

After the Death of a Parent: Supporting Your Grieving Teenager

► Whether sudden or somewhat expected, the death of a parent can be an emotional, painful, and traumatizing event for a family. The family's dynamics change dramatically, and the family must learn to adjust to its "new normal."

With a loss, parents of teenagers (aka adolescents or youth) often find themselves struggling to parent while going on with their everyday lives as newly single parents or guardians. As a spouse or partner, you experience your own grief. Following are healthy and supportive steps that you can take to understand and find support that the young people in your life will need. No matter what steps you take, remember that this change is new and affects the whole family, including the youth.

Overview

To help parent a bereaved adolescent, one must understand the behaviors your adolescent may show during their grieving period and into the future. We will review the following:

- The grieving process
- Supporting your youth
- Staying healthy
- Working with their school

As you read through each of these sections, keep in mind that every individual's grieving process is different. If you feel overwhelmed, remember that your love is the most important ingredient. The goal is to become stronger by supporting one another—including yourself—through your loss.

More Resources

Find other helpful information on the Alabama Cooperative Extension System website.

- "Surviving Spouse's Guide," FCS-2447
- "After the Death of a Parent: From Shock to Self-Care," FCS-2627
- "Faith Communities Encourage Healthy Eating and Active Living"
- "Managing Stress Caused by Change"



Initial Shock: Finding Support

The shock of the first days and weeks following a death is only the beginning of a new stage in the journey of your family's life. You and your youth will each experience difficulties when working through your grief. As you look forward, understand this as a crisis that you will go through together, but in unique ways. Steps you might want to take in the beginning include the following:

- Let your youth understand what you are feeling, though at a level that is appropriate for a young person. You can talk to your youth about the surprise and shock you feel and your own sense of disruption. Hiding worry is not likely to work. Youth will know if you are anxious.
- Let them know you care by listening to their questions. Your teenager may be worried about what will happen to family finances, for example. They may not know the steps in organizing a funeral or the bereavement process in your family and culture. If you are too overwhelmed to listen to their questions, ask someone to be available for them.

- Let them know that you might not have all the answers, especially at this stage. However, help them understand that even though you might not know, you will get the help of others when you need it. Assure them that you will solve problems together.

Allowing your teen to see you asking for help or finding support is important. You can show them, by your actions, that even adults seek help. When you seek help, you are assuring your youth that even if things are overwhelming, you are still aware and guiding the family as your needs are met. You are also showing them that you are not alone and neither are they.

Understanding the Grieving Process

Grieving is a natural process that may be painful, but it is also part of a healthy response to loss. As individuals grieve, they work through what it means to have lost a loved member of the family. They learn to cope with a “new normal,” one in which they are without that person. In most cases, time allows grief to resolve itself. However, grief can also be complicated and may not resolve easily. There are three types of grief:

- **Acute grief** happens right after the loss of a loved one and in the following months. An individual may experience intense waves of distress, sadness, and shock and have trouble concentrating, eating, and sleeping.
- **Complicated grief** occurs when the grieving does not work its way out. Sometimes this occurs because the circumstances of death were difficult or perhaps because the grieving person or family were in a difficult moment when the death occurred. With complicated grief, a person may also experience waves of guilt when trying to move on with his or her life, or the passing of a loved one may seem unbearable and unimaginable. Complicated grief may continue for years, and you may want to seek mental health assistance to resolve the difficulties associated with the loss of the loved one.
- **Integrated grief** occurs after many of the acute grief symptoms have resolved. A person in this lifelong stage is able to accept the reality of the loss and return to previous normal daily routines. This does not mean that you have forgotten about your loved one or that you don’t feel pain or sadness when you think about them. You have just learned how to cope with your situation.

Whatever kind of grief you are going through, remember that your family is unique. After the loss of a spouse/parent, you and your young person are trying to adjust to a new way of living.

Youth Expression of Grief

Parentally bereaved youth are likely to show a wide range of emotions, which might include anger, anxiety, guilt, and sadness. Remember that feelings are okay—feelings are never wrong, even if some behaviors are. These behaviors might include hurting themselves or others or taking risky chances.

Your young people need to be accepted and encouraged to express their feelings regarding the loss, but you may want to talk with them about safe versus unhealthy ways to express feelings. Below are prompts to help you think of healthy, safe ways to address feelings:

Addressing Feelings in a Healthy Way

- When I feel upset (about anything), I need
 1. A hug
 2. My favorite movie
 3. (Your ideas) _____

- If I feel angry about the death, good ways to share this are
 1. Making a commitment that will honor their memory
 2. Running, hiking, playing a sport, or _____
 3. Sending a prayer asking for help
 4. (Your ways of expressing healthy anger) _____

- When I think about the death and I want my thoughts to go away for now, I can
 1. Put a small good memory in a journal
 2. Sing or go out into nature
 3. (Your ways to remember later) _____

Feelings do not go away; they come back until you address them. Talking about typical feelings sends a message to your young person that you know the feelings are there, even if they do not show it or deny that they are affected. Let them know that feelings are a sign that something needs to be addressed through a hug, a talk, shared health and self-care activities, or finding help and support.



