

# the guide to helping teens grieve



a resource provided by: **VISITING NURSE**  
HEALTH SYSTEM



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# intro: the guide to helping teens grieve

“Being me is hard enough,”  
feel many teens. They  
have growing bodies,  
changing hormones and peer  
pressure that is unique to this time  
in history.

To make matters even more  
difficult, add in complicated  
emotions due to the death of  
a friend, family member, pet or  
maybe even a celebrity they  
idolize. Suddenly, it becomes easy  
to see how being a teen living with  
grief is one of the most challenging  
life experiences one can imagine.

Don't despair however, as teens  
can also successfully navigate

grief given healthy tools to choose  
from...and this is where we can  
help you.

We're not here to steer you in any  
one direction as you parent and  
care for your grieving teen. You  
know your child best, even if you  
don't feel like it some days.

Our goal here is to present you  
with resources so that you can  
help your teen.

We truly believe that together, we  
can help to make the experience  
of grief and loss one of hope and  
transformation, though obviously  
the journey will be difficult at times.

By the way, in case you didn't see it already, there is also a booklet available titled, "The Guide To Helping Children Grieve" as you may have both teens and younger children in the same household. In these booklets, we hope you'll use the content as a framework for helping your teen.

It's important to remember though, that there is no "standard" for how teens grieve, even within the same biological family. Therefore, any answers you provide to your grieving teen should be tailored to his or her level of comprehension, age and maturity level. Also, we encourage you to reach out to a grief professional, your child's teacher, guidance counselor or his or her physician for help and support.

In closing, it's our hope that you'll try to be patient with your grieving teen and yourself as well. It truly is possible that you may grow closer because of the grief experience --- though at times you may feel that's an improbability! Remember, our children, regardless of age, deserve as much compassion, love and gentle support as we can muster, regardless of what we as grieving adults may be going through. It's often how we react, guide and mentor them throughout these early experiences that can set a framework for how they will grieve subsequent losses.

Never forget, one caring person can make a tremendous difference in the life of a grieving teen. Thank you for what you're doing to help heal the grief of the child in your life.

# your teen is not alone: statistics on teens and grief

by Dianne Gray

**“DEATH IS UNIVERSAL, BUT GRIEF, ESPECIALLY TO CHILDREN IS UNIQUE AND PERSONAL.”**

*Dianne Gray | Author, Palliative Care Advocate*

By the time your child is a teen, he or she may have experienced the death of a friend, family member, pet, or neighbor. In many cities, death is something teens witness and fear. Every day, parents, teachers and the media share news of lives lost, whether it was due to natural disaster, terrorism, illness or accident. Feelings of isolation can occur and for many teens, that can lead to profound sadness or anger. He or she may feel that no one else has experienced what they're going through and grief may make your teen feel as if he or she is "different" and standing out in a crowd.

However, it may help you to see that your grieving teen is hardly alone when it comes to experiencing the death of someone they care for or having feelings of loss.

## **Just The Facts: Death and Loss Experienced By Children & Teens**

- In a study of 11 to 16 year olds, 78% reported that at least one of their close relatives had died. (Harrison & Harrington, 2001)
- In a poll of 1,000 high school juniors and seniors, 90% indicated that they had experienced the death of a loved one. ([nahic.ucsf.edu/downloads/Mortality.pdf](http://nahic.ucsf.edu/downloads/Mortality.pdf))
- One in every 1,500 secondary school students dies each year. ([nahic.ucsf.edu/downloads/Mortality.pdf](http://nahic.ucsf.edu/downloads/Mortality.pdf))
- 1 in 5 children will experience the death of someone close to them by age 18 (Kenneth Doka, Editor of OMEGA, Journal of Death and Dying)
- It is estimated that 73,000 children die every year in the US. Of those, 83% have surviving siblings. (Torbic, H. "Children and Grief: But What About The Children?" Home Healthcare Nurse. 2011; 29(2):67-69)
- 1.5 million children are living in a single-parent household because of the death of one parent. (Owens, D. "Recognizing the Needs of Bereaved Children in Palliative Care," Journal of Hospice & Palliative Nursing. 2008; 10:1)
- 1 of 20 children aged fifteen and younger will suffer the loss of one or both parents. These statistics don't account for the number of children who lose a parental figure, such as a grandparent or other relative who provides care. (Owens, D. "Recognizing the Needs of

Bereaved Children in Palliative Care,” Journal of Hospice & Palliative Nursing. 2008; 10:1)

Grieving In Schools: Nationwide Survey Among Classroom Teachers on Childhood Bereavement; Conducted by New York Life Foundation & American Federation of Teachers, 2012

**Classroom teachers report that students who have lost a parent or guardian typically exhibit:**

- Difficulty concentrating in class (observed by 87% of teachers)
- Withdrawal/disengagement and less class participation (observed by 82%)
- Absenteeism (observed by 72%)
- Decrease in quality of work (observed by 68%)
- Less reliability in turning in assignments (observed by 66%)
- 69% of teachers currently have at least one student in their class(es) who have lost a parent, guardian, sibling or close friend in the past year.

\*For more information go to: [www.ChildrensGriefAwarenessDay.com](http://www.ChildrensGriefAwarenessDay.com)

Why share this information with you? To help all understand that the children in our midst need and deserve quality bereavement care. They deserve to be heard, understood and loved.



# **grief: pre-teen & teen development**

by Dianne Gray

Because adolescents and teens vary so widely in development, cognitive ability, awareness and more, included here is a basic outline of what each age group understands and what his or her grief reactions may be. Also included are first step solutions so you have a place to start from.

This is not an inclusive list by all means, but it is a guideline to start from. You, your child's physician, teachers and grief professionals are all important members of a network of individuals who can help your teen process and cope with his or her grief. Remember, grief can also help your teen in positive ways and as much as he or she may not want your input, it is valuable and important. Love and compassion are part of the healing mix for any grieving individual, regardless of age.

