

Talking to Teens After an Accidental Death

The sudden death of a peer can be a tragic event for a teen. Teens are naturally exploring their expectations regarding mortality/immortality, control, and whether or not the world is a safe place. When a peer dies, teens are forced to confront these issues, and many others, head on. With limited life experience and emerging skills for coping with overwhelming feelings, the sudden death of a peer can be confusing and disorienting for a teen.

In the shock after a sudden death, your teen might:

- Not have words to describe how they are experiencing the loss.
- Want time alone.
- Want to be with his or her friends, even to a degree that seems excessive to adults in his or her life.
- Act like nothing has happened.
- Regress to a younger way of acting. He or she may want to spend more time with parents or insist on knowing where parents are at all times, may not want to go to school, and may pick fights with siblings.
- Cry and display other expressions of sadness or have outbursts of anger and rage.
- Be afraid to drive or ride in a car.
- Have changes in appetite or sleep habits.
- Engage in excessive risk-taking behaviors.
- Want to memorialize the peer who died.

You can help your teen by:

- Holding his or her experience with compassion and gentleness. This is may be a very confusing time for your teen.
- Making yourself available to your teen — however, don't try to force a conversation about the death. Sometimes just spending time together doing activities you enjoy is enough.
- Acknowledging the tragedy and validating any expressions of grief your teen is experiencing.
- Relaxing your expectations for “performance”— schoolwork, chores, and sports activities.
- Being aware of any destructive or self-harming behaviors and offering supportive ways to express grief in a healthier way.
- Communicating with school counselors and teachers if you have concerns about behaviors that seem extreme.
- Assisting him/her in accessing community grief resources.

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