Parents can also deliberately invite young people to share concerns. For example, parents can ask their young person to finish an opening sentence such as “The times when I feel the saddest about my parent’s death are...” However, if you let your youth know that you are ready to talk or listen but they do not respond, let them know that you care and that you can talk later. Withdrawal and solitude are often part of the grieving process.

You can also create closeness by spending time recalling a favorite time together as a family or inviting your youth to remember a quality they miss most about the parent they lost. This helps make the passing real and helps transition grief into a remembered story about the missing parent. To help your youth adapt to life following your profound loss, it is key that you maintain a positive relationship with your teenager. Be consistent, warm, and loving, but also continue to guide your young person effectively.

Sometimes people think that being silent will save young people from the pain of grief, but this does not make the grief go away. Instead, silence only makes it difficult to discuss issues. Parents can indicate their support for expressions of concern or worries by paying attention to unusual feelings or behaviors that may come from bereavement. You can also invite sharing by telling them how you feel and that you are sad too.

Supporting Your Youth

Part of coping with grief means that over time you will have a new way of describing your family. Include your youth in the processes your family will go through during the first days, but also the days afterwards. As time moves on, let them know that they are not betraying the deceased person as they start to move on from shock: they are just beginning to remember that person in a different, more long-term way.

In the beginning, include your young person in the first steps of family arrangements. This gives them some choice and a sense that they are important in the process. For example, if you sort through your loved one’s personal belongings, talk to your youth about how this will happen. When you start, your teenager may seem standoffish and may not want to participate, but they will remember the invitation.

My mother’s first step in moving forward and sorting through my father’s belongings was cleaning out his side of the closet. When she did this, she allowed my brother and I to choose a few of our favorite pieces of his clothing. She bought us large “keepsake chests” and placed some of his personal items that we had picked out in each of them. Now, we can pull them out when we want, but we don’t feel an overwhelming sadness by simply walking into a closet.

As a young person, they may not value some things now. You can put certain things aside for them to have later. Do not judge them though. Each person is unique in how they grieve.

In time, you may want to explain that although they will always feel sad, they will no longer be shocked. Many things can help you and the young people in your family move toward the stage of resolving grief. Over time, feelings will change. Although the path will not be straightforward or fast, the following tips may help.

Tip 1: Maintain Good Communication

Open parent-youth communication helps reduce problems that may follow the death of a parent.

- Express your own feelings to your young person (at an appropriate level). This shows them that it is normal to feel a range of emotions, including sadness.
- Help youth express themselves by teaching them to say, “I feel...” When young people learn to identify and name their current experiences and feelings, they can work to address them.

- Don't say, "You should." You cannot choose the best way for your teenager to express what he or she feels.
- Reassure your youth that even though you are sad, your family unit is strong and that you will all continue to grow and get better together, in time.

As a parent, listening is helpful. Listen by leaning in with your body language, making eye contact, and genuinely trying to understand your young person's feelings. Make time to be together.

Your teenager knows that you cannot fix their problems. However, when you show them your sadness, anger, or anxiety, it helps them know that you are not afraid of those emotions, even if you can't fix problems. By sharing your feelings, you also show them how dynamic feelings are and how they may increase or decrease over time. You may also share memories or help them find others to share memories.



Tip 2: Support Youth Self-Esteem

The loss of a parent can affect a youth's level of self-esteem. Lower self-esteem has been linked to various mental health issues. Health professionals encourage parents to counteract this by helping their youth feel valued. Parents also can engage with their young person in activities with little room for failure, such as art, a noncompetitive sport, or music. Your youth may also enjoy a sense of comfort and competence, whether it is in academics, athletics, or community service. All these activities help build self-esteem.

Tip 3: Help Youth Regain a Sense of Control

Losing a loved one is probably one of the hardest things many people face in their lives. With all the unexpected events that come with the loss, it is understandable, and even somewhat expected, that life can be more

chaotic. The loss of routines might increase the feeling of helplessness and loss of control at the same time that you, as a parent, may also be feeling unsettled.

To begin to rebuild a sense of stability, plan for together time, such as mealtimes or bedtimes, when you can check in as a family. Also have special check-in time with your young person during an activity you normally do together or during a new special time. Routines are often soothing and help a family coordinate. Establish new routines to help you and your family get through the day so that you interact and support each other. You might include love notes in your lunch, or you might set little tasks, like taking a photo of something that reflects your mood at lunchtime and texting each other. You might want to think about things such as a sporting event or holiday that your lost parent enjoyed and plan for a way to remember them at that time. Planning introduces a regular activity around remembering. You might also take over some chores that the absent parent did. These might include Saturday shopping or school drop-off. Paying attention to these routines and talking about how you will move forward helps to re-establish stability.



Tip 4: Recognizing Youth Roles

Young people also may feel an extra sense of responsibility, such as the need to provide a sense of comfort to you. Recognize their ability by including them, but let them know that although you appreciate their love and supportive encouragement, they are not solely responsible for helping you get better. Youth may also benefit from knowing that they can help by doing ordinary things such as taking care of their homework and being themselves. They should not feel guilty for spending time with their friends.