## **10 TO 13 YEARS OF AGE**

### *Understanding of death:*

- Death is very personal
- Child has a realistic view of death
- Similar to those above for 6-10 year olds except more in depth

### *Grief reactions of children 6 to 10 years of age:*

- May worry he or she is to blame in some way for the death

- May experience separation anxiety and need affection but may feel embarrassed by it.
- May lose manual skills
- Grades may fail
- May emotionally separate from the ones they love as a defense mechanism & as a feeling of self-preservation
- Sexual promiscuity
- Compulsive behavior
- Nightmares
- Truancy
- Secretiveness
- Antisocial behavior
- Destructive behavior

***First step solutions:***

- Attempt several shorter conversations, respecting attempts to push you away.
- Respect differences in grieving style. You may be open and conversant. Your child may not be.
- Your child may attempt to heal through “doing” activities and then may attempt to converse with you. Respect his or her “way.”
- Explain that each person’s grief is unique.
- Discuss that they will enjoy life again and it is okay to feel happy again.
- Please give permission for them to feel whatever they are feeling so the emotions can be shared and the grief ultimately healed.
- Be honest yet respectful with age-appropriate discussion
- Find healthy ways to remember the deceased without idealizing this person (putting him or her on a pedestal).

## **TEEN YEARS**

### ***Understanding of death:***

- More adult thought processes evident
- Complete understanding of the permanence of death
- He or she may ponder the seeming injustice of death
- He or she may seem adult-like in the understanding of death but may not yet be able to understand other more philosophical aspects of death
- Teens may question fate as a part of the life experience

### ***Grief reactions of teens:***

- Isolation in an attempt to shield friends and other family members from seeing his or her feelings
- Self-medicating via drugs, alcohol or via overeating in an attempt to numb feelings of grief
- Feelings may be very intense
- Teen may emotionally regress
- Teen may take on additional chores, work to “step up” and replace deceased family member
- Physical changes may occur due to stress: skin issues, weight issues (gain or loss)
- Forgetfulness
- Truancy
- Resistance to discipline
- Secretiveness
- Staying away or running away from home
- Compulsive behavior
- Sexual promiscuity
- Poor performance at school

- Insomnia or sleeping too much
- Destructive behavior
- Resentment of authority
- Anger or rage may erupt unexpectedly, leaving the teen surprised at his or her own behavior
- Nightmares

***First step solutions:***

- As much as possible, maintain routines and rituals while also allowing your teen space to explore his or her own feelings
- Attempt several shorter conversations rather than one long, intense one
- Remember teens are not adults; They are still maturing and should be respected as such
- Physical touch is important but ask permission first
- Encourage interaction with his or her friends, if it seems to help
- Ask specific questions like: “What do you miss most about your (friend/mother/father/brother who died)?”
- Avoid vague questions such as, “How are you?”
- Share specific memories to open conversation; “I remember the time we...”

# helping teens grieve

by Dianne Gray

**1. Grief is natural.** One grieves because he or she feels a connection to another being. Therefore, grief is a natural reaction to death. What feels unnatural to teens is a lack of control: of emotions, thoughts and the physical manifestations of grief. Grieving feels scary and quite honestly, overwhelming to many teens. The more you and those around your teen can remind him or her that grief is normal and healthy, the more supported your teen will feel and the more healthy the grief experience will be.

**2. Grief is as individual as your DNA.** Your teen probably feels (quite strongly at times) that no one else in the world is like him or her. In a way, your teen is correct. The more we acknowledge that he or she is indeed, going through a unique grief experience, the more respected your teen will feel. However, we can also point out that there are some similarities to feeling grief and loss—and in that we are all united. You can share that just like no two pregnancies are the same and incredibly babies are born, keeping in mind that unique, individual process... people die -- and we celebrate birth and mourn death around the world. It's "how" we go through those experiences that makes us all unique.

**3. Grief affects the entire being: mind, body and spirit.** It's helpful for your teen to hear that grief will impact his or her body physically as many feel queasy, lethargic, sleepy, teary, amped up, humorous and/or all of the above at different times, which is terribly confusing to teens who really like the idea of being in control. It's important, too, to explain that any two people, even those in the same biological family, may react completely differently to grief.

**4. There is no textbook method on how to grieve...no single concept of the right and wrong way to grieve.** We wish we could offer up a textbook to make it easier on all of us, but one doesn't exist. All we can offer you are guidelines that may help you and your loved one. Yet, therein lies the beauty of the situation. Possibly you have a grieving teen who wants to exert his or her own ideals on how to navigate the emotional and physical manifestations of grief. So where can you help? By providing insight into healthy options for living with loss. You can also help by modeling these healthy opportunities yourself. Furthermore, you can keep reinforcing the concept that coping with loss of any kind means making a lot of individual choices. Some are helpful and healthy and others may not be.

What's healthy? Journaling, time with trusted friends, advocacy, creating art as an emotional outlet, talking, exercising, cooking and more. What's not? Drugs, alcohol, promiscuity, long-term emotional withdrawal, holding feelings inside....anything that further stuffs emotions down as a way of not facing what has occurred: devastating loss.

**5. Death and your teen's "timeline" of life:** For many teens, the death of a friend, family member or even a celebrity places an indelible

“mark” on the timeline of his or her life. What does that mean? It means that in the future, your teen may review his or her life in terms of “before the person’s death” or “after the person’s death.” Why is this important to understand? Because you, as a central figure in your teen’s life need to remain aware that they may see themselves as a victim of loss—that something horrible has happened to him or her and your teen may think they’re on a downward slide because they don’t yet have the ability to see the potential uptick that can occur as a result of grief and loss. What’s a positive life skill your teen can learn a result of going through the grief process: the ability to make empowered, healthy choices for change. It’s up to you to consistently remind your teen that grief is filled with opportunities to make positive choices that will impact how they grieve in the future.

