



the sunflower project

bereavement support for young people

When somebody close to you dies or is seriously ill, life can be tough. Many children and young people have found it helps to talk to someone who understands.

Information Sheet: For a parent or carer of a bereaved young person

How young people grieve?

Adolescence is a time of great changes, teenagers are developing their own identity and emotions run high. Part of growing up is becoming independent and this is often a time of conflict with loved ones. If a family member dies during this unsettled period feelings can be confusing and unbearable. Grief and shock cut people off from one another and it can be hard to empathise with each other's feelings. The bereaved can try to protect others from how they are feeling when talking about things could really help.

Common reactions include:

- Shock/disbelief 'it doesn't seem real' or 'I just feel numb'
- Anxiety - 'what's going to happen next?' or 'how will we manage now?'
- Sleep difficulties
- Physical health complaints and appetite changes
- Anger - it is not always obvious what the cause is but it is natural to feel it
- Guilt / regret 'I should have....' or 'if only I hadn't....'
- Sadness and longing
- School problems 'I can't concentrate.' or 'they don't know what to say to me.'
- Apparent lack of feeling or detachment
- Deterioration in relationships

Warning: If these behaviours continue beyond the first few weeks or you are concerned by their risk taking behaviours or suicidal thoughts seek advice from your GP or call the Sunflower Project.



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How can I help?

The most important thing an adult can give a grieving teenager is to be there. Encourage them to talk, notice how they are behaving, be honest about what has happened and how you are feeling? Well-meaning neighbors or thoughtless friends can reveal cover ups and damage trust. Feelings of grief can be overwhelming and frightening to anyone, the young person can be reassured that this is normal if you talk about it. Crying is a natural response to grief, many grieve privately but try to accept that tears can be helpful. Equally, shock can mean that the tears do not come and this can be alarming. Don't try to fix their pain, you can't. Let them feel included, involved and that they are not alone.

Talk to the young person, school may be a haven of normality that they want to get back to or it may be the next step they are dreading. Contact the school about the return, perhaps a friend can meet up to go back, do they want their teacher to explain to the class? Ask the school to notify you if the young person is struggling with work and find ways to for increased support.

Encourage the young person to seek outside support and don't feel rejected if they turn to someone beyond the family. Sometimes they don't want to add to the burden or are afraid of what you may think. Sign post to sources of support such as the [App For young people - from Child Bereavement UK](#) and websites: [Help 2 Make Sense – Supporting for young people following a bereavement – From Winston's Wish](#) or [Hope Again](#). If they want to talk to someone suggest The Sunflower Project at The HUB.



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When someone has died young people need to:

- Be listened to - what are their worries
- Participate in goodbye rituals
- Talk about the person who died
- Make a memory box or book
- Know that grief will diminish over time but their loved one will always be important
- Find ways to express feelings e.g. physical exercise, art, writing, hitting a cushion
- Prepare for anniversaries, birthdays etc. to remember the person who has died

Useful information is available at [Support for bereaved children - Child Bereavement UK](#)

Understanding of Death:

Young people have an adult understanding of death and express their grief in adult like ways. They recognise that life will never be the same and may dread being different from their peers.

As you people mature their understanding of death will change. it is not unusual for the to revisit their loss with more questions.

Everyone is different, some will cope best by talking to the family about their feelings and loss, others prefer someone independent from their nearest and dearest. Many enjoy getting together in a group setting to realise that they are not the only ones. In a bereavement group young people can; explore and normalise difficult feelings, share what helps and have some fun with people who can really understand.