

What is Grief? Tips for Teens

You might be wondering, *what is grief?* Grief is what you feel when you experience a loss. There are many types of loss that we experience throughout life; some are concrete (death, divorce, illness/disability, etc.) and others more abstract (loss of childhood, freedom, innocence, etc.). Because death isn't something that is a popular topic of conversation, if you find yourself suddenly impacted by it, you may have no idea what to expect. When you experience a significant loss you may feel totally alone and wonder if what you're going through is normal. Know that *grief is a natural reaction* that everyone has or will go through at some point in their lives. Here are a few tips to help clear some things up during what might be difficult time:

1. **Grief is not just sadness.** There are no limits to the feelings you might experience when you are grieving. Besides feeling sad, some people feel shocked, abandoned, confused, angry, lonely, afraid, guilty, anxious or happy. There are no feelings that everyone feels or an order in which you have to feel them. It helps to acknowledge what you are feeling and why you feel that way.
2. **Everyone's grief is different.** No two people experience loss in the exact same way. People may assume that they know what you are going through or suggest what you should do or feel, but only you know what is right for you. While there are general time frames and feelings for what many people experience, there is no right or wrong way to grieve.
3. **Avoid clichés.** After someone close to you has died, you may hear things that annoy you like "you need to be strong", "everything will be okay", "you're the man/woman of the house now" and "(the person who died) wouldn't want you to cry", just to name a few. These clichés are common myths that people may tell you when trying to offer comfort or support. Hearing these things may make you feel guilty about or ashamed of the way you really feel. It's okay to not "be strong" or to not feel like "everything will be okay".
4. **You don't "get over" it.** Another popular cliché is "you'll get over it". Whether someone says this directly or indirectly by asking why you are still sad two months after the person died, it can be very discouraging. Know that you will never "get over," "move past," or "move on" from what has happened because that person and your experience will always be a part of you. But that doesn't mean you will always feel the same way you felt right after it happened.
5. **Acknowledge the "if only's."** Whether someone dies suddenly or after a long illness, there are always "if only" feelings of guilt or regret that run through our minds. Some examples are: "If only I had made him go to the doctor..." "If only I hadn't let her leave the house..." "If only we hadn't gotten into that fight..." "If only I had said I love you one last time..." It is important to acknowledge these thoughts. Just because you have them doesn't mean that you did something wrong- they are a normal part of loss and it is important to talk about them.
6. **Tell your story.** Talk about the person or what happened if and when you are ready to someone you trust who will listen. Tell or write it as many times as you want. Sometimes getting something out of our thoughts and into words or on paper can help us to feel better or see things in new ways.

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7. Allow yourself to seek and receive support. Grief isn't an illness, so it's not necessary to seek "treatment." That being said, what we can benefit from now and during any difficult time, is support from other people. Some people feel that they get enough support from their friends and family, while others may see a counselor or attend a support group. You may need support in school, too. Be in touch with teachers, guidance counselors, social workers and/or administrators in your school who may be able to support you.

8. Allow yourself to explore "big questions." Sometimes a death makes us think more about things such as: Why do people die? Is there an afterlife? If so, what is it like? What does "spirituality" mean to me? Does the person who died understand what I'm going through now? Can I communicate with him/her? You may not always get clear answers to your questions, but it's okay to ask them and to think about them and discuss them with others who support you – especially other grieving teens.

9. Stay connected. Talk about the person who died to other people. Use their name. Share things that you remember about them. Write letters. Visit the cemetery or another special place. Celebrate their birthday or do something special the day they died. Cook or bake something that they made for you or enjoyed. Allow yourself to stay connected to the person any way that you like as they will always be a part of you.