

Adolescents (Ages 13-18)

When Illness or Death Happens in a Family

Adolescents are experiencing many changes and losses as part of their natural development as they struggle between wanting to be independent and fearing separation. When they experience illness or death of family or friends they are even more overwhelmed in their search for identity. We can help them find the understanding, guidance, and support they need to deal with the uncertainty of life.

What they may be FEELING

- They may be angry. They may get upset easier and about things that didn't bother them before.
- They may feel highly self-conscious about being different in their grief, and therefore have a need to protect their vulnerability in public and private.
- They may believe that showing their feelings is a sign of weakness.
- They have an awareness of their feelings and may experience them intensely. They may feel out of control and unsure of what to do or where to turn for support.
- They may have contradictory feelings: wanting to be independent versus needing supportive people in their life; wanting to open up but being sensitive to how others may respond.
- They may be scared. They may worry about other people getting sick or dying. They may feel like their life and world is uncertain and need more reassurance.
- They may feel guilty for things they said or did when the person was sick or feel responsible somehow.
- They may feel lonely and as if no one understands how they feel and what they are experiencing.

How they may be BEHAVING

- Their grief can be complicated by normal adolescent development including need for more independence, withdrawing from family activities.
- Difficulty in school: grades, behaviors, or interactions with peers and/or faculty.
- In the school setting, teens may be able to distract from the pain they are experiencing and do better in school.
- They may withdraw from friends, family, and/or usual activities as a response to the changes they are experiencing.
- Their moods and behavior may change more often and unexpectedly.
- They may sometimes act like nothing happened and do not want to talk or express emotions.
- Increased crying because of the sadness, stress, or changes that are happening.
- Changes in their sleep including sleeplessness, increased need for sleep, or dreams/nightmares.
- Physical complaints – stomach aches, nausea, emptiness inside, or headaches.
- May experience difficulty concentrating, staying focused, and completing tasks at home, school, or work.
- Increased irritability.
- They may have more responsibility or different roles in the home.
- May engage in high risk behaviors (use of alcohol, drugs, dangerous driving, promiscuity)

What they may be THINKING

- They have a more adult understanding of illness and death and have the ability to talk about what they are thinking.
- They will be influenced by the emotions and responses of those around them, especially in the home or at school.
- They have more abstract thinking and understand that death is final and inevitable.
- They will examine the purpose and meaning of life while formulating their own personal values and beliefs.
- They want to understand what is happening and may ask more questions. They may need to be included and informed by the adults around them. Or, they may have a greater need for privacy or peer support to sort out their thoughts and feelings around the loss.

Page 2 ... Adolescents (13-18)
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How you can help

- Try to be patient with the inconsistent or contradictory thoughts and feelings.
- Remember the changes in their feelings, thoughts, and behaviors are to be expected and often common.
- Be aware of sleeping and eating patterns.
- Be available as a supportive listener honoring their unique grief process.
- Be present, without judgment, to their expression of feelings and thoughts as they naturally occur.
- Give choices about involvement in visits, appointments, and death and mourning rituals.
- It's okay to share your own experience of grief, whether its through discussion or emotional expression.
- Answer their questions about the illness or death truthfully.
- Gather information on local peer support groups available.
- Your religious and spiritual beliefs may help them understand or explain the illness or death.

When to Get Help

- When there are concerns with eating, sleeping, and/or moods that begin to affect their physical and mental health.
- When they become extremely withdrawn or aggressive and this affects their ability to function at home and/or school.
- When they say or do anything to harm themselves or someone else.
- When they engage in high risk behaviors (use of alcohol, drugs, dangerous driving, promiscuity)
- When they ask or feel they need someone (counselor) to talk to about their experience.
- When death or illness happens it is a normal and healthy response to seek counseling. You don't need to wait for something to happen before you get additional help for yourself and your children.

Where to Get Help/Resources

- For any health related concerns, contact your pediatrician or doctor.
- In any emergency call 911 or go to your local emergency room.
- For counseling and resources related to long term illness or grief and loss call Pathways Hospice at 970-663-3500.
- For counseling in the community specific to an illness talk to your hospital counselor or social worker for local community resources. United Way 211 has a list of community resources by topic. Dial 211 from your phone to contact them or search on line at www.211colorado.org.
- To search for a local counselor in your area go to www.healthinfosource.com.
- Contact your health insurance or EAP (Employee Assistance Program) through your Human Resources Department at work to find out about benefits for counseling services for you and your family.