

Grief Handbook for Teens



HOSPICE
OF SANTA CRUZ COUNTY
Compassionate Care Since 1978

Working Through the Grief

This booklet is designed specifically for teens. Its purpose is to help you understand and work through your grief. Healing from grief is not easy, and you don't have to do it alone. For over 30 years, Hospice of Santa Cruz County has supported people of all ages in recognizing, understanding and healing their grief.

The information in this booklet has been compiled from many different sources which we have found to be helpful over the years. We especially acknowledge the Centre for Living with Dying in Santa Clara, California; the Teen Talk Grief Support Group at Good Samaritan Hospice in Puyallup, Washington; and Linda Cunningham at TAG Teen Age Grief, Inc. whose work with grieving teens has helped to shape this booklet.



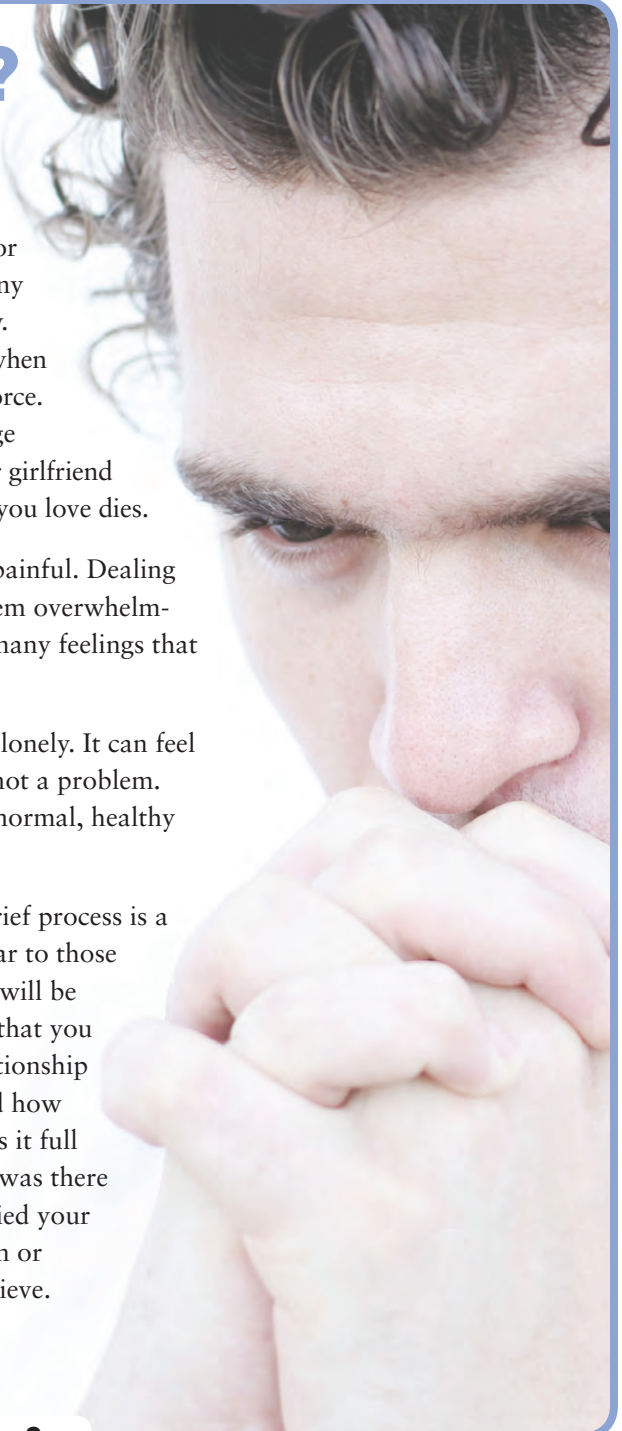
What is Grief?

Grief is a normal and natural response to loss. And, loss is something that you feel when there is a separation from something or someone that you care about. There are many kinds of grief and loss that we face everyday. You may experience grief when a pet dies, when a friend moves away, or if your parents divorce. You may feel a loss when you have to change schools, or when you and your boyfriend or girlfriend break up. And there is grief when someone you love dies.

Losing someone you love or care about is painful. Dealing with the feelings after someone dies can seem overwhelming. Sometimes it helps to understand the many feelings that you may experience as you are grieving.

Grief can be confusing, overwhelming and lonely. It can feel like your life is out of control. But grief is not a problem. It is not something to “get over.” It is the normal, healthy process of healing.

