

SUPPORTING TEENAGERS AFTER THE SUDDEN PASSING OF A PEER

CAREGIVER INFORMATION SHEET

THIS INFORMATION SHEET SHOULD BE USED ALONGSIDE THE PSYCHOLOGIST-LED SESSION DESIGNED TO SUPPORT TEENS AFTER THE SUDDEN PASSING OF A PEER. IT SUMMARISES KEY POINTS BUT SHOULD NOT BE USED IN ISOLATION.

WHY THIS CAN AFFECT TEENAGERS SO STRONGLY

The teenage brain is still developing.

- Emotional and threat-detection systems are highly sensitive and closely linked
- The regulatory, calming, and perspective-taking system is still under construction

WHAT THIS MEANS IN PRACTICE

- Emotion and threat can arrive together
- Reactions may feel intense, confusing, or inconsistent
- Thinking and perspective often come later

Sudden deaths and accidents are particularly unsettling because they:

- Happen without warning or preparation
- Disrupt a sense of safety and predictability
- Can trigger fear as well as grief

It is common for teenagers to experience anxiety, sleep difficulties, withdrawal, heightened alertness, or an increased need for reassurance.

“BUT MY CHILD DIDN’T KNOW THEM WELL”

TEEN GRIEF CAN BE SYMBOLIC RATHER THAN RELATIONAL.

Teenagers may be affected because:

- The person was their age or part of their school community
- It challenges the belief that serious things only happen to other people
- Schools are emotional environments where feelings spread
- It raises questions about safety, fairness, and life more broadly

Reactions should not be measured by closeness. Helpful language includes:

- “Something like this can shake people, even if they didn’t know them.”
- “It makes sense this has made you think about safety.”

GRIEF: WHAT TO EXPECT

CAREGIVERS OFTEN EXPECT:

- Clear stages of grief
- Gradual improvement
- Visible sadness

IN REALITY:

- Grief is non-linear
- Teenagers move in and out of it
- Emotions often come in waves
- Laughter and sadness can coexist

LIVING ALONGSIDE GRIEF

- The aim is not to 'get over' the loss
- Routine and moments of enjoyment do not mean avoidance or disrespect

HELPFUL PHRASES:

- "Grief doesn't follow a timetable."
- "You can feel sad and still enjoy things."

HOW CARE- GIVERS CAN HELP

✓ BE A CALM PRESENCE

- Stay steady, predictable, and measured
- Sit alongside rather than interrogate
- Avoid rushing to fix or reassure

Calm responses help teenagers regulate their own emotions.

✓ LISTEN MORE THAN YOU SPEAK

- Gentle check-ins are often more effective than long conversations
- "I don't know" or "I'm fine" can be genuine responses
- Silence often reflects processing, not avoidance

USEFUL SENTENCE STARTERS:

- "How has today been for you?"
- "Anything come up about what happened?"
- "I'm here if you want to talk – now or later."

WHAT TO SAY (AND WHAT TO AVOID)

HELPFUL APPROACHES

- Calm, simple, age-appropriate language
- Letting teenagers lead the depth of the conversation

TRY TO AVOID

- "At least..."
- "Try not to think about it"
- "Be strong"
- Over-reassurance or problem-solving too quickly

Validation helps emotions settle. Minimising reactions can unintentionally increase distress.

ROUTINE, REASSURANCE AND SAFETY

Routine helps teenagers feel that life is still held together & there is some control.

SUPPORTIVE ACTIONS INCLUDE:

- Regular meals, sleep, and school attendance where possible
- Lowering pressure without removing structure
- Maintaining familiar rhythms

REASSURING LANGUAGE:

- "The adults around you are focused on safety."
- "It's understandable this has made you think about these things."
- "We can take this one day at a time."

Avoid making absolute promises; calm realism builds trust.

SOCIAL MEDIA: SUPPORT WITHOUT POLICING

1 TEENAGERS MAY TURN TO SOCIAL MEDIA TO:

- Stay connected
- Share grief
- Make sense of what has happened

OPEN THE CONVERSATION WITH CURIOSITY

- "What are people sharing?"
- "How do you feel after scrolling?"
- "What feels helpful, and what doesn't?"

2 AT THE SAME TIME, IT CAN:

- Increase anxiety
- Expose them to rumours or upsetting content
- Keep emotions heightened

SUPPORTIVE BOUNDARIES MAY INCLUDE:

- No scrolling in bed
- Muting certain accounts or keywords
- Taking breaks before sleep

Explain limits as care and support, not punishment.

DIFFICULT QUESTIONS ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED

Teenagers may ask concrete questions as they try to understand risk and regain a sense of control.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- Keep answers to graphic questions brief, factual, and non-graphic
- Remember that boundaries are protective
- It is appropriate to say, “I’m not going into that.”

EXAMPLE WORDING

“The details are upsetting, and going into them would not be helpful.”

WHERE POSSIBLE, REDIRECT TO:

- Safety (“Adults are focused on keeping people safe.”)
- Feelings (“Is this bringing up worries for you?”)
- Reassurance (“I’m here with you.”)

FUNERALS AND MEMORIALS

POSSIBLE BENEFITS INCLUDE:

- A sense of closure
- Shared grief
- Validation

POSSIBLE CHALLENGES INCLUDE:

- Overwhelming emotions
- Sensory overload

ATTENDANCE SHOULD BE A CHOICE.

- Prepare teenagers for what to expect
- Give permission to leave early
- Alternatives are equally valid

NEURO- DIVERGENT TEENAGERS

NEURODIVERGENT TEENAGERS MAY:

- Grieve in a more cognitive way
- Fixate on details
- Show delayed reactions
- Need greater routine and predictability

HELPFUL SUPPORT INCLUDES:

- Clear, concrete communication
- Reduced sensory demands
- Written summaries where helpful
- Respect for different expressions of grief

Meltdowns or shutdowns usually signal overwhelm rather than behaviour.

WHAT'S NORMAL – AND WHEN TO SEEK SUPPORT

COMMON RESPONSES INCLUDE:

- Changes in mood
- Sleep disruption
- Reduced concentration
- Emotional ups and downs

ADDITIONAL SUPPORT MAY BE HELPFUL IF:

- Distress escalates or does not ease over time
- Sleep or anxiety are significantly affected
- Withdrawal persists
- There are concerns about safety or hopelessness

Support can be framed as “extra help during a hard time.”

CARING FOR YOURSELF AS A CAREGIVER



Your calm presence matters



‘Good enough’ support is good enough



It is okay to say, “I don’t know.”

Teenagers are not only grieving a person; they are grieving a sense of safety and certainty. Your steadiness, routine, and willingness to sit alongside discomfort are powerful protective factors.

As caregivers we often focus on how we can make our teens happy. Sometimes our role is to support them in being unhappy and managing distress in a safe & contained way, alongside continuing to live.