

Grief and Loss

What Is Loss?

During your teenage years you will probably notice that you are becoming more aware of and sensitive to the growing number of changes in your life. This is the time of your transition into adulthood, of developing your individuality, and of learning how to cope with important challenges in life. It is a difficult and sometimes agonizing period, but it is also a rewarding time of learning and growth. The knowledge you gain now will help you make smart decisions in the future.

When you experience change, you often experience loss. The many changes of the teenage years can bring many losses, large and small. Loss is the experience of losing someone or something that is important to you, and the feelings that you experience are significant and valid. Learning how to deal with loss is an important part of becoming a healthy and strong person.

There are many different kinds of losses that teens can experience. A loss can be anything from the death of someone you love, to changing schools, to moving from your home or town. It could be your parents' separation or divorce. It can be breaking up with a boyfriend or girlfriend. It can even be grieving for the loss of your childhood.

Everyone experiences loss differently. How you feel at the time of loss is personal, and the feelings you have are never wrong. The most important part of coping with loss is how you choose to deal with those feelings. Some people choose destructive ways of dealing with their feelings, such as drinking or doing drugs. These are only harmful choices that do not allow you to move on and grow.

On the other hand, sharing your feelings with other people can be a way to start the healing process. It is important to know that it is OK to feel what you feel. Being honest about how you feel is often the first step in healing. And no matter how big or small the loss, there are people, organizations, and services specially created to help people understand and cope with their feelings.

Dealing With Change

Change can be healthy and necessary. But sometimes it hurts, so you resist it. When you were young, you probably believed in the tooth fairy. You played in sandboxes and climbed the jungle gym. As you got older, your reality changed as you changed. You found out that the tooth fairy does not really exist. And instead of playing with toys and on playgrounds, you became more interested in your appearance and hanging out with friends. These changes signal an end to childhood, a loss that you may feel as you move into adolescence.

Rites of Passage

A rite of passage is a ceremony or ritual that people go through as they travel from one stage of life to another, often from childhood into adulthood. Rites of passage help you understand the world as you grow and change. They mark transition periods in your life.

Usually a person's culture or society determines how he or she marks rites of passage. Some rites of passage are societal, such as high school graduation. Some are religious rites of passage. For example, Jewish children have a bar or bat mitzvah when they turn thirteen. Many cultures have an elaborate ceremony when a young woman first gets her period. Changes related to sexuality are causes for celebration. This provides young people with a healthy way to deal with conflicting and confusing emotions.

In American culture, there are fewer institutionalized rites of passage than in other parts of the world. For example, young girls may experience a whirlwind of confusing emotions when they menstruate for the first time, but there is no official observance to mark the event. They have to devise their own ways of coping—telling their mom, older sister, or some other trusted female—and hope that they will gain support and learn the correct information. Sometimes this makes loss and change difficult to work through. If you feel that you're undergoing a change or experiencing a loss by yourself, it's probably a good idea to let your parents or another trusted adult know how you feel.

Types of Loss

There are an infinite number of losses that you can experience. Some will be more difficult to deal with than others, but no loss is too small or insignificant.

You may have experienced a loss that hurt you, but perhaps other people did not recognize how important it was to you and told you just to "be strong." As you grow up, you will learn to acknowledge your own feelings and give them the value that they deserve. It can be hard to learn to acknowledge your feelings. However, whenever you experience a loss, it is important for you to take the time to understand it, feel it, and deal with it.

Experiencing Loss

Everyone experiences little losses. You get back a test that you thought you had aced, and the grade is lower than you expected. The friend you're supposed to hang out with ends up ditching you to hang out with someone else. The high school sports team you play on loses a big game. Whenever you go through something that hurts even a little bit, it makes a difference in your life. But these kinds of losses are relatively easy to recover from. After some time passes, these incidents are usually easily forgotten.

Sometimes, however, you may experience a loss that is so devastating it could take months or years to overcome. When experiencing a major loss, it often helps to talk to a parent or school counselor. No matter what kind of loss you've experienced, you're not alone. There are people who are trained to help you get through difficult times. Loss encompasses a wide range of experiences and emotions. The following kinds of loss are just some of the things that humans go through. But whatever the loss, it is possible to find the path to healing.

Breaking Up

The teen years are the time during which many people have their first boyfriends or girlfriends. Unfortunately, it can be very difficult when these relationships come to an end. It can be hard to accept that someone may not have the same emotions for you that they once had. It might make you question your own worth, and it can affect your self-esteem. It's natural to feel upset if you and your significant other break up, but it's also important to learn how to move on.

Being Different

A common form of loss is not "fitting in." Your teenage years are a time of establishing your identity and learning who you are. Most young people want to be popular and also maintain their individuality. This is a tricky balance to achieve and can result in being teased or bullied by others, especially if you feel the need to look or act differently than the people around you. Sometimes teens are picked on, not for the choices that they make, but for the color of their skin, race, religion, or social class.

Dealing with being different from the people around you or wanting to express your difference can be a difficult and lonely experience. Even though people tell you to ignore bullies, their words still sting. Not letting them make you feel insecure and angry takes courage, strength, and endurance.

Divorce in the Family

In the United States, a great deal of marriages end in divorce. This can have a profound effect on the divorced couple's children. Having separated parents often means having to split your time between two households. Sometimes you may not want to see one of your parents at all. It's understandable and perfectly all right that you are experiencing these feelings.