How you experience grief and your own grief process is a unique journey. Some feelings will be similar to those of people around you, while other feelings will be different. How you grieve and the feelings that you experience may depend on the kind of relationship that you had with the person who died and how they died. Was it a loving relationship? Was it full of conflict? Was it sudden? Or violent? Or was there a prolonged illness? Was the person who died your parent, grandparent, teacher, sibling, cousin or friend? All of these will impact how you grieve.



Feelings in Grief



A word cloud of various emotions associated with grief, set against a dark blue background. The words are in different colors (white, light blue, and green) and orientations (vertical, horizontal, and diagonal). The most prominent words are 'Fear', 'Yearning', 'Insecurity', 'Anxiety', 'Resentment', 'Anger', 'Grief Attacks', 'Loneliness', 'Longing', and 'Shock'. Other words include 'Guilt', 'Depression', 'Relief', 'Helplessness', 'Numbness', and 'Lack of Control'.

Fear
Yearning
Insecurity
Anxiety
Resentment
Anger
Grief Attacks
Loneliness
Longing
Shock
Guilt
Depression
Relief
Helplessness
Numbness
Lack of Control

Feelings in Grief

Here are some of the feelings that you may experience when grieving. Feeling them is part of the healing journey.

Shock

The person you care about has just died. You can't believe that it is true. You feel numb. Total disbelief. You feel that a cruel joke has been played on you. This cannot be real! You may find yourself truly believing that they are still alive, when you also know for a fact that they have died. You want to scream, "NO, it's not true!" You may not feel anything for a while, and that's OK too. This feeling of shock and numbness can last for hours, days, weeks and sometimes longer.

Sadness

As the shock begins to wear off, you gradually begin to believe the person is really gone. You may feel sad. You may cry many tears, or you may feel intense sadness and not be able to cry. You are very aware of how much you are going to miss the person you cared so much about. Nothing really makes you happy right now. You don't seem to care about anything. The empty feeling in your heart just doesn't seem to go away. You may need to talk about your loss with someone you can trust.

Loneliness

Along with sadness comes loneliness. Other people not affected by your loss seem happy, carefree and going about life in a normal way. This is not the way that you feel. Your life doesn't feel normal. You may not want to be out with your friends, or if you do go out, you may feel guilty if you have fun. You may feel as if no one understands. After the funeral, people often stop talking about the person who died. It is during this time that it is normal and common to feel alone with your sadness.

Relief

Many people feel relieved when someone dies. Maybe the person had been sick for a very long time, and you are glad that their suffering is finally over. Maybe the person was abusive, and you feel relieved that you will never have to experience abuse from that person again. Relief is a natural reaction.



Anxiety and Fear

You may begin to feel anxious. Death has now become a reality in your life. It is no longer just a news story or something that only happens to other people. It has happened to you. This may bring up fear about when death will touch your life again. You may worry that something will happen to you, your friends, or your family. You may be anxious about how you'll make it without this person. Sometimes, you may even experience physical symptoms such as shortness of breath, pains in your chest, headaches and/or an upset stomach. Most people do experience these kinds of body reactions during the first few weeks following a death.

Anxiety and fear are normal reactions to the stress of your loss.

Guilt

Everyone seems to have regrets when someone dies. You may be thinking of all the things you wish you would have said or done. Perhaps you are remembering things that you wish you hadn't said or done. You thought that you had a lifetime to say, "I love you", or "thank you", or "I'm sorry." Now, you may feel guilty wishing you had said or done more for the person who died. You may begin to ask yourself questions like, "Why did I say that to him?" or "Why wasn't I nicer to her?"

If you feel guilty, talk to someone that you trust or try writing in your journal about how you feel. Don't keep guilt locked up inside of you. Remember that you are human. Forgive yourself.

Anger

Anger is another feeling that is a normal part of the grief process. You might be thinking, “This is not fair.” “Why did he have to die?” “Didn’t she know that I needed her?” “I hate it when my friends yell at their mom. They have no idea how quickly all of life can change.” You may find yourself resenting others who still have their parent, sister, brother, friend or other loved one. Some people find themselves angry at God and asking, “Why me?” You may even feel angry at the person who died. You may feel abandoned and alone. Anger may be masking the hurt, pain and confusion that you feel. Many people don’t understand that anger is a part of grieving, and so they may not understand why you are angry.

It is OK to feel angry, and the important thing is to express it in a healthy way. Talk with someone. Go for a walk or a run. Lift weights. Draw. Write. Listen to music. Scream into a pillow. Scream in your car. Do whatever works for you to release the anger in a safe way.