**6. How one grieves is impacted by many factors. It’s okay to trust that your teen is grieving differently than his or her friends. What are some of the differences that may impact your teen’s grief style?**

- Who’s around to help your teen? Friends, family, church community, neighbors, teachers or grief counselors?
- Circumstances of the death: How, where & when the person died
- Did your teen find the body? If so, look for info on traumatic grief
- Was your teen in a healthy relationship with the person that died? Was the relationship abusive, filled with conflict? Was there something left unsaid?
- Was the teen part of the dying process in some way? Did he or she get to say goodbye?
- The physical, emotional and spiritual “age” of the teen make a difference
- Has your teen had a previous experience with death?

- Has your teen experienced any type of loss previously?
- Each factor has no right or wrong response. What matters is how you would like to progress moving forward, with healthy, positive options as guideposts.

**7. Remember and reinforce: Grief is a process.** It changes in its intensity and its ability to impact the day's productivity. Remind your teen that very few days will feel alike and that's okay.

**8. Finally: Remind your teen it is okay to laugh, smile and have a good day in spite of the loss of a loved one.** Remind him or her that grief is much like the weather: some days it rains—hard -- and we may cry or sob unexpectedly. Other days, the sun shines so brightly. We may smile and have great moments. Yet most days, clouds pass by allowing sun, shade and maybe even brief bit of rain. Grief is a lot like that. It's part of the natural cycle of life.



# myths about grieving teens

by Dianne Gray

**Myth: Teens naturally “get over” the loss of a loved one.**

*Fact:* Teens are complex, intuitive, growing beings. They grieve deeply and are usually quite resilient. They can adapt to loss and shifts in identity (for ex: if an older sibling died and they are now the oldest child in the household). However, while it is natural to feel grief, teens may vary wildly in their desire to understand the grief process. Powerful feelings of sadness, anger, guilt, frustration and additionally, the physical manifestations of grief, can be confusing to anyone, especially a teen.

**Myth: Children and teens need less time to grieve and mourn than adults.**

*Fact:* That’s not necessarily true. Children and teens love with all of their hearts, which means they also grieve deeply. Full consideration should be given to understanding that some teens may be the size of adults but they still need and deserve guidance and support throughout their grief journey.

**Myth: Grief occurs in predictable, orderly stages.**

*Fact:* Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, psychiatrist and author wrote about “the Five Stages” in her book,

On Death and Dying. She said, “People are not robots. They do not go through stages in an orderly fashion. People can go through all, none or some of the stages (denial, anger, depression, bargaining, acceptance). Grief is not an orderly, neat and tidy experience. In fact, it can feel quite “messy.”

**Myth: Teens don’t really grieve and mourn to the depth adults do.**

*Fact:* Any living being can experience grief because they love and love is not measurable. So yes, teens can experience deep, painful mourning.

**Myth: Teens aren’t affected by the grief of adults around them.**

*Fact:* Of course, they are. Adults often hide conversations about the death of a loved one or the ensuing sadness, which only confuses teens who are naturally perceptive and intuitive...though

they may not discuss their feelings or their sadness because they don’t want to make anyone else even more sad.

**Myth: Teens who experience a traumatic loss in their childhood don’t function well as adults.**

*Fact:* Most teens are resilient and do well provided they receive counseling and have access to mentors, resources and/or others who surround them with love and support.

**Myth: Teens are better off if they don’t attend funerals.**

*Fact:* Teens often want to go to the funeral of someone they love. In fact, most teenagers understand social structure, feelings of deep friendship and the responsibility that comes with relationships. Attempting to shield your teen from sorrow by saying that “funerals are sad,” may go against the innate responsibility he or she feels

toward his group of friends or his love of another. Funerals can also provide a teen the opportunity to say “goodbye” to their loved one and can also provide the opportunity to express their love to others about the deceased.

**Myth: Grieving boys don’t need to cry while grieving.**

*Fact:* This is an outdated theory. Boys and girls both cry as a normal, healthy expression of emotion and should be encouraged to express feelings of

sadness and grief. Unexpressed emotions and pent up grief can lead to physical and emotional issues. Encourage your child to cry by explaining that you, too, cry when you are sad. Also, understand that your son may need different ways to express his or her grief. While you may wish to sit and “talk it all out,” your grieving son may prefer to talk while playing a sport, fishing, hiking or playing a video game.

# parenting a grieving teen

by Dianne Gray

This may be one of the most difficult times of your entire life, yet it may also be one of the most rewarding. Why? In parenting a grieving teen, you may be challenged in ways you didn't know possible but with that, comes the opportunity for amazing growth and close connection with your son or daughter.

**How to navigate these difficult days, weeks and months? Here are a few basic pointers along with a few resources to help you out along the way:**

Is your discussion with your teen based on a rational or irrational fear? In your teen's quest for a certain amount of freedom, he or she may push back a bit harder than usual following the death of a loved one. In many cases, you

may have lost the person, too, which of course, creates a fear of loss in you, as well. Ask yourself this question: "Am I reacting out of fear that I may lose my child, too?" If that's the case, say so. Discuss your feelings with your teen. You may build a bridge of communication.

Timing is everything. Try to wait until you and your teen have time together – just the two of you, before discussing his or her grief. Most likely, your teen may not want to open up in front of his or her friends but may really want to talk to you when no one else is listening.

If timing is everything, your tone of voice is a close second. Grief can heighten everyone's emotions. People's feelings are right at the surface and it can be difficult to

understand what you should and should not say to your grieving teen. What makes a difference? Tone. If you practice staying calm and choose your timing, you stand a good chance of creating opportunities for healing.

Try having conversations about the loss of your teen's friend or loved one, a little at a time. Why? The feelings of teens can run deep which means grief can be physically exhausting to your teen. Big, long discussions can make anyone tired. So remember to have shorter conversations, more frequently.

Remember to play. Your teen may truly want to just be with you without talking about the loss or his or her grief.

Listen more. Talk less. Let your teen run the conversation if he or she wants to. You may be surprised at what he or she has to say.