Just because divorce is common doesn't mean it's easy for teens to live through. It's common for teens to feel guilty regarding their parent's divorce, even though it's not their fault. You may be angry with your parents, and you may even be angry with yourself. If you are having a hard time dealing with the divorce and don't feel that you can talk to your parents or siblings about it, seek out a school counselor. It can be painful and difficult when your parents separate, but it's possible to learn to live through it.

Illness

Illness is another form of loss. Many teens are forced to deal with the fact that illness has stricken a loved one. Taking care of a parent, grandparent, or sibling can be very stressful.

Coping with illness will likely affect your emotions. You may feel as if you have to be cheerful all the time because you want to be positive around the sick person. But inside, you may feel like crying because it's hard work and it hurts to see someone so helpless. When a sick person is in the hospital, you may feel frustrated because his or her well-being seems beyond your control. It can be difficult to accept the fact that there often isn't much you can do to help besides offering moral support. If the sick person is a member of your family, your daily responsibilities may change. You might have to take care of a younger sibling, for example, or do more around the house. This can be frustrating, but try to remember how important your help is to your family.

You may also think about that person possibly dying and regret all the things you ever did or said that weren't so great. It's normal to have feelings of guilt and fear. They are part of the change that's going on around and inside you.

Sometimes you're the one who is ill. Teenagers come down with diseases, too, although they tend to think of themselves as invincible. Sadly, cancer, HIV (the virus that causes AIDS), and other long-term illnesses can and do strike teens. Even if your disease is curable, it is very stressful to learn that you are ill and must fight to get well.

Death

The situation that most people associate with the word loss is death and dying. Even if the person was someone you barely knew, maybe a fellow student in one of your classes or a neighbor you saw on the street, there will still be an effect. Life will likely seem a little less safe and secure. If it is a parent or grandparent who dies, it is an especially painful experience. Along

with all of the difficulties of growing up, teenagers are suddenly forced to face the world without the person who gave them life or the person they rely on for support and guidance.

As a result, when a teen loses a parent or grandparent, he or she often re-experiences what it is like to be a child—totally helpless and dependent. And at the same time, teens may feel as if they have to hurry and be a grown-up. This is true even if there is another parent still alive and able to care for them, if they have other adult role models, or even if they didn't feel close to the parent who died.

The death of anyone you care about will have a tremendous emotional impact. When that person is a sibling or friend, someone around your own age, it can be extremely confusing. "People in their teens aren't supposed to die," you may think. This can bring about a range of emotions: guilt, fear, anger, loss, and sadness. Sometimes when someone our own age dies, we can be filled with fear that it could happen to us next. This is a normal fear, and talking to a medical professional or a counselor can help to reduce your concern. The best way to deal with these feelings is to know the facts about the person's death and what your risks really are. The most common causes of death among people between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four, for example, are accidents, homicide, and suicide.

After the death of someone close to you, you will start to go through the stages of grieving: denial, numbness, confusion, anger, guilt, regret, depression, and acceptance.

It is important that you talk about how you feel and the things you are going through. In addition to talking about how you feel, there are other ways to help yourself through the grieving process. Take part in observing the deceased person's life. Attend the funeral. Talk about the person and their achievements with others. Make a memorial. You can also try to help the grieving family. You can bring food, run errands, or do anything, such as yard work, that needs to be done. You may find that the best way to make yourself feel better is to help others.

Abuse

Kids who come from abusive homes live under the constant threat of pain and loss. Abuse is deeply destructive, and it's very widespread. When a parent or another trusted adult verbally abuses, beats, or sexually molests a child, they inflict damage that may not emerge or be fully understood until years later.

Adults who abuse children are mentally ill and need immediate professional help. That's why, even though it's scary to report an adult to another authority figure, it should be done as soon as possible. Another trusted adult, like a teacher or a counselor, can help you take the steps toward ending the abuse and making sure that the person does not hurt anyone else.

Unhealthy Ways to Numb the Pain

Teenagers often turn their pain inward and do things that make them hurt even more.

Suppression of emotional pain is a major cause of eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa (self-starvation), bulimia (bingeing on large quantities of food and purging, or ridding, it from the body), and compulsive eating. People turn to obsession with food and body image to fill the painful void they feel when their lives lack support or comfort.

Another way people cope in an unhealthy way is through self-harm (harming one's own body by cutting or burning, for example). This usually happens when a person's emotional pain is so great that inflicting physical pain on oneself is actually a release or way to take the person's mind off emotional turmoil.

Some teens turn to drugs and alcohol to numb reality. At first, drinking or taking drugs may seem like a harmless way to escape from problems for a little while. But experimentation often leads to drug or alcohol addiction.

It is important to note that these ways of coping never heal pain. They only briefly cover it over. In the end, they create problems that are even more difficult to solve. If you are suffering from any of these disorders, it is very important that you get help as soon as possible. Talk to someone you trust. No one has to keep pain inside.

The Healing Path

There are as many different paths to healing from loss as there are people who suffer loss. Everyone's healing process is unique, but there are some basic guidelines you can learn to help create the path that is right for you.

Admitting That You Hurt

The first step is always the hardest. Before you can truly start to heal and feel whole again, you have to admit that you are hurting and need help.