Depression

You may feel sad, tired, lonely, lost, and/or empty inside. This is a time when you may not feel like going out with your friends. You may feel that no one understands or cares about how you are feeling or what you are thinking. You may feel incredibly miserable and alone. Being depressed is not a pleasant feeling, but it may allow you the opportunity to be alone with your sadness, to think about what has happened, to sort it all out, to begin to understand that your loss is permanent and that you have been changed.

Talking can often help. Try to tell at least one person how you feel.

The feelings of grief that you have just read about begin the moment you know someone has died. You may experience all of them or some of them. You may experience more than one feeling at the same time. This can be confusing. Feelings do not always make sense, but they are real. They are a part of who you are.

Common Grief Reactions

Physical Reactions are Natural

Lack of energy

Fatigue

Hollowness in stomach

Tightness in chest

Shortness of breath

Dry mouth

Increased noise sensitivity

Pain

Problems sleeping

Changes in appetite

Restlessness

Tension

Exhaustion

Grief can affect the way you act and think

Trouble concentrating

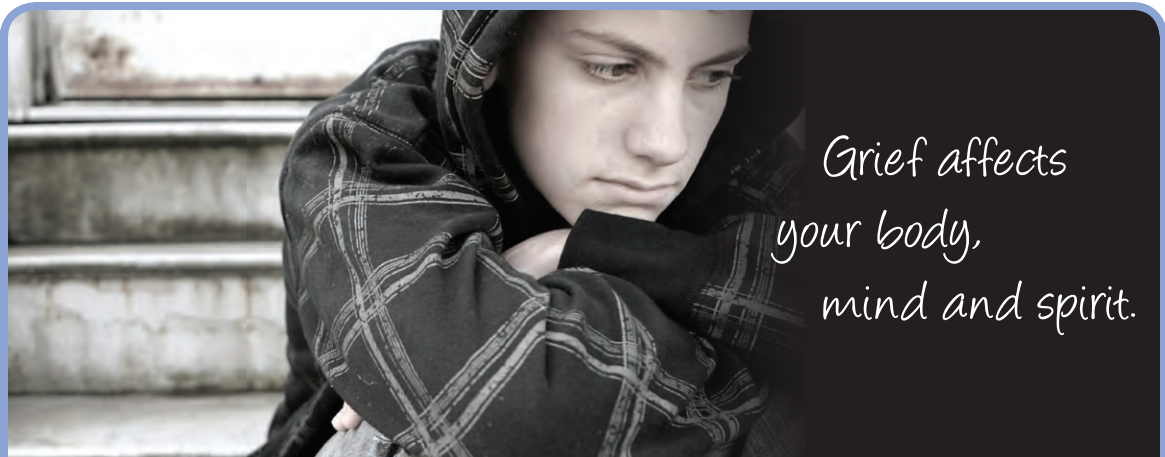
Forgetfulness

Strange dreams

Spacing out

Withdrawing

Being reckless



*Grief affects
your body,
mind and spirit.*

You may find yourself...

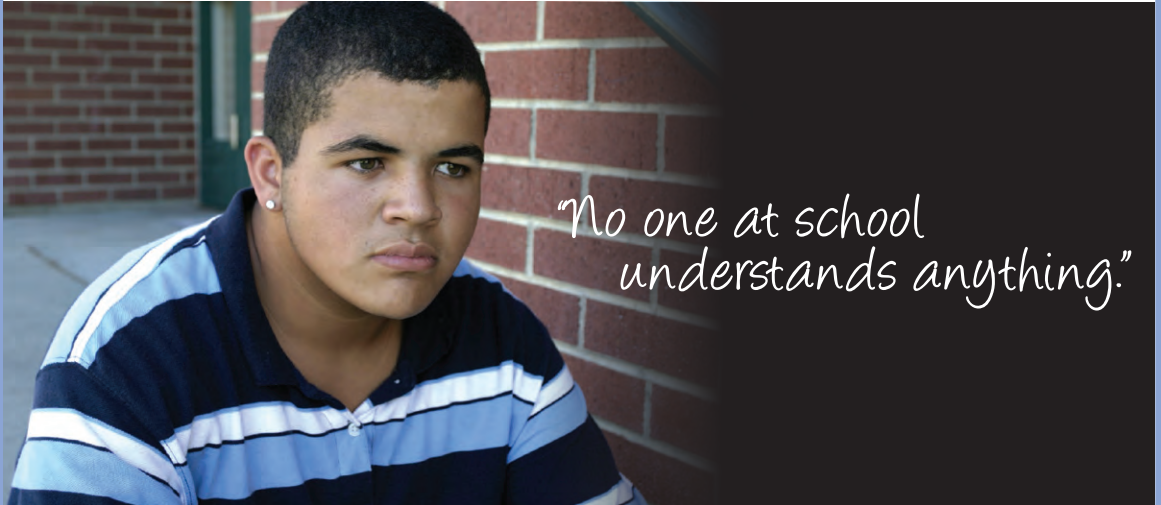
- Carrying special objects to remind you of your loved one
- Visiting the grave site
- Keeping an altar
- Keeping belongings intact
- Looking at photos
- Talking to the person who died
- Changing your daily routine