Be prepared that he or she may grieve differently than you do. If you feel squeamish about

going to a funeral or burial site, be prepared that your teen may lead the way and want to go. Teens are often less closed off to many things that adults deem uncomfortable. Offer to go with your teen, by the way. He or she may not verbalize it, but your grieving teen may also be feeling a bit unsure about the whole situation. Your presence may be incredibly helpful and healing.

Expect that there are some things you are going to get just plain wrong. There are no perfect people and there is no perfect grief experience. However, you may be surprised at how much you get right by remembering these four things:

- Listen more than you talk
- Show up and spend time with your teen
- Your teen may be bigger than you but in many ways, he or she is still a child
- Don't give up on your teen... ever.
- Small acts of love really do make a difference

# helping teens grieve the loss of a sibling

by Dianne Gray

1 Be open and honest about the death of their sibling. Teens are wise, intuitive and insightful. They can sense when things don't add up. Be sure to confirm or deny facts as they reveal themselves. You want to build a foundation of trust not a foundation of lies between you, especially when the rest of life feels upside down.

2 Show and explain to the surviving sibling that grief is a part of life and confirm that it's alright to cry and feel sad about the death of their brother or sister.

3 Confirm that these tremendously sad feelings won't last forever... even if it feels that way right now.

4 Remind the surviving sibling that he or she is not alone in their grief and that you are grieving too, even if he or she doesn't see you crying or feeling sad.

5 Bereaved siblings often feel guilty and participate in "magical thinking" (a belief that somehow they contributed to the death of the sibling or maybe that the sibling isn't really dead). Remind the surviving sibling repeatedly that he or she was not at fault in the death of their brother or sister.

6 Guilt: A surviving sibling may feel guilt about being alive when their brother or sister died. This is a natural part of the grief process.

The surviving sibling may also feel a sense of relief that the brother or sister died, which also causes feelings of guilt to arise. Allow the surviving sibling the opportunity to speak about these feelings without condemnation or accusation.

Confusion about their role in the family: “Am I still a little sister?” one girl asked. Teens worry more than young children about what to say to people who ask how many brothers or sisters she has following the death of the sibling? Role play and practice giving answers. Your child is always a brother or sister even though their sibling has died. How to explain this and to whom, is up to you both, even if you don’t agree on the answer. Be aware this issue is very common in grieving teens who have lost a sibling.

Give your surviving child space to answer questions as he or she feels comfortable in that moment, without correcting him or her in front of others. Why? Your surviving sibling child is navigating his or her grief as you are. There are new “norms” and each of you are finding your own way. Don’t take offence if your surviving child’s answer is different than one you would give.

Remember, you are both navigating a new normal. With love and focused time together, you will find your way through grief.

# you're a grieving teen: what you need to know

by Dianne Gray

## **Some quick info:**

It's completely normal to feel angry and irritated at the world and/or sad following the loss of one of your friends, family members or someone you look up to (including celebrities).

The issue though is what to do with all of the feelings that swirl around inside of you.

## **Your grief may be impacted by whether you're coping with sudden death or expected death:**

***Sudden Death:*** Are you coping with an unexpected loss caused by accident, illness, homicide or suicide? Do you feel guilty because of something you said or didn't say about the person who died? Do you think you could have prevented the death?

Why ask? Because guilt can be a part of the above scenario. Whatever you're feeling, you can and will get through this. It's helpful to read about what you or others you know are feeling though, which is why the info below may help you.



***Expected Death:*** Did you know that someone you care for might die because of a prolonged illness? If that's the case, you're still going through grief—and it doesn't mean the grief is going away any sooner. However you may have grieved the loss a little at a time. For some, that helps. What does this mean to you now?

- Your life seems upside down but the grief does not feel like shock.
- You may think you should be better able to handle the grief, but in truth, you don't need to be hard on yourself. Grief is still grief—and you will find your way. It's just different (not easier) than someone who didn't expect the death.
- Give yourself time to adjust to a new normal, even if you liked the old norm.
- Remember that a healthy body will help you heal your grief, too. Eat well, sleep when you can and exercise often. It does help.

### **What you can expect and request:**

It's fair to:

- Ask and expect to be treated like an individual, not a number and not like anyone else who is grieving.
- Ask for space if you need to while you grieve the loss...keeping in mind that it's also a good idea to be a part of others' lives right now.
- Grieve until you don't. Grief has no timeline.
- Ask for help from counselors or friends if you want it
- Expect that if you treat your body well, your grief process may go easier. Stay clear. Stay clean. Eat well. Exercise. It helps.
- When in doubt, reach out. Staying isolated doesn't help the grief process.
- Your group of friends may change. Why? Some people can cope;

some know what to say or do. Some don't. It doesn't mean they don't care about you. This shift of friends may be temporary. See how things feel a few months after the passing of your friend or family member.

**Here are a few ideas for you to consider:**

Crying over the loss of a friend or loved one is completely normal. There's no time limit on grief.

As for drugs, alcohol, overeating, skipping school, and having unprotected sex: In short, it's not a good idea. Why? It only makes matters worse. It can complicate and potentially lengthen the grief process. Really. It may also numb you for a bit—distracting you from the root cause of the sadness, but the pain will still be there when you come down off of whatever distraction you've participated in. So, overall—not such a good plan.

What are the basics? Your friends want to be there for you. Thing is though, they may not know what to say or do. So they do nothing. Why? Because they want to say or do the “right thing,” not something that will cause you even more grief.

Complicating the issue is that no two people grieve in the same way so there really is no “norm” on what to do to help someone who is grieving. So many people again, do nothing.

Your friends may keep asking you the same question: “What can I do for you?” You keep giving the same response: “I'm okay. Thanks.” But is that true?

- Take some time to decide what you need...really need. Consider asking someone to spend time with you – doing whatever it is you like to do.
- It'll be good for both of you.
- Are you stuck and not know how to get your feelings out? Try writing, doing photography, making a video (though no need to share it all), create a photo album; The point is to get your feelings out.
- Try to remember that some of your friends just can't be there for you. That's okay.
- Don't judge them. You don't want them to judge you. So what to do? Look outside your usual circle of friends. There's probably someone around you that would be good to be with.
- Create some art-- whether it's journaling, music, painting, whatever you like. It'll help you feel better.
- Want to cry? Then cry until you can cry no more. That day will come.
- Create a no-drama zone – that place where you can go to be “you” without needing to explain yourself. If you can find a place in nature, by water, your room-- a space that makes you feel at peace—all the better.
- Listen to music! Research shows this really, truly helps. Promise! In fact, make it a “go-to.”

