



## **Helping Teenagers Cope with Traumatic Loss**

Grief tends to be mixed with trauma when a loss is sudden and unexpected. Grief is a normal reaction to loss, with its symptoms diminishing over time. If the loss is sudden or unexpected this natural reaction may be delayed by feelings of worry or fear, shock, and a traumatic response. There are ways to help support a teenager through these reactions and throughout the grief process.

### **Listen and Give Support**

- Explain what has happened and answer their questions honestly and truthfully
- Listen to their words and pay attention to their feelings. Watch their body language.
- Encourage teens to express their feelings and reactions so you can help them deal with all that is going on inside of them in a safe place.
- Be patient and supportive and assure them that their reactions are understandable, common and normal. Do not rush their process.
- Do not be judgmental and punitive. Teens need to feel safe with you, especially when they are feeling scared and hurt.
- Remember that anyone who experiences a traumatic loss may feel scared and vulnerable and needs to feel emotionally safe.
- Do not tell the teens how they should feel and react. Listen and support them as they share.
- Tell them what you appreciate about them. Teens need positive support after trauma or traumatic loss even more than usual.

### **Be Understanding and Accepting**

- Concentration and memory are often impaired and teens may need help getting work done.
- Understand that teens often want to be with their friends and not their families.
- Know that teens may exhibit childish, immature behaviors, regress back to earlier stages of development and then act very mature and adult.
- Remember that everyone recovers differently and that teens may seem to be fine at first and then need help later.

### **Encourage and Be Involved**

- Help teens get back into a routine as soon as possible even if they cannot do all they used to do right away. It is ok to build the routine up over time.

- Sometimes teens talk better and share more when they are doing activities such as walking, driving, games, sports, hobbies or similar activities. This is especially true for boys.
- Suggest that they can express their reactions and feelings through writing journals, art, music, drama, dance or other expressive media.
- Give them appropriate responsibilities and expect that they will fulfill them. Support them when they do and help them get on track if they don't.
- Encourage them to get involved with positive activities with other teens.

### **Be Aware and Concerned**

- Watch for changes in their behavior (eg., a usually outgoing teen becomes withdrawn or a well-behaved teen starts acting out). This may call for deeper discussions or professional intervention if it continues months.
- Teens often withdraw from everyone when they are dealing with difficult reactions. Support them, but monitor their television watching, computer time, social media and listening to music.
- Watch for signs of substance use and abuse; help them find other ways of coping.
- Statements of hopelessness and seeing no reason to keep on living by teens should be confronted in a caring, supportive discussion. Professional intervention may be needed.
- If you feel comfortable, share your own reactions appropriately.
- If you do not feel comfortable talking about death or about this particular trauma, refer the teen to someone who does.
- Take care of yourself so you can continue to help teens and be a healthy role model.

Remember: Most people who experience a traumatic loss learn coping skills and grow stronger as they feel support through the experience.

**Adapted from:**

**Association of Traumatic Stress Specialists**

**“Recognizing Standards Of Excellence In Response, Treatment And Services”**

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