



CANCERcare®

800-813-HOPE (4673)  
info@cancercaare.org  
www.cancercaare.org

fact sheet

# HELPING TEENAGERS WHO HAVE LOST A PARENT

Even at the best of times, the teen years can be challenging. Teenagers may want to be independent, yet at the same time want to be taken care of. It's common for teens to have a wide range of emotions, often within a short period of time. The death of a parent only adds to the difficulty of the teen years. It presents new challenges for both the teenager and his or her family.



## THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND WHEN HELPING YOUR TEEN COPE WITH THE LOSS OF A PARENT:

**Each teenager's grief experience is unique.** How a teenager reacts to the death of a parent will depend on many factors, including what kind of relationship he or she had with the parent, and how the parent's death affects the teenager's daily life.

**Teenagers have complex emotions.** Teens can respond to a situation in a variety of ways. After the death of a parent, it may be hard to tell whether a teenager's emotions or actions are the result of grief or are a part of normal development. Keep in mind, too, that the teenager may be uncomfortable with some or all of his or her feelings about the parent's death.

**Teenagers do not want to be different.** Most of their friends and classmates probably have two living parents. The death of a parent can make a teen feel different, and feeling different is uncomfortable. It may be helpful for the teen to take part in a support group, peer to-peer network, or supervised online chat room. This can help the teenager see

that other young people are going through the same difficult situation.

**Teenagers are not adults.** The death of a parent may make a teen feel that he or she should take on additional tasks in the family. While this may be helpful or even necessary, keep in mind that the teenager is not yet an adult and should not be expected to be the "man" or "woman" of the family.

**Teenagers need privacy.** A teen may or may not want to talk about the parent's death with you or with his or her siblings. Let your teen know that he or she can talk to and receive support from other people, such as an aunt or uncle, family friend, teacher, or clergy person.

**Teenagers need consistency.** To the extent possible, keep to your usual daily routines at home. Also, try to ensure that your teenager continues to take part in his or her usual activities and social events.

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**Teenagers struggle with the need for independence.** A parent's death may make this more difficult. Encourage your teen to spend time with friends of his or her own age.

**Teenagers need to be included in your plans to cope with special days.** Thinking about upcoming birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays is often harder to deal with than the days themselves. Talk to your teen when making plans about how to spend the day or honor your loved one. Give yourself permission to try something new.

### **GET EXTRA SUPPORT**

**Take care of yourself so you can take better care of your teen.** Grief can leave you feeling tired and weak. Eat and rest regularly. Find sources of support. Consider consulting a professional who understands the special needs of bereaved for you and your teen. If you need help coping, talk with your health care team or an oncology social worker. Professional oncology social workers at CancerCare offer free counseling and support groups for anyone affected by cancer. To speak with an oncology social worker at CancerCare, call 800-813-HOPE (4673).



### **CancerCare® Can Help**

Founded in 1944, CancerCare is the leading national organization providing free support services and information to help people manage the emotional, practical and financial challenges of cancer. Our comprehensive services include counseling and support groups over the phone, online and in-person, educational workshops, publications and financial and co-payment assistance. All CancerCare services are provided by professional oncology social workers and world-leading cancer experts.

To learn more, visit [www.cancercare.org](http://www.cancercare.org) or call **800-813-HOPE (4673)**.

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National Office • 275 Seventh Avenue • New York, NY 10001

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