### **Books For You**

- Healing Your Grieving Heart: 100 Practical Ideas For Teens by Alan Wolfelt
- When a Friend Dies: A Book for Teens About Grieving and Healing by Marilyn E. Gootman
- Fire in My Heart, Ice in My Veins: A Journal for Teenagers Experiencing a Loss by Enid Samuel Traisman

- Straight Talk about Death for Teenagers: How to Cope with Losing Someone You Love by Earl A. Grollman
- After Suicide by John H. Hewett, Wayne E. Oates
- Teen Grief Relief by Heidi Horsley, PsyD.
- When Will I Stop Hurting? Teens, Loss and Grief, It Happened to Me (The Ultimate Teen Guide) by Kelly Adams

### **Websites For You**

- Too Damn Young: [www.toodamnyoung.com](http://www.toodamnyoung.com) ; Loss of a parent; lots of great content; content in Spanish, too.
- Surviving Life After A Parent Dies: [www.slapped.com](http://www.slapped.com); Loss of a parent; online forum, tributes, lots of content.
- Hello Grief: [www.hellogrief.org](http://www.hellogrief.org); Developed by Comfort Zone Camps;
- National Students of AMF (Actively Moving Forward): [www.activelymovingforward.org](http://www.activelymovingforward.org); For college students; Chapters throughout the country
- National Childhood Traumatic Stress Network: [http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/helping\\_teens\\_with\\_traumatic\\_grief\\_caregivers\\_final.pdf](http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/helping_teens_with_traumatic_grief_caregivers_final.pdf)

In closing, there are a lot of people who want to help you. However, as a teen, it's important for those people to recognize you have your own thoughts, too. It's our hope that you reach out to your teachers, a counselor, your family, friends, or maybe even a neighbor or church community throughout your grief journey -- especially if your grief seems overwhelming. There's no need to go it alone.

# **grieving teens & warning signs: what to look for?**

*by Dianne Gray*

As the parent of a teen, you may have had your fair share of sleepless nights already as you wonder what your teen is going through emotionally, physically and/or spiritually.

Now your teen has lost a loved one, a friend or someone he or she looks up to. Here are a few signs your teen is struggling with his or her grief journey, though in no way is this a complete list of the signs that your teen needs professional help or counseling.

Please listen to your own intuition and pay close attention to the warning signs you see visually and feel intuitively. When in doubt, please call your child's physician immediately or reach out to a professional grief counselor. We hope the short list below helps to give you a framework from which to start:

## **The signs that your teen may be struggling with grief:**

- Absence of grief for more than a few days (immediately following the loss of his/her friend or loved one)
- Shows no emotion

- Aggressive, anti-social behavior or destructive acts toward property, people or animals
- Suicidal thoughts or actions
- Self-harm including cutting
- Repeated unwillingness to speak about the deceased (over a period of time)
- Prolonged dysfunction in school
- Prolonged accident proneness
- Engaging in addictive behavior
- Changing completely his or her circle of friends
- Consistent daily crying without cessation
- The list can go on—but basically any behavior that is a large shift from what he or she has been like for years is a signal to you to step in & get help.

### **What to do if you are worried about a grieving teen in your care?**

First and foremost, try to stay calm. Inflamed emotions only make it more difficult to converse with a child/teen at any age or with a professional who needs to help. Then you could contact:

- A grief or mental health professional in your area sooner rather than later
- Your child's school counselor
- Your child's pediatrician
- Local clergy
- Your local hospice grief and bereavement counselor, for either an appointment or a referral
- Your teen's teacher

# surviving the loss of a sibling

by Dr. Heidi Horsley

**“EVERY LOSS IS UNIQUE. THE TRUTH IS, THE WORST LOSS IS THE ONE THAT IS HAPPENING TO YOU, THE ONE THAT HAS PICKED YOU UP AND THROWN YOU DOWN AND LEFT YOU STRUGGLING TO PUT YOUR LIFE BACK TOGETHER.”**

*Elizabeth Devita-Raeburn | Author*

When I was 20 years old, I was awakened in the middle of the night to the terrible news that my 17-year-old brother Scott and cousin Matthew had been killed together in a car accident. It seemed inconceivable that my brother had died. My brother, who I had grown up with, shared a history with, and expected to grow old with, was suddenly gone forever from my life. Scott had unruly blond curls and bright green eyes. He was very athletic, devoured Twix candy bars, was

a NY Jets fan and loved to play practical jokes. I envisioned us attending each others' college graduations and weddings, raising our kids together and growing old together.

Scott's death turned my world upside down and put everything I ever believed into question. We expect a natural order to the losses in our lives with our grandparents dying first, followed by our parents and then eventually our siblings. Our

siblings share a childhood history and take this journey with us, as parallel travelers in our lives, wrote Elizabeth Devita-Raeburn in her book, *The Empty Room: Understanding Sibling Loss*. In fact, most siblings will spend 80-100% of their lifespans together (Packman, Horsley, Davies, & Kramer, 2006). However, all of us are not so fortunate, as two million people each year become bereaved siblings (Hogan & Desantis, 1992). Studies show that bereaved siblings grieve for not only their brothers or sisters, but for the loss of future plans together and the opportunity to grow old with someone who knew them at every developmental life stage (Horsley, 2003; Marshall, 2013). Many consider their sibling to be their best friend. When one dies the other feels the loss intensely. Lyn, whose sister Donna died at age 49 of breast cancer, remembers her sister this way, "Donna was my trusted confidant, my witness and my cheerleader. She was there

for me and I for her. A glance into her eyes affirmed my joyous reality: She was both my sister and my best friend."

