

Coping with Loss:

Unveiling the Signs of Distress in Teens

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Signs and Symptoms of Teen Distress



Your Observations

- Spending increased time alone and withdrawing from friends and family
- Distractibility- Inability to focus on a specific topic in a conversation or activity
 - *This may look like incomplete chores, not turning in or completing homework*
- Feelings do not match content or seem flat
- Strong mistrust of others
- Increased irritability and/or violent outbursts
- Signs of alcohol or drug use
- Expressions of general unhappiness over a period of several weeks
- School avoidance or change in academic performance
- Gain or loss of significant amounts of weight
- Abrupt change in manner, style, or personal hygiene
- Increasing dependence on you

The Teen's Experience



The Teen's Experience

- Marked anxiety, extreme restlessness, inability to concentrate or relax
- Marked decrease or increase in appetite
- Marked decrease or increase in sleep
- Loss of interest in activities they previously enjoyed such as classes, spending time with friends, extracurricular activities
- Increased escape behaviors
- Increased irritability
- Expression of fears -fear of death
- Physical complaints without a medical cause, such as headache, stomach pains, etc.
- Unusual ritualistic, rigid or repetitive behavior
- Chronic fatigue
- Expressed feelings of hopelessness
- Suicidal thoughts, plans, threat

Additional Risk Factors:

- Increased fixation on death, suicide, and/or violence
- Withdrawal from family and friends
- Communicating feelings of hopelessness
- Expressing a desire or plan to die by suicide
- History of expressing a desire to die or previous suicidal gestures
- Giving away belongings of special meaning or significance
- Obtaining a weapon or other means of lethal self-harm
- Engaging in risky and/or dangerous behavior
- Loss of interest in people, things, places, and activities
- Feeling suddenly happier or at peace (may be due to coming to terms with the decision to end their life)

What do I say to my teen?

- We want to say the right thing but in actuality no words will be able to take away their pain. It is connection and not necessarily words that provide comfort.
 - *Empathy* by [Brene Brown](#)
- Say the student's name. Normalize that it is OK to talk about the student and the full range of feelings your student may be experiencing. These conversations will be necessary at the beginning and at milestones as well.
- Normalize that your child will need different things at different times. Feelings are fleeting. It is very common to feel a mixture of feelings when grieving.
- Not all children will experience grief equally. Some children may feel guilty because they don't feel significantly impacted.
- Some children will experience significant grief even if they did not know the student who died. Help your child to understand that people who have experienced a loss of a loved one or pet may experience increased grief even if they did not have a connection with the student who died.
- Your child may not want to talk about it at home, especially if they have talked about it all day at school. Or your child may want to talk at home because they are no longer talking about it at school. Repeated check ins are important. Eventually the focus at school will return to academics. What will that feel like for your child?
- Be specific when you are speaking to your child
 - *Instead of asking "How are you?" ask questions like "What is your level of grief today? Is it difficult to concentrate at school? Or "How are you coping with your grief?"*
- Sometimes children believe they are responsible for taking care of others when they struggle. It is important to educate our children that this burden is too heavy to carry on their shoulders.
- Family cohesion and communication during times of crisis build resilience in our children so it is important to be mindful that this is an ongoing process.

What might they experience?

- Your child may experience grief - different levels on different days
- Your child may experience guilt- Why didn't I notice? How can I feel happy when my classmate is dead?
- Your child may experience confusion- In an attempt to understand how something like this could happen children may attempt to simplify a complex issue which often results in misinformation.
- Your child may feel judged by other students - Why are they so upset... That person acts like they don't even care.
- Your child may experience fear - What happens when we die?
- Your child may feel confused- Why don't I have any energy?
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When will we notice they need help?

- Two prong approach - Now and Later
- Immediately provide opportunities to connect with others and provide meaningful access to relevant services. By showing up tonight you are supporting your student and saying this is important.
- Understand that your child may want to address this on their own, or not be affected by this tragedy.
- Many times, children only seek assistance when they are confronted with evidence that they are not doing well. Change in academics, difficulty with sleep or change in mood which may occur weeks or months from today.
- Reinforce that asking for help is not a sign of weakness but a sign of courage.
- Changing the language from what is wrong with you, to what is happening to you removes a great deal of the stigma associated with help-seeking behaviors.
- Encouraging kindness and compassion towards self and others.