Spiritual questions may come up

- How is she?
- Where is he now?
- Why could God allow this?
- When will I die?
- Will I see her again when I die?
- What will happen to me when I die?

You're Not Alone


Sometimes it can feel like you're the only one who has lost someone. But many people your age have experienced the death of someone they love. Here's how other teenagers have described their feelings.



“I don’t think I will ever be able to walk into another hospital.”

“I feel as if dad is still here. I can’t believe he’s really gone.”

“I feel very strange. Sometimes I feel like a totally different person since my Dad died and other times, I feel like nothing has happened.”



*I always feel like crying
but I hold it back and then
I just shut down."*

*"People call the house and ask me how my mom's doing, not
how I'M doing."*

"I hate it when people say, I'm sorry."

"Will I ever feel better?"

"I just don't belong anymore - anywhere - home or at school."

"I'm jealous of friends who have a relationship with their parent."

Healing

Healing takes time and energy. There is no time line. Everyone is different. For some people it may be days or weeks, while for others it takes months or years. But slowly all the feelings that you have been experiencing begin to feel less heavy. First hours, then days will go by where you may not think about the person who has died. There will still be things that remind you of the person – a song, a favorite place you used to go together, a particular food, a time of day, a smell... and when that happens, any of the feelings of grief will come back. But with time and attention they will be less painful.

Exploring & Expressing Your Grief

The Healing Begins

There is no right way or wrong way to grieve, but there are helpful things you can do. Here are some healthy ways to explore and experience your grief.

GO AHEAD AND CRY. Tears are a natural and necessary part of grieving. They are not a sign of weakness; they are a sign that you have loved.



WRITE IT OUT.

Writing poems, stories, or your thoughts helps you to understand and connect with your feelings.



Music can help the healing



Art projects help you to honor your loved one.

MUSIC CAN HELP THE HEALING. Whether listening, playing instruments, singing, or making playlists of songs that remind you of your loved one, music can help the healing.

TALKING HELPS. Share your story, feelings, reactions, fears, and memories with friends, family and other people that you trust.

EXPRESS YOURSELF THROUGH ART. Art projects like painting, drawing, creating a Memory Book or a collage help you to honor your loved one.

GET MOVING! Physical activities like dancing, playing sports, running, jogging and exercising help release emotions.

Other Ways to Help Yourself through Grief

Give yourself permission to grieve. Some days you can handle the feelings that come up, and some days you may “fall apart.” These “ups” and “downs” are a natural reaction to loss.

GIVE IN WAYS THAT YOU CAN. Giving to others will assist you in your own healing. Consider joining a grief support group. As you benefit from the love and courage of group members, your presence and personal story will also be helpful to them.

DO NOT MAKE MAJOR DECISIONS TOO QUICKLY. Change requires lots of energy. Put that energy into taking good care of yourself.

BELIEVE IN YOURSELF. Think of all the reasons your loved one cared for you. These qualities are still present and will help you find strength and meaning in the future.

TELL PEOPLE WHAT YOU NEED. People may avoid you because they are afraid that they will say the wrong thing. If you don't feel up to talking, it's OK to let them know that. Maybe you just need them to be there. Maybe you just need a hug. When you let others know what you need, they are usually grateful and relieved.

AVOID SELF-DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIORS. It may be tempting to try to dull your pain through alcohol, drugs, or risky behaviors like reckless driving. These actions will not take your feelings of grief away and may ultimately trigger worse feelings.

BE GOOD TO YOURSELF. Get the rest you need, balanced with regular exercise and a good diet. You may not feel motivated to do these things now, but they are important for your physical and mental well-being.



Let's Connect

Sometimes it helps to talk with other people your own age who have experienced a death. Hospice of Santa Cruz County's Grief Support Program offers teen group support or individual support throughout the year. You or your family can learn more by calling Grief Support at (831) 430-3000.

You may also find it helpful to read about the journey of grief. Here are some websites that offer a variety of books and resources on grief and have specific information for teens: www.centering.org, www.compassionbooks.com



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