You can even help them regain a sense of balance by supporting them in doing ordinary things, such as registering for a sports team or tackling a challenging

school subject. If they are having difficulties because of the disruption they have experienced, it could be their “job” to focus on school issues or navigate new friendships. Showing them that you are working with them is part of helping them regain a sense of control. Working with them plays a part in moving toward healing. You may also want to work with a helping professional, health provider, or community leader to let your young person know how they are valued and that their issues are important, no matter what your family has experienced.

Staying Healthy

You will feel days of extreme stress and sadness. When you feel stressed, do not feel bad if you need to seek support from outside sources—take care of yourself. Focus on your bereavement-related personal goals. You will demonstrate what self-care looks like.



Building Resilience

Resilience is having a reserve that helps you deal with small and big shocks, extra work, and extra needs. Staying healthy will also help you be resilient. You can do simple things, so when you are overwhelmed with the tasks for the day, your health is strong.

To build resilience:

- **Stay hydrated.** Remember to drink water throughout the day.
- **Take a deep breath.** When you feel stressed, take a big deep breath so you can take a pause for yourself.
- **Eat well.** Prepare and eat vegetables and fruits when you can.
- **Walk.** Get out of your home for fresh air.

- **Plan for health.** Choose healthy coping strategies rather than alcohol or other substances. Start a project to distract yourself from unhealthy habits or find a friend to help you focus on supporting your own health.
- **Include your youth.** Setting up an achievable and specific health goal for both you and your youth can be a great way for you to support your health together. This will also help you set up a new routine and bond.

Remember, you are setting an example for your teenager when you are caring for yourself. This can be challenging, given all the things there are to do, such as organizing and attending the funeral or memorial, doing paperwork, claiming insurance, addressing property and other major costs, and perhaps even moving. Visit the Alabama Extension website for resources on financial planning, managing stress, and more. During this process, people can often forget to take care of themselves, so having a buddy to help you remember to do good things for yourself is important.

Find Support for Yourself

Finding support is another way to stay healthy. Grieving is not, by itself, a cause for concern. However, to support your adolescent, you must also take the time for your own grief. Look for more resources on the Alabama Extension website. You may want to talk to community or faith leaders about available support. You may want to seek professional help if you feel that your or your youth’s response is leading to mental health concerns, such as substance use or depression, whether temporary, sudden, or potentially chronic. Help your young person find his or her own support, including peer, online, or professional. Discuss this with your youth if you are concerned.

School and Community Resources

Returning to school and resuming a typical schedule may be a challenge for your youth. School is a large part of their everyday life and youth need to know that they have support and encouragement from individuals other than their parents.

Although the school may be generally supportive, don’t assume that your young person is doing fine at school, and don’t assume the school is specifically supporting your young person. After the initial sympathy, your young person may feel abandoned or lost.

I specifically remember that when I went back to school, I did not want to speak about my father's death, nor did I want to be asked about it; however, my avoidance of my emotions and needs had adverse effects on my academic success. While teachers and administrators noticed a change in my academic performance, they did not ask, How can I help? or What do you need?

As the parent, you have the right to meet with your youth's teachers and administrators to help them be aware of what you feel your teenager may need during this time. They may not be aware of family stress, for example, or extra burdens.

You can ask the school for an academic plan that has achievable targets and regular check-ins. This will introduce you to the support people in young person's life. It will also alert those people that you need and want their academic support. You may suggest to teachers and administrators that they use the plan to meet with your youth at regular check points to see if the plan is going well. This will help prevent your young person from slipping through the cracks and encourage sustained support.

Although your youth may worry about losing independence, a plan may help them ease back into their academic responsibilities. Having a plan that accommodates the roller coaster they are on may also reduce the stress of not knowing how or when to get help. Having a plan helps open a two-way channel of communication both with the school and with your youth. For example, if the family is making changes, you will know who to talk to at school to make them aware of your young person's needs. You might also do this for two or three years. Grief is not resolved quickly, and next year's teachers may be unaware of the loss.

As a parent, you know your young person; you know what they are capable of and you can observe whether they seem to be doing well. Make time to ask them regularly how they are doing at school and if there have been any changes or if they need something, whether it is new opportunities or help to meet expectations.

Reflection on a Young Person's Perspective—From Shock to Grief

In a companion Alabama Extension publication, "After the Death of a Parent: From Shock to Grief," FCS-2627, we speak to youth about some typical reactions after death. Also in that publication, a young adult who experienced parent loss as a youth tells the story from their point of view. As you read, ask yourself some questions:

- What emotions did the young person express? How did they appear on the outside?

- What were they asked to do? Or not asked to do?

- Who else besides the parent was there to support them? _____
- How do you think the parent in this story felt about their responsibility to protect their teenager?

In Conclusion: Love Is the Most Important Ingredient

Your love is the most important ingredient in helping your family members work through their grief. Every parent, teenager, and family is unique, as are the events that lead to each death. As you navigate your new normal, support one another through your loss to become stronger as a family.



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