

How to Help Your Teen Cope With the Death of a Friend

Here are some ways you can be there for your child.

FOR TEENS, FRIENDSHIPS are extremely important, and losing a friend can feel like losing a close family member. Death can be a reminder of how unfair and short life can be.

If you're faced with needing to comfort a mourning teen, the first thing to note is that you have something your child doesn't: experience. Draw on your life experiences and use the following strategies to help your teen cope with a friend's death:

Say something. Don't let the fear of not knowing what to say keep you from saying anything at all. When reaching out to your teen, steer clear of giving advice. Your teen will have a unique way of coping that may be very different from how you mourn. Also, your teen will have a personal pathway to healing. Your inclination may be to rush the process to help your teen feel better, but life doesn't work that way. Your teen knows you can't change things, but your love and support will go a long way toward helping your child heal.

Be present in the silence, too. Though it's important to speak with your teen when he or she is dealing with loss, don't rush to fill in silent moments with words. There may be times when your teen doesn't want to talk at all, and that's perfectly normal. However, don't take your child's silence as a cue to leave. Rather, give your teen a hug, hold hands or offer a tissue. Being present amid silence can be extremely therapeutic. Just quietly sitting with your teen through the pain can speak volumes to how much you care.

Ensure their basic needs are met. Self-care is extremely important, especially during difficult times. The body needs sleep and nutrients to survive and recuperate. Unfortunately, sleep and a proper diet are often forsaken during difficult times. Sleep recharges your brain, but according to the National Alliance for Grieving Children, 39 percent of teens report having trouble sleeping after the death of a loved one. When teens don't get enough sleep, it can affect their memory, mood and judgement. Being physically healthy can help one better cope with emotional upheaval.

Encourage your teen to connect with friends as well. Developmentally, teens are in the process of emotionally separating from their families and are more apt to seek solace with other teens. It's no surprise that teens like to congregate, and that may be a healthy way for them to cope as well. Encourage your teen to invite a few friends over, and allow them space and time to express their hurt and pain. This simple gesture of pulling together a circle of friends can help your teen open up and express feelings that may otherwise remain unspoken.

Ride the roller coaster of emotions. Many teenagers have little experience with death and may not know how to ask for help. After a friend dies, youth are faced with the reality of death and their own mortality. Teens may not know how to verbally express the hurt and pain, so their grief may come out in the form of disbelief, angry outbursts, alcohol or substance use, physical altercations, or risky and dangerous behaviors.

Though it's normal for a teen to experience a wide range of emotions following the death of a close friend or family member, be on the lookout for unhealthy coping patterns. In time, your teen's emotions should begin to level out.

Honor memories. Remembering and honoring the person who died by keeping photos or special trinkets that belonged to the person can be helpful to your teen. You can also encourage your teen to think of innovative ways to honor the friend's life. For example, is there a cause or event that the friend was passionate about to which you and your teen can contribute? Are there medical expenses or funeral arrangements that the family may need help with? If so, perhaps orchestrating a fundraiser for the family would help. Doing something good when one feels helpless can promote healthy coping.

When a friend dies it is life changing. However, in tragedy beauty can emerge, and once the pain subsides, your teen may look back and be extremely grateful that you were there each step of the way.