As with Lyn's story, my brother and I were also very close, and early on in my grief the pain was so great that not only did I not know how I would survive, I didn't know if I wanted to. I honestly thought I would die of a broken heart. Many other siblings' have felt the same way after the death of a brother or sister. In interviewing Lauren and Kerri Kiefer after the death of their brother (firefighter Michael Kiefer who died in the 9/11 tragedy), they described sibling grief this way: "It's like you're in a foreign country now and you were just dropped there. You have to learn to adapt to this new world and this new way of life and it's not easy."

Sibling loss changes us in countless ways, There are numerous stories of siblings,



including myself, who have changed their career trajectories as a result of their sibling's death. After my brother's death, I changed my major to psychology, wrote my doctoral dissertation on the sudden death of a sibling and have devoted my career to helping others find hope after loss. Another person whose career was greatly influenced by sibling loss is social worker Andrew Tartler, whose sister died of a brain tumor when he was just 5 years old. As a result of her death, Andrew became an administrator of the Children's Inn, a National Institutes of Health residence for families with a child who has cancer. He also founded Camp Fantastic, a summer camp for well siblings who have a brother or sister with cancer.

Meanwhile, Dr. Robert Gallo, who was just 13 when his 6-year-old sister Judy was diagnosed with leukemia, became the chief of the laboratory of tumor cell biology

at the National Institutes of Health. One of his most significant discoveries to date has been isolating a retrovirus that causes leukemia, the very disease that killed his sister.

As difficult as sibling loss is, I am here today to tell you, that I did survive and eventually thrive. I have interviewed and worked with thousands of bereaved siblings who have gone on to thrive as well-- and you can, too. Here are some tips and tools you can use to find hope again:

### **Active Coping**

A sibling death often leaves surviving siblings feeling disempowered and victimized. Participation in memorial events, family gatherings and other activities meaningfully associated with the deceased sibling can be opportunities to focus, express emotions and feel empowered. Elizabeth DeVita-Raeburn found during interviews for her book,

that as siblings move toward an active style of coping with grief, they begin to heal. For example, Dr. Stephen Chanock, a pediatric oncologist at the National Institute of Health, devotes his life to trying to find a cure for cancer. Ironically (or not) Dr. Chanock has an office just 500 feet away from the intensive care unit where his brother died. Other examples of active coping may include seizing opportunities to talk about your deceased sibling. What are other examples of active coping? You may choose to volunteer in honor of deceased sibling, make a memorial toast during a holiday party, or plant a memory garden.

Finding any creative way to actively cope by honoring and memorializing your sibling can help you heal. After her sister Linda died of a rare form of childhood cancer, Pleasant Gill White founded a nonprofit organization, The Sibling Connection, whose mission is to

provide resources for bereaved siblings. As Gill White points out, “They used to tell us that you had to let go of the person who died and now we understand that it’s all about going on with your life, remembering and staying connected to the person. If you don’t, you’re going to be blocking a part of your life and that can rob you of needed energy.”

### **Explore Internet Sites**

The internet can be a valuable resource and virtual online community 24/7 for individuals dealing with sibling loss. In on-line virtual communities, grieving siblings’ can come together as a community and grieve online anytime, so they feel less alone. Social networking sites such as The Compassionate Friends Sounds of the Siblings, Facebook page, offers a place where bereaved siblings’ can express condolences, find grief support and get advice from others. Facebook also hosts

thousands of memorial pages, where friends and family can post pictures, videos, and memories about those who have died, and provides a place where bereaved siblings can gain support from others.

I co-founded The Open to Hope Foundation, [www.opentohope.com](http://www.opentohope.com) to help support people after loss. Today, Open to Hope is one of the most visited grief support sites on the internet. Open to Hope provides thousands of articles, hundreds of radio shows, cable T.V. shows, webinars, and youtube videos devoted to finding hope after loss. Much of the content on Open to Hope is specific to sibling loss. Chantal, wrote to Open to Hope saying: “I lost my sister six months ago today. I’m 25 and none of my friends know what I’m going through because their siblings are still alive. But it’s a relief to know others are out there who have survived and understand my pain.”

## **Attend Support Groups**

Bereaved siblings often benefit from talking with others who have experienced a similar loss. This can help them feel less alone in their grief, and show them how others have coped. Currently in the United States, there are more than 300 grief centers and over 150 peer support programs. The largest peer support program for bereaved families is The Compassionate Friends, [www.compassionatefriends.org](http://www.compassionatefriends.org) with over 700 chapters Internationally. This organization offers ongoing programs and peer support groups that can be an opportunity to connect and receive support from other bereaved siblings.

## **Foster Expressions of Continuing Bonds**

When a sibling dies, we lose the relationship we once had, but we don’t sever our connections with our siblings. We continue those bonds in new and different

ways. Bereaved siblings often report praying to their deceased brother or sister or having imaginary conversations with them. They continue to think about their sibling, particularly during anniversary dates, such as graduations, weddings, birthdays, holidays and other milestones. These events can be used as a way to honor the life of their sibling.

In fact, research has shown that maintaining a connection with our deceased loved ones is not only adaptive, it is an integral part of healthy adjustment (Packman et al., 2006). Sarah, 21, whose brother Bruce died last year after a long battle with cancer, had his favorite NY Jets sweatshirt made into a teddy bear that she sleeps with at night. Others carry their brother or sister's picture with them, wear their clothes, or listen to music that reminds them of their sibling.

Devita-Raeburn found that as bereaved siblings grow older, their wish to stay connected with their deceased sibling grows even stronger. For example, Meredith's brother Jon loved running marathons. After he died of neuroblastoma cancer, she began running marathons and donating the money she raises to cancer research. Running has given Meredith a way to keep Jon with her as she moves into the terrain of her own future, one that she looks to more willingly now. She has invented a new relationship with her brother, one that acknowledges that he is both gone from her life and present too. Running has helped Meredith to redefine life after loss.