You may deny that you are hurting. You may tell people you're fine when you really aren't fine at all. Sometimes denying emotions can make it easier to cope with the demands of everyday life. Sometimes you just don't want to sound needy. Or you may try to take your mind off the pain by doing some other activity, such as playing basketball or watching television.

You may also be in denial because you are afraid to feel or express emotions. Sometimes people feel silly or embarrassed about crying. Boys and men are often taught that they're not supposed to show pain or cry.

Denial is very normal, and almost everyone goes into denial at some point. The problem is that denying your emotions doesn't make them go away. It just pushes them inside for a little while.

Moving Beyond Denial

Moving beyond denial isn't necessarily easy. But getting through it makes you stronger and better able to face the entire grieving process.

Denial exists because people sometimes need to put their feelings on hold for a while in order to cope with a painful experience in their lives. Denial can be a tool instead of an obstacle. But it's important to learn to recognize when you are in denial so you can move beyond it and deal with your problem head-on.

Your Steps to Healing

Denial is not always the first step to healing. Because we all deal with loss in a different way, we progress through the grieving process uniquely. We move through the levels of grief and loss in the way that makes sense to us. This all depends on who we are and what we have experienced.

There is no right or wrong way to grieve. But the feelings that people usually go through can be broken down into roughly five categories: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. (Psychologists originally created these categories to address the process of dealing with death. But they can apply to all kinds of loss.) You may go through some of the stages and not others,

or you may go back and forth through the stages. And it might take longer to get through certain stages. It is important that you let yourself feel what you feel, and allow yourself to go through the process at your own pace.

Breaking It Down

It may help you to understand these five categories if you relate them to a relatively minor traumatic experience in your life. For example, most of us know what it is like to experience problems with a computer. If your computer refuses to work at a time when you most need to produce an important piece of homework, you will probably experience these five categories of dealing with the situation.

- **Denial:** When you first start up the computer and it doesn't work, you will probably restart it and then try again. You may even try it several times, refusing to believe that it just won't work properly.
- **Anger:** You may get angry, or hit the table, or yell at the computer or at anyone who is nearby.
- **Bargaining:** You may start to make a compromise with the computer: "If you just start now, I'll always do my homework on time in the future." You may beg the computer to work.
- **Depression:** You start to feel hopeless and foresee the trouble that you are going to get in tomorrow when you don't hand in your homework. You picture low scores, failing the year, and having to repeat a grade while all your friends move on to the next grade.
- **Acceptance:** Now you are ready to deal with the situation. You go to the library to use the computer there, or call a friend and ask if you can use his or her computer for a few hours. You find a way to complete your homework and then arrange for the computer to be fixed later.

Now imagine these steps when there is a deeper trauma in your life, such as a romantic breakup. At first you may deny that the breakup hurts you—or that it really happened! Stunned, you may replay conversations over and over in your mind. You may be shocked and sad that there is a big change in your life. You may get angry with you ex-boyfriend or ex-girlfriend. And at the same time you may bargain with him or her, wanting life to be the way it used to be.

If it becomes clear that the breakup is permanent, you probably will experience the fourth category—getting depressed about it. Life may seem uncertain, and you may not know what to do. But soon enough, you will be able to accept it, deal with it, and start to move on.

The most important thing to remember when you're dealing with a loss is that it's your process. These are only guidelines. That means if you are currently going through the process of grieving

and you haven't gone through the denial stage but you are experiencing the anger stage, you haven't failed. There is no right or wrong way through grief. The right path is the one you discover yourself.

Writing a Contract

Whatever step you take first in dealing with loss, it is the right one. It is probably also the hardest step. The first time you recognize that something in your life is causing you pain, you have, in a way, signed a silent contract with yourself that says you will move through the process. You have agreed with yourself that you will face the pain, learn all that you can from it, and work toward moving on.

That doesn't mean it's going to be easy or fast. But once you have admitted that you want to heal, you will have already started by making a promise to yourself. It might even help to take that silent contract and put it down on paper. The contract can be simple, merely stating that you are committed to coping with your loss, no matter what it is. Write down why you think your loss is important, even if you think others might not agree.

If you think it will help, try to look at the contract every night before you go to bed and every morning when you wake up. Keep it in a drawer near your bed or maybe taped on your wall. If you're embarrassed about someone reading it, you can keep it hidden, but make sure you read it regularly. If you feel comfortable, you could even share the contract with a trusted friend, parent, brother or sister, or therapist, and have him or her keep a copy, too. That way, if this person notices that you have abandoned your process, he or she can gently remind you that you need to get back on the path. This contract with yourself will help you remember how important it is to stay in touch with the feelings you have about the changes in your life.

Most of all, be sure to be open to your feelings and not get mad at yourself if you aren't finished grieving when you think you should be. Healing a loss is like climbing a mountain. You need the proper gear, good skills, and endurance.

The Road to Recovery

Anyone who has ever gone backpacking or rock climbing will tell you that the two most important things you should know before you head out into the wilderness are that you should bring the proper gear and that it is not getting to the peak that is important, but how you get there.

Sometimes, after you have lost someone or something, you want so badly to feel better again that you may move through the healing process too fast. You convince yourself that you have accomplished your goal and that you are ready to move forward. However, when people try to rush themselves back to normal or keep their feelings bottled up inside, they can feel guilty or angry for years.

