person committed suicide, understand that “survivor's guilt” is normal. Part of you may feel guilty that you didn't die when someone else did. Dealing with survivor's guilt takes extra time and support to sort out all the feelings.

Things That Will Help You Recover

- Understand what is happening or has happened; find out the facts about the death and about the mourning process.
- Express your emotions and mourn your loss. Find ways that suit your personality.
- If you have difficulty crying in front of others, try taking a shower. You can cry in a shower; no one sees, hears, or can tell by your face later.
- Commemorate your loss formally or informally. Perhaps you can participate in the memorial service by reading a poem or helping plan the service. Or you can write a letter to the deceased and place it in the coffin, or release it in a balloon.
- Find friends and trusted adults who can give you emotional support. Share your experience with others. Safe relationships help you work out your feelings.
- Seek occasional solitude; it is important to reflect, feel and recover.
- Communicate with your family; honest discussions usually bring support, empathy, and healing.
- Learn how to go on with your life.

Things That Make Grief Worse

- Believing death cannot happen to you.
- Seeking escape through suicide or acts that place you or others in danger.
- Trying too hard to act like an adult.
- Trying to replace the person who died.

- Withdrawing from others.
- Using sex for escape, comfort, or attention.
- Denial: using constant music or the telephone to avoid being alone and having to face your feelings.
- Misusing alcohol, food, or drugs as a way to try to forget or not care.

What Others Expect of You

Different people will have different expectations of how you feel or behave as you mourn. Some may expect you to “be strong”; others will expect you to cry. The loss of a loved one is something few people know how to address.

Because other people feel uncomfortable and are inexperienced in dealing with loss, they may say things that hurt. Things like: “Be strong.” “Time heals all wounds.” “It was for the best, anyway.” “I know how you feel.” Some people may ask for details you aren't ready to share. Try not to let such comments or questions cause you more hurt or anger. Simply say, “I'm not ready to talk about it yet.”

As hard as it may seem to believe, most people are not watching you every minute. Most people are busy dealing with their own feelings and fears. Be yourself. It is okay to cry during a memorial service. It is also okay to not cry.

As You Begin To Heal

Mourning takes time. You may still hurt months after the immediate shock of your loss. Even years from now you may feel part of this grief again as you experience other transitions: graduation, loss of a friend, marriage, or a move. This is all normal.

Loss usually changes your life dramatically for the first year or so. Many students find it difficult to study, and grades suffer. You may find it hard to sleep. You may feel a tremendous amount of stress. You may wonder about the meaning of life. Relationships can seem suddenly difficult. Friends act awkward, not knowing what to say. You may be tempted to withdraw into yourself.

Your school performance will return to normal in time, as you heal. So will relationships. Don't blame yourself if your life seems to fall apart right now. You are capable of putting it back together, especially with help from true friends and adults you trust.

If you feel like you're "stuck" and can't overcome your loss, talk to your guidance counselor, clergy, or other trusted adult. Ask this person to help you find a professional counselor who can help you continue healing.

Grief can change your whole life, making you stronger. If you allow yourself to face the hurt and heal, you will find that you have a deeper appreciation of life. You will become a more caring person, capable of richer relationships. You will be emotionally stronger. You will become capable of giving great gifts to others out of the depths of your experience--gifts of yourself.

This publication talks about special experiences of teens. To learn more about grief and mourning, read "Learning To Live Through Loss: Grief and the Mourning Process," FCS 2267, available through your Extension office.

Books

Books provide more than just information. Books help us identify with others, explore our feelings, and grow stronger. Look for these and other titles in your library:

The Fall of Freddie the Leaf, by Leo Buscaglia

- A fable for all ages, Freddie the Leaf illustrates and explores deeper meanings in the delicate balance between life and death.

Losing Someone You Love: When a Brother or Sister Dies by Elizabeth Richter

- Sixteen young people (ages 10 to 24) describe the fears, sorrow, and other emotions they experienced when a brother or sister died. (Non-fiction)

How It Feels When a Parent Dies by Jill Krementz

- Eighteen people (ages 7 to 16) describe their feelings and how they learned to go on in life. (Non-fiction)

No Time For Goodbyes by Janice Harris Lord

- Appropriate for older adolescents, this book deals with the sorrow, anger, and feelings of injustice after a violent or sudden death. (Non-fiction)

Learning To Say Goodbye by Eda LeShan

- Discusses the questions, fantasies, and fears many have when someone close to them dies. (Most appropriate for 11-13)

When Living Hurts by Sol Gordon

- A self-help book specifically for teens, this publication discusses depression, confusion, and suicidal thoughts.

Fiction for 10- to 14 Year-Olds

Tiger Eyes by Judy Blume

- A teenager's father is murdered during a robbery. This novel deals with how the girl copes with the experience.

You Shouldn't Have To Say Goodbye by Patricia Hermes

- Thirteen-year-old Sarah learns her mother has cancer. But even as she faced death, Mrs. Morrow reaffirmed life, leaving Sarah with good memories.

Beyond Silence by Eleanor Cameron

- Troubled by a recurring nightmare following his brother's death, Andrew accompanies his father to the family castle in Scotland where he has several encounters with one of his forebears and resolves his grief.

For Older Adolescents

Death Be Not Proud: A Memoir by John Gunther

- Penned by his father, this story of Johnny Gunther is one of courage and hope. Many have

found this memoir of a teen who died of cancer inspiring and consoling.

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