### **In Conclusion: Positive Growth**

Although the death of a sibling is a difficult life event, research has shown that bereaved siblings also experience positive growth. In one study, siblings' from 40 families who had lost a brother or

sister to cancer were interviewed. These bereaved siblings' reported increased maturity, greater compassion, and more motivation as a result of the sibling death compared to normative samples (Foster, et al., 2012). Forward & Garlie (2003) discovered that positive changes reported by bereaved adolescents included (a) less risk taking, (b) more displays of affection, (c) a deeper appreciation of life, (d) more maturity, (e) a greater life purpose. Bereaved adult siblings also had greater empathy and were more likely to support others who had experienced a death (Davies, 1991).

Bereaved siblings may not always look like they're grieving, but the wounds within them run deep. Nevertheless, many bereaved siblings eventually learn how to find a new normal and create a new relationship with their deceased siblings. They don't

forget, move on and have closure, but rather they honor, remember, and incorporate deceased siblings into their lives in new ways and continue bonds.

With time and support, you will go on to transform your life and create a new normal. I have found meaning, hope, and joy again, and met many wonderful and caring people through organizations such as The Compassionate Friends ([www.compassionatefriends.org](http://www.compassionatefriends.org)), the Elisabeth Kubler-Ross Foundation ([www.ekrfoundation.org](http://www.ekrfoundation.org)) and the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors ([www.taps.org](http://www.taps.org)). Today I keep my brother's memory alive through the stories I share with others. Our siblings continue to live forever in our hearts. They are our guiding lights and will always play an important role in our lives. If you've lost hope, please lean on mine, until you find your own.

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# teen grief and traumatic loss

by Dianne Gray

It can be hard being a teen and even harder when the world seems to have turned upside down due to the unexpected death of a friend, family member or someone he or she looked up to.

Unexpected death can result in what is termed “traumatic loss.” The grief journey for those dealing with traumatic loss can differ in many ways than those who were expecting a loss, though certainly grief, regardless of cause can be difficult to cope with.

## **Here’s what a teen coping with traumatic loss may experience:**

- A shattered sense of what is fair, just, and right with the world
- Sudden discomfort with his or her routine
- Feelings of abandonment
- A questioning of faith, God and any spiritual practice
- Feelings that the world is an unsafe place
- A sense of being unprotected and powerless
- A running “mental cycle” that focuses on negative or sad thoughts
- A feeling of blame, shame, or guilt (especially if the last conversation with the person was negative)
- May wonder if the event was preventable and his or her role in the death
- Empathy and sympathy



- Recklessness, especially if there is a sense of injustice in the death event (“Why not do what I want since we all die anyway?”)
- Confusion about how to react to the shock and grief together

Teens often worry a great deal about how they appear to others in his or her social circle, which only complicates the experience of coping with traumatic loss. Teens also understand that he or she may appear to be unstable or weird as compared to how he or she was before, which means the teen may stuff their feelings down—internalizing them which is emotionally unhealthy and potentially dangerous over a protracted period of time.

### **What can help the teen coping with traumatic loss?**

A network of support: friends, family, clergy, extended family, teachers, and so on. They are critical to the well-being and healing of the grieving teen.

Very important: providing the teen coping with traumatic loss the opportunity to receive professional grief counseling, even if he or she is adamant they don't need it. A grief counselor can truly help to provide tools for healing traumatic loss and can also help to facilitate the adoption of healthy rituals that will only help when coping with subsequent losses that are a part of any living person's life.

# living on

by Haley Thalheimer | Student Contributor University Of North Florida

Ten years. To some that's a lifetime. For others it's simply another decade in the book of life. For me, it's how long it has been since I lost my dad. For some, dads are the "good cop," the one that teaches you how to change your oil or the one you go to when mom says "no."

For me, my dad was everything. He was my confidant, my twin soul, and the one whose unwavering love and support gave me the courage to be anything I wanted to be. And suddenly, he was gone in an instant due to a motorcycle accident that took his life in the blink of an eye.

All at once I found my world completely upside down. At the time, I was only 11-years-

old. The fact that it has been a decade since he's been gone really resonates with me as the anniversary of his death approaches. I've pretty much gone half of my life without my dad and all I can think is, "Where has the time gone?"

So many holidays, birthdays and special events without him...and I'm still here. I survived. At times, I think back on the past decade and feel like a warrior.

I've overcome this heinous, life-altering situation. I can still laugh. I can still love. I can still appreciate the good days and take the bad ones as they come. I can live on.

With that said, I understand now too, that there will never be a day when I don't miss my dad.

Half of me (my dad) is out of my sight forever. However, slowly but surely over these past ten years, I've started to fill the hole in my heart...a hole that was once gaping and had me reaching into the depths of my soul to survive. Yet despite the hardship, now all I think about is how lucky I am.

I think about how lucky I am to be able to seize the opportunities offered to me each and every day, and I know without a doubt my dad would be beyond proud of me for doing so. Through the strength and confidence he and my mom instilled in me, I'm a survivor.

No matter what happens, no one can take away the strength I've obtained through these past ten years of grieving and that is empowering. It's empowering to know that despite whatever happens in life, good or bad - I can appreciate everything.

I can remember and appreciate the memory of climbing a

mountain with my dad and relish the fact we accomplished that together. Yet, I can also go kayaking in Maine with my mom and brother, feeling happy and appreciative to "be" in that very moment.

If early on in my grief someone would've explained the ability for us all to miss someone that's died while still really loving life -- I would've told them it's impossible! Yet, here I am...at peace with the loss of my father and while also enjoying all that life has to offer in the here and now. What made the difference for me? Stillness. Mindfulness. And the fact that I know for sure, my dad's spirit is with me every single day.

When the sky is so blue with not a cloud in sight (a perfect day for flying his bright red bi-plane) I can just stop, breathe and feel my dad smiling down on me.

All in all I feel so fortunate... fortunate to know such sorrow

and to now be able to appreciate everything fully. The biggest lesson I've learned through this past decade is that "it's okay." It's okay to be happy. It's okay to be sad. It's okay to feel so incredibly helpless that you don't know what to do. But most of all, it's okay to move forward. It's okay to live on.