Let's compare that loss to climbing a mountain. Dealing with a major loss such as death is like facing the world's highest and most challenging climb. You need to train and develop mountaineering skills like compass reading and first aid. You need to be mentally determined and pay attention to the route you take and to your surroundings if you want to reach the peak. If you are not paying attention, you may get lost or follow a path that doesn't lead to the top.

Climbers use smaller mountains as training grounds. They go slowly and practice and learn skills that will allow them to deal with the more challenging situations that are critical on bigger mountains. With this experience and knowledge, they then have the confidence to face more challenging, fearful, or unexpected situations.

The Process of Grieving

The process of climbing a mountain is similar to the process people go through when they grieve. People want to be finished with the process quickly because it can be frightening and painful, like scaling a cliff. But if you take the time to experience your emotions, pay attention to how you feel, and figure out how to deal with how you are feeling, you will develop coping skills that will help you be prepared for losses—big and small. When possible, try using little losses to practice your coping skills. The new parts of yourself that you discover may amaze you. You may even feel really strong and proud of yourself for facing and dealing with difficult situations. It can be a very rewarding experience, just like reaching the top of a difficult climb.

The Winding Path of Grief

Dealing with loss is not necessarily a one-time thing. Years after you have lost someone or something and felt that you were healed, the pain of that loss could revisit you.

You may suddenly find yourself feeling depressed or angry about losing a pet when you were a child, even if you went through the grieving process a long time ago. Or maybe you thought you

were totally over your ex-boyfriend or ex-girlfriend. You've been dating someone new for three months. But then you run into your ex at the mall and you feel upset again.

This is when you should backtrack and re-examine the path you have chosen. Perhaps you missed some trail that was a better fit for you. Perhaps you weren't ready to say good-bye. Maybe you didn't achieve closure—the official end to something.

Remembering losses is normal and healthy. You will remember losses from time to time throughout your life. Each time, you deal with them a little differently. Or maybe the memories or what you learned from experiencing that loss will help you deal with a current loss. This is also an opportunity to learn something new about yourself. The most important thing is to stay in touch with your feelings and be aware of your reactions and behaviors related to those feelings.

Support Systems

After you have created your contract and you feel ready to begin your journey, one of the first steps you will take is selecting proper tools and finding people to help you put those tools to use. There are countless ways for teens to heal themselves. These are just a few of them.

Keeping Track of Your Dreams

Everyone has dreams, even if they don't always remember them. Many people believe that we try to work out our problems in our dreams. These problems sometimes come out as symbols or situations that don't even seem to make sense. But often, when you write stuff down, you realize that your unconscious mind—the part of the mind you're not normally aware of—is trying to tell you something.

One way to start the healing process is to begin keeping a dream journal. It helps to keep the journal at your bedside or even to keep it with you all the time so that whenever you recall a dream or have an idea you want to make note of, you can write it down.

Writing

Some therapists think that the best way to cope with pain and loss is by exploring your creativity. Art therapists are trained psychotherapists who have a clinical background and use art therapy to help people express themselves through painting, drawing, and sculpture. Many people find that keeping a journal and writing poetry is also helpful. Therapists find that ideas often become clearer to you or are easier to analyze when they are written down. Writing serves several different purposes, from simply releasing emotions to putting your thoughts in order. Writing is used in many types of therapy to help both the patient and the therapist. It is often useful to share your writing or poetry with other people.

Talking

In an ideal world, the first people we would be able to talk to when we had a problem would be our parents and other family members. However, this is often not the case. Sometimes it is even family members who are causing you pain. In this case, you need to look outside your family for support and understanding.

Most schools provide counselors who are equipped with resources to guide you in an appropriate direction. Some schools even have visiting social workers. A teacher can be a good first person to turn to because he or she knows you well and will know which counselor can best attend to your needs.

An important thing to remember is that no problem is too big or small. Never feel ashamed of your problem. If it is big enough to bother you, it is big enough to ask for help. Teachers and counselors have seen many, many people like yourself, and often they may surprise you by their familiarity with problems like yours. Regardless, they will not pass judgment. They are there to help you.

Therapy

A school counselor or social worker can refer you to a therapist outside of school, if that will help you. When you are choosing a therapist, it is helpful to know what you want from him or her before you make your decision. Sometimes your choice might be influenced by economic reasons, such as whether a certain therapist accepts your family's insurance. There are different kinds of therapies, and each therapist has a different approach to therapy. Ask your therapist about his or her confidentiality; by law, most conversations are private, but there may be certain parameters such as your age and safety that could affect confidentiality. Remember that sometimes it takes several tries before you find a therapist and type of therapy that works for you. Do not get discouraged if you don't immediately find a therapist and therapy you like; it is hard to find a therapist you connect with. Before deciding on a type of therapy, ask yourself:

- Do you want to be involved in group therapy or in a one-on-one therapy session?
- Would you be open to being prescribed medication, such as antidepressants, or are you opposed to it?
- Do you want someone to talk to you and give you advice, or just listen to you talk?

There are many varieties of therapy and kinds of qualified therapists. Psychologists have a Ph.D. in psychology and licensed social workers have a master's degree in social work. There are also licensed professional counselors (LPCs), often called psychotherapists, who have a master's degree in therapy. All of these therapists have completed many years of additional training. They may offer one-on-one or group therapy sessions. Psychiatrists are trained psychologists who are also medical doctors. They may offer the same range of therapy as psychologists, but they can also prescribe medication if it is determined that medication would be helpful for you. Deciding whether or not to go on medication is a big decision. Some people do not want to go on medication, and others have found medication to be extraordinarily helpful in their daily lives.

