

## Tens Ways for Teens to Get Through Grief

By Victor M. Parachin

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*Shortly after returning home from school, Christina, 16, listened to her voice mail and was shocked to hear a message from a friend informing her that a classmate was found dead earlier that day. It was a 16-year-old boy who took his life.*

*Even though Jose, 15, had struggled with cancer for all of his teenage years, he had a large circle of good friends and an active social life. Shortly before his sixteenth birthday, Jose died. His death stunned his friends who deeply felt the loss.*

*While running errands in her suburban Los Angeles community, Jessica was shot and killed. The police said she was the innocent victim of a gang-related drive-by shooting. Her senseless death left her friends bewildered and confused.*

Those three true incidents are a difficult reminder that teenagers are not immune to the impact of grief. Like adults, teens lose relatives and friends to death through accidents, illness, violence and self-inflicted wounds. When a friend dies, teenagers don't have to remain numb, helpless and hopeless. Important actions can be taken which will hasten recovery. Here are ten ways for teens to get through grief.

1. **Read all about it!** Just because you don't know much about the process of grief doesn't mean you can't become quickly informed. Read all about grief and bereavement. Information is empowering and knowledge can liberate you from false assumptions. Websites, libraries and bookstores are excellent places to find information about grief and healing. Here are three excellent books to get you started: *Healing Your Grieving Heart for Teens: 100 Practical Ideas* by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph. D., *The Grieving Teen: A Guide for Teenagers and Their Friends* by Helen Fitzgerald, and *Straight Talk About Death for Teenagers* by Earl Grollman.
2. **Expect to experience a wide range of emotions.** Even though grieving is unique to each individual, some of the more common emotions experienced by teens include; Shock and disbelief ("I can't believe he's dead!"); Guilt and regret ("If only I had been there" or "of only we hadn't had an argument" or "If only we'd spent more time together.") Anger ("How could he/she be so stupid!"), Depression ("I'm too sad to do anything or go anywhere.")

Teens may also feel numb, confused, and afraid. They need to allow themselves to experience their feelings. Encourage them to not repress them and not to judge themselves. Such emotions are normal responses to an abnormal time. If feelings are overwhelming and interfering with daily life, then it's wise to share them with someone trustworthy such as a parent, teacher, coach, school counselor, spiritual leader.

3. **Seek support from friends.** “Your friends can be your greatest support when you are grieving,” notes Dr. Alan Wolfelt in *Healing Your Grieving Heart for Teens: 100 Practical Ideas*. “You may not feel like being around people when you’re sad or depressed over losing someone. But now, more than ever, friends can come to your aid. Try to talk to you friends about the death and how it makes you feel. Getting up the courage to talk about it can be hard, but your friends will better understand how to help if you do. And expressing your grief helps you reconcile your loss,” he adds.
4. **Make a collage.** This is a creative way of bringing additional healing into the grief process. Collect some magazines and newspapers. Then cut our words and pictures which remind you of your deceased friend. Carefully glue them onto construction paper. When the project is completed, you will have created an artistic “story” about your friend. Keep the collage in a visible place in your home. That way, people who visit will ask questions about it, giving you a grand opportunity to talk about your friend and share your thoughts and memories.
5. **Locate and join a support group.** One of the best ways to help you heal is by participating in a peer support group. Your parents, religious leader, teacher, or school counsellor can help you find one. And if there isn’t one in your community, partner with an adult to help you start one. Support groups are invaluable because participants are allowed and encouraged to express their feelings, tell their stories and talk about their pain. No one will judge you or try to shut you down. You will be affirmed for sharing your thoughts and feelings. Each time you leave the meeting, you will feel a little bit better because you had had an opportunity to speak, to be understood and to be supported in your journey through grief.
6. **Keep a journal.** Getting your thoughts down on paper can be very therapeutic. One girl, 14, whose 15-year-old classmate died in an auto accident began writing in a journal. Her first entry was a letter to say goodbye. “At first it felt weird writing a letter to my friend who was already dead. However, I told myself no one else was going to read it so I kept on writing. I wrote telling my friend how sorry I was he died; how much I enjoyed his company in classes; how his death really reminded me how delicate life is; and how much I would miss him. I said goodbye and told him I would never forget him. What began as a painful writing exercise ended up making me feel much better. It’s been nearly seven months since the death and I still return to my journal, reading old entries and adding new ones.”
7. **Tap into your faith.** The death of a friend creates a deep wound. Try to remember that God cares about you and your hurt. Tap into your faith and turn to God who hears, helps and heals those whose hearts are burdened by loss. Take comfort from these Bible verses: “The Lord is near to the broken-hearted, and saves the crushed spirit” (Psalm 34:18, New Revised Standard Version). “He heals the broken-hearted, and binds up their wounds. (Psalm 147:3)
8. **Be patient with yourself.** Don’t rush the grieving process. Grief has its own timetable and there is no quick fix for the pain of bereavement. Helen Fitzgerald, author of *The Grieving Teen: A Guide for Teenagers and Their Friends*, is often asked how long grieving takes. “The answer I give is that grief takes as long as it takes. It will definitely take longer than three months, and it could take several years. I’m not sure we ever get over grief, but I do know

you will get past this pain that you're feeling now and will be able to look back and once again enjoy memories of the person who died. The loss you endured will get integrated into your life as time passes."

9. **Help some else.** Volunteer your time at a homeless shelter, church, hospital, nursing home. Reaching out to others will take the focus off yourself and your pain and will help you see more clearly the many blessings which are present in your life. Dr. Wolfelt says: "Giving of yourself and your time is the most precious gift you can give – and can also help you move forward. Often, you will find that in return you receive more than you gave. An expression of gratitude, a smile, or a tender touch from someone who appreciates your presence can make you realize you value and connection you share with other human beings." If you're nervous about volunteering, consider asking a friend or an adult to join with you.
10. **Memorialize the person who has died.** One group of teenagers organized a car wash in order to raise money to memorialize their friend, a 15-year-old boy who died of cancer. Fifty of them gathered together on a Saturday at their school parking lot. They cleaned cars all day collecting donations and gathered enough to buy a tree. School officials gave them permission to plant the tree in memory of their friend, on the school grounds. They also had a plaque made which simply read: "For James – your friends will never forget you."

Find your own unique way to memorialize the person who died. In doing so, you will discover that some of your hurting will turn into healing and some of your sadness will turn into gladness. Memorializing a friend who has died is a wonderful way of taking something heartbreaking and transforming it into something hopeful and even joyful.

Victor Parachin is the author of *Daily Strength: One Year of Experiencing the Psalms* (Liguori Triumph Books) and *Healing Grief* (Chalice Press).

### **Ten additional ways to help yourself when grieving**

1. Take care of your physical self. Eat healthy food. Rest more.
2. Avoid drugs and alcohol. They simply prolong and complicate the grieving process.
3. Accept and roll with tough days such as birthdays, anniversaries, holidays.
4. Stick to a routine even if you don't feel like it. It will bring some order and discipline to life.
5. Never make important decisions while grieving – quitting school, changing jobs, moving.
6. Use the arts to let out your feelings – music, writing, art, and dance.
7. Talk with others who have experienced loss.
8. Seek healing help if necessary: medical doctors, therapy, support groups.
9. Get physical. Engage in exercise.
10. Don't be on a timetable. You become "normal" quickly. Healing takes its own time.