Resources

- The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline – Call or text 988 -24/7 – Crisis Counseling
 - Crisis Text Line – Text HOME to 741741 – 24/7 Crisis Counseling

- [TrevorLifeline](https://www.trevorlifeline.org/): Call 1-866-488-7386

Created by The Trevor Project, this free 24/7 hotline aims to give support specifically to LGBTQ+ youth who may be experiencing mental health challenges. You can also get intervention over text or instant chat.

Websites

- [Suicide.org](https://www.suicide.org/)
- [AFSP.org](https://www.afsp.org/) – American Foundation for Suicide Prevention
- [Alliance of Hope](https://www.allianceofhope.org/) – [allianceofhope.org](https://www.allianceofhope.org/).

Groups

- Catholic Charities – LOSS – Loving Outreach to Survivors of Suicide – [catholiccharities.net](https://www.catholiccharities.net)
- [NAMIdupage.org/series/suicide-loss-connections-groups](https://www.namidupage.org/series/suicide-loss-connections-groups)
- Psychology Today – Groups in Illinois – [psychologytoday.com/us/groups/Illinois](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/groups/Illinois)

Books

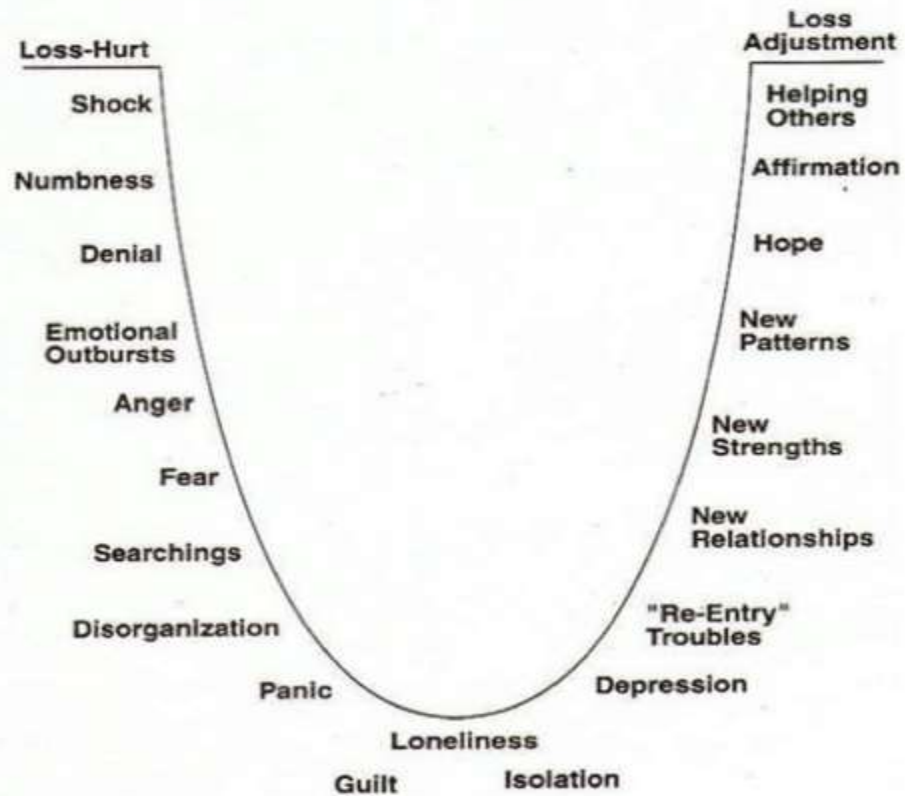
- Aftermath: Picking Up the Pieces After a Suicide; I wasn't Ready to say Goodbye – Brook Noel & Pamela D. Blair –
- Death and Dying – Elizabeth Kubler-Ross
- Why People Die by Suicide – Thomas Joiner

Insights

Dr. Anne Krick & Dr. Andrew Ansell

- 1) It is not helpful to say anyone commits suicide – They died by suicide.
 - a. The difference is easy to see if you compare it to other deaths – people do not commit cancer.*
- 2) What was very helpful was a group – being able to know you are not alone with what you are going through.
- 3) New term – Survivor of Suicide
- 4) Grief has stages and many emotions – it is not an organized process (see picture)

STAGES OF GRIEF



My experience



Unpacking Grief: The Ball & The Box Analogy

Melanie Morgensen



Thank you

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