During therapy you will have to examine yourself, your attitudes, and your actions. This may seem painful and be a very emotional experience, but your therapist will provide a safe environment for you to open up and heal your pain. And just talking through your problems to someone who is trained to listen and will not judge you can be extremely helpful. By going to talk to a counselor, you are taking an active role in making yourself feel better.

Moving Forward

As you work through your grief and come to terms with the pain and emotions that you feel, you will find that you are overcoming many hurdles and can feel proud of your strength and achievements. Life is a long and sometimes difficult road, full of losses and gains—some large, some small. As you learn new ways of coping, you will be able to use those lessons time and again. This will allow you to grow and develop. You may even find that you are able to use what you learn to help others.

It can be harder to find the strength to deal with losses than it is to suffer them. It may seem easier to live in denial or to seek escape through drugs, alcohol, self-abuse, or violence. But when you face your problems, you will find that dealing with them will make you a stronger, healthier, and happier person—a person you are proud to be.

Myths and Facts About Dealing With Loss

Myth: When I've experienced a loss, I shouldn't let myself feel sad.

Fact: The best thing you can do is allow yourself to feel sad. By keeping your feelings inside, you're not letting yourself heal.

Myth: I am all alone in dealing with my loss. No one can help me.

Fact: There are likely a lot of people who have gone through the same thing that you have. Your parents or a school counselor can talk with you about your troubles or help you find a therapist or support group.

Myth: If I'm feeling depressed, there must be something wrong with me.

Fact: There's nothing wrong with you. It's normal to feel depressed after experiencing a loss. However, if your depression goes on for a very long time or makes it difficult for you to function, then you should get some help from a counselor or therapist.

Myth: If I ignore my grief, it will go away.

Fact: Even though it can be difficult to confront your grief, burying it deep down inside won't do you any good. Besides your friends and family members, there are trained professionals who can provide a confidential, non-judgmental environment in which you can talk about your problems.

Ten Great Questions to Ask About Dealing With Loss

1. What steps can I take to cope with my loss?
2. What can I do to make myself feel better?
3. How long is it normal to grieve for?
4. How can I tell if I should talk to a counselor?
5. How can I connect with other people who have suffered losses?
6. Is there a support group in my area for teens who have suffered the same kind of loss that I have?
7. Who should I talk to if I'm feeling depressed?
8. If I need to go to a therapist, how can I tell which one is right for me?
9. How do I find out about the different kinds of therapy available?
10. What should I do if my therapist recommends I go on medication and I'm not sure I want to?

Jack's Story

It's Friday evening; the weekend is finally here after a long week. I was sitting around talking with my friends, having a great time, cracking jokes about each other, and enjoying life. Of course my mom calls while I'm with my buddies, but I didn't answer because I didn't want to ruin the fun. I get another call, now from my brother in Arkansas, and I'm wondering to myself, "Is there a problem?"

David, my brother, asks me if everything is all right; I said everything was fine. David said, "Mom called and I missed her call and now she won't answer."

I told him I would get in touch with my mom and call him back.

The phone rings once and there is the answer from my mom that became the hardest moment of my life. My heart dropped as I slowly processed her telling me that Rebecca, my cousin, had been in a horrible car wreck and her future was uncertain.

Rebecca was dead. It hurt me. She was in great health and was having the best time of her life. It was just two weeks into college at the University of Alabama, and the wreck was a freak accident. I immediately had flashbacks of her infectious smile that always brought happiness wherever she went. Rebecca had a way making every event fun--family or otherwise--even if she wasn't fired up about being there. The beauty of Rebecca was the silent, positive influence that she had on so many people; she really never realized it. Rebecca taught me that attitude is what you need to get through life, to listen to your values, and to respect other people whomever they are. I have never known someone so happy like her. She was my cousin, and my best friend.

I find myself continually asking how I turn this tragedy into a positive in my own life. I'm going to make a concerted effort to implement her fine qualities and positive attitude in my own life. A genuine care for others is the quality that I will carry throughout my life. That is the one value which I will hope to maintain in my own life and will make an effort to instill in my children's lives.

As I reflect back to that moment when I first learned of Rebecca's death, never did I realize that at this young age I would be confronted with such a tragic event, an event which will help define me as the person I will become. I have learned that life takes many turns, some good, some not. However we must be strong, make good decisions, and continue to look forward and find positives in all that we experience.

—Jack

[Share your own story here.](#) Sharing stories is a powerful way to connect with other people. Be part of the Teen Health & Wellness Personal Story Project--like Jack did above--and share your story about successfully dealing with or overcoming a challenge.

Madeline's Story

It was May 18th, 2010 when I got that call. It was 4:45 in the afternoon, my memory as clear as a bell. It was my coach who called, not of sports or work, but about loss and grief. It was then when I realized my dear friend had been in a car crash the morning before. We both were seventeen, and finishing our junior year, but only I would be able to see our senior year. Only I would be able to experience college, and a family of my own. A question I keep asking myself as I see my friends, and my peers pass away, I often wonder "Why them?" or "Why not me?" I saw him every day for two years, and now he is gone, like dust in the wind, there one moment and gone the next.