Move forward and enjoy your holidays, celebrate the birthdays and commemorate the special events. Experience the joys of life because there are so many. After all isn't that what your loved one would want you to do? I know my dad would want me to and you know what? After all of this, I deserve to and so do you.

# books and more for grieving teens

**The Next Place** by Warren Hanson; (age 9 yrs and up)  
<http://www.amazon.com/Next-Place-Warren-Hanson/dp/0931674328>

**Teen Grief Relief** by Gloria Horsley, PhD and Heidi Horsley, PhD (ages 12+ yrs)  
<http://www.amazon.com/Teen-Grief-Relief-Gloria-Horsley/dp/1568251106>

**Heal Your Grieving Heart For Teens** by Alan Wolfelt; (12+ years)  
<http://www.amazon.com/Healing-Your-Grieving-Heart-Teens/dp/1879651238>

**Fire in My Heart, Ice in My Veins: A Journal for Teenagers Experiencing a Loss**

by Enid Samuel Traisman:  
<http://www.amazon.com/Fire-Heart-Ice-Veins-Experiencing/dp/1561230561>

**When a Friend Dies: A Book for Teens About Grieving and Healing** by Marilyn E. Gootman  
<http://www.amazon.com/When-Friend-Dies-Grieving-Healing/dp/1575421704>

**Straight Talk about Death for Teenagers: How to Cope with Losing Someone You Love**  
by Earl A. Grollman: [http://www.amazon.com/Straight-Talk-about-Death-Teenagers/dp/0807025011/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1462985071&sr=1-1&keywords=straight+talk+about+death+for+teenagers](http://www.amazon.com/Straight-Talk-about-Death-Teenagers/dp/0807025011/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1462985071&sr=1-1&keywords=straight+talk+about+death+for+teenagers)

## ADDITIONAL WEBSITES

### **Too Damn Young**

[www.toodamnyoung.com](http://www.toodamnyoung.com); Loss of a parent; Spanish language content, too.

### **Visiting Nurse Health System: Bereavement Content**

[www.vnhs.org](http://www.vnhs.org)

### **Surviving Life After A Parent Dies**

[www.slapd.com](http://www.slapd.com); Loss of a parent

**Hello Grief** [www.hellogrief.org](http://www.hellogrief.org); Developed by Comfort Zone Camps;

**National Students of AMF (Actively Moving Forward)** [www.activelymovingforward.org](http://www.activelymovingforward.org); For college students; Chapters throughout the country

**National Childhood Traumatic Stress Network** [http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/helping\\_teens\\_with\\_traumatic\\_grief\\_caregivers\\_final.pdf](http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/helping_teens_with_traumatic_grief_caregivers_final.pdf)

## RESOURCES FOR GRIEVING SIBLINGS

### **The Compassionate**

**Friends** [https://www.compassionatefriends.org/Brochures/when\\_a\\_brother\\_or\\_sister\\_dies.aspx](https://www.compassionatefriends.org/Brochures/when_a_brother_or_sister_dies.aspx)

### **The Dougy Center**

[http://www.dougy.org/docs/TDC\\_Sibling\\_Grief\\_Tip\\_Sheet\\_10\\_14.pdf](http://www.dougy.org/docs/TDC_Sibling_Grief_Tip_Sheet_10_14.pdf)

**Open To Hope Foundation** <http://www.opentohope.com/death-of-a-sibling/>

**Band Back Together** <http://www.bandbacktogether.com/sibling-loss-resources/>

**National Child Traumatic Stress Network** [http://nctsn.org/nctsn\\_assets/pdfs/Sibling\\_Loss\\_Final.pdf](http://nctsn.org/nctsn_assets/pdfs/Sibling_Loss_Final.pdf)

**What's Your Grief** <http://www.whatsyourgrief.com/death-of-a-sibling/>

## **BOOKS ON SIBLING LOSS**

**Coping With the Death of a Brother or Sister** by Ruth Ruiz

**Empty Room: Surviving the Loss of a Brother or Sister at Any Age**  
by Elizabeth DeVita-Raeburn

**I Will Remember You: A Guidebook Through Grief for Teens** by Laura Dower

**Recovering from the Loss of a Sibling** by K. Donnelly

**Part of Me Died Too: Stories of Creative Survival Among Bereaved Children and Teenagers** by Virginia Lynn Fry & Katherine Paterson

**Sibling Grief: Healing After the Death of a Brother or Sister** by P. Gill White

# about the author

Dianne Gray is an award winning writer/journalist for over 70 books, magazines, newspapers, blogs and educational projects. She's also a film producer/consultant, international keynote speaker and program builder. In short she's a powerhouse advocate global advocate for improved care for seriously ill, dying and grieving people of all ages. Her motivational keynote talks and inspirational delivery discuss the tough and tender topics involved in the provision of quality end of life and grief care.

Dianne is also President of the Elisabeth Kubler-Ross Foundation, on the board of the International Children's Palliative Care Network and is co-founder of the American Academy of Pediatrics, Section of Hospice and Palliative Medicine's Parent Advisory Group. Over the past twenty years, she has founded four non-profit organizations, each focused on improving life for seriously ill children and their families.

As well, she still sits bedside with as many patients as possible, often acting as a resource for families facing end of life care for their loved ones.

Throughout, Dianne sees her family's ten-year pediatric hospice/palliative care experience with healthy daughter, Christina and her son, Austin (who died in 2005 as a result of a neurodegenerative disorder) as the gift of a lifetime.

As an aside, she has traveled to 17 countries and over 175 cities in the past nine years-- and loves to see who she crosses paths with each and every day!

Contact Dianne Gray at [dgray@hhccommunications.com](mailto:dgray@hhccommunications.com) or follow her on Facebook & Twitter: @diannebgray

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**Visiting Nurse Main Office (404) 215-6000**  
**[www.vnhs.org](http://www.vnhs.org)**