

## Strategies for Talking to Teens about Grief and Loss

*Tips to help you support teens struggling with grief*

- **Provide a safe space to talk, but let teens guide the conversations**
  - Let teens know that you want to talk with them about the loss but give them options about when and where you'll talk about it — even if that means dropping plans.
  - Teens may respond in ways that are flippant, selfish, inappropriately matter-of-fact, etc. Be patient and avoid doing anything to make them feel embarrassed, wrong, or ashamed.
  - Encourage them to ask questions. They may not know as much as you think they do about death.
- **Provide clear, honest, non-judgmental information about the situation**
  - Make sure you have control of your emotions when you talk to teens. Seeing caretakers distressed or inconsolable can be frightening for any young person.
  - You may have an urge to protect your teens from pain, but withholding information makes it worse for them.
  - Be thoughtful about explaining concepts like disease, suicide, and overdose. Avoid any language that could be shaming and paint the loss in a negative light.
  - Let kids know that grief is normal by sharing your own thoughts and feelings about the loss as calmly as you can, modeling how you cope with your own strong emotions.
  - Make sure they know the death was not their fault and assure them that they will continue to be cared for.
- **Try to maintain the routine, but be alert to an increase in risky behavior**
  - Teens may switch between grief and more normal behavior at the drop of a hat. They may also not start grieving until long after the loss occurred. Let them move at their pace.
  - Maintaining familiar routines and activities will help support healing and moving forward.
  - You may see an increase in pushing boundaries and taking risks. Be clear about expectations and firm about maintaining limits.
- **Seek support and provide space for remembrance and memorial**
  - Include family and friends in your support system. Let your kids know that it's fine if they feel more comfortable talking to someone else about their feelings. Make sure they have access to friends, trusted adults, and mental health professionals.
  - Some teens will want to speak at memorials, while others will want to stay away. Avoid pressuring them one way or the other and support whatever they choose.
  - Encourage them to engage in whatever type of remembrance feels good for them. This may mean looking at photos, writing a song, choreographing a dance, or having a bonfire.

The Child Mind Institute is an independent, national nonprofit dedicated to transforming the lives of children and families struggling with mental health and learning disorders. Our teams work every day to deliver the highest standards of care, advance the science of the developing brain, and empower parents, professionals and policymakers to support children when and where they need it most. Together with our supporters, we're helping children reach their full potential in school and in life. Learn more at [childmind.org](http://childmind.org).