A couple days later, I found myself at his school, Jesuit High, for his funeral. As I wrote my name down on the guestbook, along with my coach and other teammates, everything seemed so much more real than it had seemed before.

I took my seat near the back, on the aisle seat and watched the stained glass window of St. Peter as the sun glistened through. The service started, the Reverend and my friend's brothers talked about how he was a smart, joyful young man and how successful he was at this and that. All we could do was laugh, how could one not laugh at the stories and of the adventures he took, the fantastic memories he gave us all. They talked about how he befriended everyone he met and made them feel like one. Most of all they talked about how he had joined crew with his school, and later on with my team. His brothers said how he impacted his friends through the team, but there was so much more than that. He taught me never to give up on what I wanted in life. If I really wanted something I should always "stand up and fight for it," and never give up till I got it.

That day, I did not just lose a friend, but lost a great teammate, a great athlete. As the service ended, I sat in my seat for a couple minutes after, looking still at St. Peter. As it started drizzling outside for a moment, it looked as if St. Peter was crying too. Right then and there I knew, it was ok, and everything would be all right, for God was showing his grief for our loss, through nothing but a simple stained glass mural.

As my senior year nears the end, I finally figured out that my friend did not just die for any reason, but in a way he died to show us to live for what we believe in because we never know when our last day will be. In some way he died for all his friends, and me, for we lost him, but through him we grew stronger. We did not die, because it is our job to realize that we should value what is given to us, because it can just as easily be ripped from our hands. We never know when we might be at our next funeral, saying goodbye to friends, family, or neighbors.

Nine months to the day from my friend's death, as I write my name in another guestbook, it was another confirmation, a constant reminder of how things never last. When someone leaves us,

and departs from this world, we open space for new life, for new stories, a new beginning. It is just a matter of how we live our life.

—Madeline

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Jemma's Story

There is a huge man standing on my chest. I try gasping for air but he doesn't budge. One of his friends is punching me in the stomach. And the other is grabbing hold of my throat and squeezing. I just want the pain and hurt to go away. I want to cry but I hold it in until I am all alone. This is how I feel when I think of my Uncle John.

My Uncle John died this October, and ever since then all I want to do is hear his laugh and see his smiling face. But all that happens is I get stuck underneath that huge man and his friends. I think of how he will never be at another Christmas or how he won't be there to sit at my graduation or even how he won't be there to take pictures at my wedding. This wound in my heart is huge and gaping. He was the man who brought the family together. Now it will never be the same.

I have had a number of bad things happen to my family in the last eight months. It started in May when my Uncle Cecil passed away after cancer was found again in his body. Two weeks later my grandma lost her husband. He died after spending many years fighting for his health. In October my Uncle John passed away after hitting the two best golf balls of his life. He died of a heart attack and was gone before he hit the ground. Next, at the beginning of December, my grandma was put in the hospital with a very rare, potentially fatal hernia. We almost lost her, but thankfully the doctors wanted to take a closer look. On Christmas Eve my cousin and her 7-year-old daughter were in a car accident. A drunk driver hit them and they shouldn't have lived, but I believe that someone was watching out for them. They were able to walk away with only minor injuries.

When I say there was one bad thing after another, I am not kidding. I could probably uncover some more family crises, but I think a lot of the hurt comes from everything happening at once. I like to think that my family and I are healing, but I am not so sure. My Grandma is having a hard time knowing her son died before her. What she doesn't know is how hard it is to watch her say that she wants to go with him. My aunt is trying to be there for everyone and she can't heal herself. I might have that same problem. I feel like that man will never get off my chest. My dad is guarded and putting all his effort into work. All the emotion has caused my parents to be agitated towards each other. I hate fighting, but what I hate more is seeing my family fight with themselves on the inside.

I feel emotionally numb. I try to keep my head up. Even with all the darkness in my life right now I keep hoping I will find the silver lining. I know that if I keep looking for good in all situations life has to offer, eventually I will have to find them. Even though I don't want to believe there was good in my Uncle John's death, it has to be there. One thing that comes to mind is he didn't suffer. The truth is the people who are left behind are the only ones to feel pain. Another thing is

that my uncle would help anyone; he was the model citizen. He was a great community man and everyone respected him. I can only hope to be half the person he was. I know that I will not have my whole family for the rest of my life, but I am selfish and still wish death and hurt and sickness didn't exist.

All that has happened with my family makes me not want to leave for college in just a few short months. I want to stay. Maybe then I would be able to keep everyone happy and healthy. Sometimes I wish I was in a fairytale. Nothing would be allowed if a ten-year-old wouldn't understand it. I know that it is stupid, but then there wouldn't have to be the hurtful reality of living life without my loved ones. My mom says if I were to stay, there would be nothing I could do to help if something happened. She said it would hurt my family more if they were the reason that I didn't follow my dreams.

I know that my Uncle John won't physically attend another celebration, but he will always be there. When we were at the funeral my dad gave a speech that had us all laughing and crying. We had a coat hanger covered with hats to show all of John's different sides. When dad mentioned that John would do anything at a drop of a hat, one of the hats fell off the hanger as if it was rehearsed. Seeing that told me he was there that day. He is here watching and encouraging me. He grabs a drink and toasts at the Christmas table, he walks beside me when I go hunting, and he cheers when he watches me dance. Even though I can't see him I believe that he is there. Like my sister said at his funeral: "God knew we needed a guardian angel."

