



Heart 'n Home
— HOSPICE —

“Perhaps they are not stars, but rather openings in heaven where the love of our lost ones pours through and shines down upon us to let us know they are happy.”

- Eskimo Proverb



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Coping with Illness and Death *For Teenagers*

Children have been referred to as the “silent grievers.” As adults we tend to want to protect them from the pain of loss. However, that is not always possible. When a loss occurs in a child’s life, the experience can be seen as an opportunity to teach children effective coping skills and the reality is that they will experience more losses throughout their lives. Knowing how to support children through grief can be difficult, especially if you are also grieving. The following is information that can help you support the grieving children in your life.

Adolescents may have a particularly tough time with the loss of a loved one. If you think about what a teenager needs to accomplish in growing up, this is easier to understand. The task of the teenage years is to achieve a separate identity from a child’s loved ones and discover themselves as young adults. The struggles that go on between loved ones and their teenagers are a normal and necessary part of gaining a new identity.

Teenagers often behave in opposite and unpredictable ways - one day they feel independent and the next they retreat into the safety of childhood. As every parent of a teenager knows, it can be a delicate balancing act between giving a teenager enough independence to learn and experience the world while trying to protect them from what they are not yet mature enough to handle. These struggles go on in every household. Teens are old enough to know that their lives will greatly change due to their loved one’s illness and death, and they struggle to deal with this unmanageable threat. They may cope in ways that are hard for a loved one to deal with, such as refusing to talk about the illness or trying to take control. Others may adapt, try to get closer to them, and/or try to restore order to the home. As the loved one gets sicker, the teen may want to sit with them for short times each day. Some teens may want to be as far away as possible from their sick family member and thoughts about their death. Most want to spend time with the loved one, but still have some time to be a kid. It's okay for the teen to help out, but they should not be in charge of their loved one’s care.

Possible approaches for working with teenagers:

- ♥ Give detailed information about the terminal diagnosis such as the name of the cancer, symptoms, possible side effects of medicines, what they might expect, and other information if they are interested.
- ♥ Keep the teen up to date with what’s happening with the treatment. Answer all questions honestly, even as death approaches.
- ♥ Have the teen visit the loved one in the hospital. Suggest ideas

- ♥ Tell the teen's teachers, coaches, and other school staff about the family situation.
- ♥ Discuss any spiritual concerns related to illness, death, and dying.
- ♥ Explain that even though the loved ones have less time for the children during severe illness, they are still loved and valued.
- ♥ Arrange for as normal a life at home as possible.
- ♥ Don't expect the teen to take on caregiving and other difficult tasks.
- ♥ Talk with the cancer care team about your family situation and see if you can get other help.
- ♥ When possible, let the teen help choose where to go after school and have a voice in whose care they prefer when a loved one can't be there.
- ♥ The teen may feel bad about having fun when a loved one is sick or dying. Be sure that the teen knows their loved one is aware that having fun and spending time with friends are important parts of their lives, and there's no need to feel guilty about it.
- ♥ Encourage teens to keep up their usual involvement in school and other activities.
- ♥ Ask a relative or trusted friend to take a special interest in each teen in your family.
- ♥ Teens may try to protect loved ones by trying to hide their sadness, anger, or fears. Check in with your teens often and let them know that everyone has feelings that can be confusing and overwhelming. Tell the teen it's okay to ask you questions and express feelings that they think might upset others.

Teens have a grown-up understanding of death and what it means. After a loved one dies, some teens cry or get very angry, while others want to spend time alone. Some need to be around friends and talk. The teen needs to know that there is no right way or wrong way to grieve and they can deal with it in their own way. There will be a lot of changes, though. It helps to keep a regular routine with friends, activities, and school.

Because of the turbulent nature of this stage of growth, a loved one's death during the teen years can result in difficulty for the child to achieve an identity separate from the loved one. This doesn't mean the child is forever damaged, but that it will be important for them to have relationships with other adults so they can continue to develop a sense of self. The teen may regret arguments with the loved one, disobedience, and other issues. There may be guilt over what the teen said or didn't say to them. Sometimes it helps for the teen to write a letter to the loved one saying all these things they didn't say before, and all the things they want to say to their loved one now. For many teens, it helps to talk to an adult who can listen without judging them. There are also support groups and websites that are just for teens - these can be valuable as safe outlets for feelings and good sources of support and encouragement.



*"We acquire the strength
we have overcome."*

Ralph Waldo Emerson