

Helping Teens with Traumatic Grief: Tips for Caregivers

Each teen grieves in unique ways. After a sudden or violent death some teens may develop traumatic grief responses and have difficulty coping. Here are ways to recognize and help your teen with traumatic grief. Being nonjudgmental, open to compromise and considering your teen’s point of view are important.

I WANT YOU TO KNOW THAT:	YOU CAN HELP ME WHEN YOU:
1. I may feel sad, scared, empty, or numb but be embarrassed to show my true feelings. Yet, I may say too much on social media.	1. Say that it is painful when someone you care about dies. Talk about your own feelings and invite me to talk about mine once I’m ready. Discuss sharing things on social media. Offer to find me a counselor if it seems easier for me to talk to someone outside the family.
2. I might have behavior problems that are new or worse than before the trauma (angry outbursts, irritability, rule breaking, revenge seeking). I may be doing serious, unsafe, or harmful behaviors (self-injury, risky sexual behavior, drug or alcohol use).	2. Have patience and try to remain calm while setting appropriate limits on behaviors. Encourage me to get back to routines and activities with friends. For serious, risky, or harmful behaviors, get professional help.
3. I have trouble concentrating and paying attention or have a change in sleep patterns, such as staying up later or sleeping in all day.	3. Realize that I may be having scary thoughts about the trauma and not tell you. Talk with me about ways to cope with these, like getting back to enjoyable activities or listening to calming music. Taking a technology break at night will help me to sleep better.
4. Have physical reactions like jumpiness, stomach aches, headaches, a pounding heart, or body aches. These may be worse after being around people, places, sounds, situations or other things that remind him of the trauma or the person who died	4. Recognize that I may minimize these physical reactions—or do the opposite—exaggerate a minor ailment or injury. Encourage me to use physical activities to release tension or try relaxing things, like deep breathing or gentle stretching.
5. I may think that life is meaningless, feel guilty for being okay, or withdraw from family and friends—yet retreat to social media or gaming.	5. Discuss solutions for feeling sad and mention that, while social media can be helpful, I may feel better seeing friends in person. Check with other adults I may confide in to discuss ways to support me. If I seem very sad or guilty, seek professional help.
6. Sometimes I wonder if something bad will happen to me or that other important people in my life. I may express this by appearing anxious or worried or seeming not to care about the future (not studying, skipping school), or risk-taking behavior.	6. Help me develop a realistic picture of the dangers in life. Talk about ways for me to take control of my safety and future (e.g. driving carefully, eating well and exercising, asking others for help).
7. I may talk about feeling responsible for the death.	7. Give honest, accurate, and age-appropriate information. Teens get information from all kinds of media, so let me know you will always tell me the truth. If I feel responsible, reassure me to not worry; that I did the best I could at the time.
8. Sometimes I might not want to talk about the person who died. I may try to change or reject the topic (“leave me alone”), or shrug it off. I may hide my discomfort and act as if nothing bothers me or as if I’m is doing fine.	8. Realize that I may think that talking about the trauma or the person who died will upset you Even if you feel rejected, do stay involved with me and know where I am and what I’m is doing. I need your presence more than ever.
9. I might refuse to go places or do things that remind me of the person who died, or of how my life has changed since the person died.	9. Understand that I may be overwhelmed by upsetting feelings, but want to look strong or act as if nothing is wrong. This may be a sign of traumatic grief, and a professional can help.
10. I may not want to talk about or remember good things about the person who died because it brings up reminders of the traumatic death.	10. Keep pictures of the person who died around for me to see. Tell me stories about the person and make me a memory book so I can keep the person in my mind and my heart.

If any of these problems get in the way of your teen’s functioning at school or home, or continue more than 1-2 months, get help from a mental health professional who has experience treating children and teens with trauma or traumatic grief.