I know that my wound in my heart will slowly heal. And the man that is on my chest will lose weight. He will eventually step off. That makes me want to keep living life to the fullest and not hold anything back. I tell my family I love them every day, because you never know what day is your last.

—Jemma

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Hannah's Story

I was 2 and a half when I get separated from my mother and my grandmother and her husband adopted me. My mom and dad had the choice if they still wanted to see me and help support me while I was growing up. My mom chose to run off and do drugs unlike my father. He got sober and helped grandma and grandpa support me.

It was fun living with grandma and grandpa. They always had good food. But one day my grandma sent me off with my aunt for some odd reason. When we got back to the house, there was an ambulance. I didn't know what was going on. I ran into the house and saw grandma. She was fine. I ran up to her and said "where's grandpa?" She said "he's with the angels now." He was dying because of old age, and I understand that, it's just a part of life and it's going to happen sooner or later.

Two years had passed and everything was going great, until on March 9th, my grandma came running in the house screaming. I will never forget the blood-curdling scream that echoed through the house that morning. I ran to her and asked her what was going on. She said she just got a phone call saying that her daughter, my aunt, had overdosed and has died. I was devastated. I didn't understand why this was happening to me. I just didn't...

One year later, I'm staying the night with my dad. We stayed up a little later than usual that night because we were watching a football game that night. After the game we all went to sleep. It was about 8:00 o'clock in the morning when I heard something hit the ground. I didn't think anything of it, I just had thought that my dad had dropped something, so I just go back to sleep. A couple of minutes later I hear it again, but this time, there was screaming. I ran back to where my dad was, and he was lying on the ground. He was having a heart attack. His girlfriend told me to go to the neighbor's house and get help, so I run out of the house to next door. I bang on the door and these two girls answer that looked to be 15, I told them to call for help. They pulled me inside and I told them what was going on. 10 minutes later my grandma showed up and took me to the hospital that he had been taken to. He died. Just at the age of 45, my father died of a heart attack.

Why does it have to be me? Why do I have to have all of these deaths in my family? I'm only 12, why me? I went through so much depression. I had to go to counseling for a while. That didn't help. A year passed and things were getting better, thank God. It goes to show that you can get over any obstacle, no matter how big or small. There is always someone there by your side. You're never alone.

—Hannah

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Jaquetta's Story

When one thinks of a problem concerning teens, it is usually somewhere along the lines of "child's play," or a situation that is significantly over dramatized. These scenarios include: relationship problems, bullying, body image issues, peer-pressure and drugs. It is an outrage that as teens, our situations are merely pushed to the side and not referenced as important by "grown-ups" who face "real" problems like financial trouble and stress. Newsflash, adults are not the only ones whose problems create long-term pain and suffering. As teens we have often heard the line "been there, done that" by many of our older relatives who strive to ensure us our problems are not as difficult as they may seem, but they don't understand. Not everyone can handle the same amount of pain or suffering. We may be teens who do encounter petty situations like misplacing our favorite sweater or breaking a nail, but we are victims as well. Victims of unbearable amounts of pain, grief and heartbreak. These internal struggles are struggles that cannot be explained through basic communication, so we try to express them through music, writing, art and in the most unfortunate cases, suicide notes. It's time someone listened.

Contradictory to my adolescence, I have not encountered many of the stereotypical disturbances associated with being young, wild and free. I've had my heart broken but not by a significant other. I've had body image issues but as of now they are in the past and the least of my worries. What I am here to discuss is the unbearable debt that death has on not only adults but adolescents as well. Yes, I am here to discuss one of life's most unfortunate series of events. It is a topic no one likes to talk about, but to help someone who desperately needs guidance I will take my chances.

At the age of five a child should be happy and full of life, looking forward to every adventure that lies just around the corner. I was all of these things, and a bit more. Despite my strenuous family situation with my mother and father being separated, I found means to be happy. My mother's home was where I spent most of my time but my father's house was my fortress. It was where I found various things to do in nature. I would take walks and play in his dirt filled yard. Those days were the best days of my childhood. Those days tragically came to an end when my father passed away. He wasn't sick or anything but he was an alcoholic and despite the negative connotation directed towards alcoholic parents, my father was a great man. He never drank around me and my older brother, or maybe he did and I wasn't aware. Those brown paper bags were a mystery then.

After the passing of my father, everything went downhill and even now as I strive to rid myself of my horrible past, I find myself rigid with anger. This anger is directed towards no one in particular but it affects everyone. After my father passed away, my mother began to struggle emotionally and financially. She was already suffering because not long before the loss of my father was the

loss of my grandmother, whose health had been rapidly deteriorating. I felt lost and unmistakably alone. I went into a state of pure hatred as I became older, tearing my father's picture off of my wall and cursing him for leaving me to face the inevitable alone. My mother didn't understand my anger. She thought it wasn't the typical reaction to the loss of a parent being it was completely opposite to her reaction of losing her mother. I couldn't explain it either. I was always daddy's little girl, but how can you be daddy's little girl without daddy?

Soon I would go on a journey of enlightenment. After the self diagnosed depression and constant negativity, I began to realize the power I had within myself. Initially believing that being without my father was a downfall, I began to redirect this idea with the realization of the independence I was forced to obtain due to the fact that he wasn't there. As a young person I was able to promptly make appropriate decisions, because I wanted to make my father proud and his death not in vain. Therefore, I became this individual who was forced to gain specific knowledge and teach myself the ways of the world so that I may grow into a being of respect.

I generally refer to myself as the one that got away because, when people think of a young girl growing up without a father figure they think of someone who is promiscuous and easily apprehended, being her father is not there to promptly explain the birds and the bees. Sure a mother is there, but it is never the same with one part missing. I am proof that this stereotype is exactly that, a stereotype. I became a person who decided to share her story in an attempt to help others with the unbearable debt of a missing parent.

It isn't the end. You don't have to be angry or view yourself as someone who is less fortunate. Take your experience and use it as fuel for your fire. Share your story so that others may know it is possible to live and live happily with a deceased parent. Follow every dream you've ever had, knowing that the parent you have lost will be proud. In turn, express gratitude for the parent that is still there. Let them be your shoulder to lean on, tell them how you feel and share your pain. Remember the good times and you will laugh together and together you will know that the death of your loved one was not in vain. My mother is standing over my shoulder, smiling as I type these last words.

—Jaquetta

[Share your own story here.](#) Sharing stories is a powerful way to connect with other people. Be part of the Teen Health & Wellness Personal Story Project—like Jaquetta did above—and share your story about successfully dealing with or overcoming a challenge.

Resources

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

120 Wall Street, 22nd Floor

New York, NY 10005

(888) 333-2377

www.afsp.org

The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) is dedicated to preventing people from taking their own lives. It works to educate people about suicide and assist people whose lives have been affected by suicide.

American Hospice Foundation

1130 Connecticut Avenue NW, Suite 700

Washington, DC 20036

(202) 223-0204

www.americanhospice.com

The American Hospice Foundation works to provide hospice care to United States citizens who need it. The foundation also has teams of counselors and volunteers to help people overcome grief.

Anxiety Disorders Association of America

www.adaa.org

The Anxiety Disorders Association of America is dedicated to promoting research into anxiety disorders and finding ways to provide treatment for people suffering from anxiety.

Bereaved Families of Ontario

(416) 440-0290

www.bereavedfamilies.net/

Covenant House

(800) 999-9999

www.covenanthouse.org

This organization provides a safe haven for kids who are hurting.

Griefworks BC

4500 Oak Street, Room E405

Vancouver, BC V6H 3N1

Canada

(604) 875-2741

www.griefworksbc.com/Teens.asp

Griefworks is a partnership between several hospitals that offers support to those grieving the loss of a loved one. This link is to the information directed to teens.

National Institute of Mental Health
Public Information and Communications Branch
6001 Executive Boulevard
Room 8184, MSC 9663
Bethesda, MD 20892-9663
(866) 615-6464 or (301) 443-4513

www.nimh.nih.gov

The National Institute of Mental Health works to improve understanding and treatment of mental illness in the United States.

National Mental Health Association (NMHA)
2000 N. Beauregard Street, 6th Floor
Alexandria, VA 22311
(703) 684-7722

www.nmha.org

NMHA is the largest nonprofit organization in the United States dedicated to mental health.

Rainbows Canada
80 Bradford Street Suite 514
Barrie, ON, L4N 6S7
Canada
(705) 726 7407

www.rainbows.ca/

Rainbows Canada is an international organization dedicated to helping children cope with life-altering events such as death, divorce, and foster care. It offers a free group counseling program for children and youth dealing with these issues.

Suicide Prevention Action Network USA
1025 Vermont Avenue NW, Suite 1066
Washington, DC 20005
(202) 449-3600

www.spanusa.org

The Suicide Prevention Action Network works to provide education, raise awareness, and provide advocacy for suicide prevention


YMCA of the USA
101 North Wacker Drive
Chicago, IL 60606

(800) 872-9622

www.ymca.net

There are over two thousand YMCAs in the United States, providing education programs, afterschool activities, and health facilities to a variety of different communities.

For Further Reading

If you want more information on the topic, you can use the resources listed below. Works of fiction are indicated by the symbol .

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Glossary

acceptance The stage of processing loss when you accept that the loss has happened and you are ready to move on.

addiction Dependence on a behavior or substance.

anorexia nervosa An obsessive desire to lose weight by refusing to eat.

antidepressant A drug such as Prozac that is prescribed by psychiatrists to treat depression.

bargaining The stage of dealing with loss when you try to make deals to get out of your unpleasant situation.

bar/bat mitzvah A rite of passage in the Jewish religion. It symbolizes the change from childhood to adulthood.

bulimia Disorder in which overeating is followed by ridding the body of food using methods like self-induced vomiting.

closure An observed or official end to something.

counselor A person who is trained to give you advice about problems or life decisions.

denial Avoiding the truth or existence of a situation.

depression A mental state of feeling sad and hopeless.

psychiatrist A doctor who is specially trained to treat people with psychological problems and who can prescribe drugs.

psychologist A person with an advanced degree in psychology who is specially trained to treat people for their psychological problems.

psychotherapist A person with a master's degree in therapy, who is trained to treat people for psychological problems. Also called a licensed professional counselor.

rite of passage A ritual that marks change, growth, or maturation.

self-esteem One's sense of self-worth.

social worker A person who has a degree in social work, the profession of providing people in need with social services and aid. He or she is trained to counsel and help people find the resources they need to solve their problems.

unconscious The normally inaccessible part of the mind that manifests itself in dreams.

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