

When Teens Are Grieving



A TEEN-TO-TEEN GUIDE TO
UNDERSTANDING LOSS

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Wheeler, Jenny Lee. *Weird is Normal When Teenagers Grieve*. Naples, FL: Quality of Life Publishing Co., 2010. Print.

"Grief Counselors Say" adapted with permission from:

Horsley, Heidi, Psy.D., and Gloria Horsley, Ph.D. *Teen Grief Relief: Parenting with Understanding, Support, and Guidance*. Highland City, FL: Rainbow Books, Inc., 2007. Print. All rights reserved. No part of this booklet may be reproduced without prior permission of the publisher. Printed in the United States of America.



Published by Quality of Life Publishing Co.
Naples, Florida

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The Grieving Teen's Bill of Rights

This Bill of Rights was developed by participating teens at The Dougy Center, an organization providing support to grieving children, teens, and their families. Reading this list of your "rights" can help you understand that what you are feeling is shared with other grieving teens. You may want to show this list to a trusted adult, who can help you achieve your rights.

As a grieving teen, you have the right...

- ...to know the truth about the death and the deceased.
- ...to have your questions answered honestly.
- ...to see the person who died and the place of the death.
- ...to be involved in the funeral or memorial service plans.
- ...to be heard with dignity and respect.
- ...to be silent and not talk to anyone about your emotions.
- ...to not agree with the perceptions and conclusions of others.
- ...to grieve in any way without censorship, as long as you do not harm yourself or others.
- ...to feel all feelings and think all thoughts of your unique grief.
- ...to have guilt about how you might have prevented the death.
- ...to be angry at death, at the person who died, at God, at yourself, and at others.
- ...to not have to follow the "Stages of Grief" as outlined in a school health book.
- ...to have your own philosophical beliefs about life and death.
- ...to not be taken advantage of when you are mourning and vulnerable.

Introduction

My name is Jenny Wheeler. I'm not a grief expert, but I do know how it feels to have someone I love very much die. The most painful loss for me was losing my dad. When I was 14, my dad died only a month after we found out he had cancer. His death left a huge hole in my life. When he died, it was like my life was split into two parts: "before Dad died" and "after Dad died."

My mom and I cried together often and shared how we were feeling, which helped me heal from some of my grief. Writing also helped me, so I wrote a book called *Weird Is Normal When Teenagers Grieve*. This booklet is based on that book.

I hope what I've written helps you. You don't have to agree with everything I say; take what you want and leave the rest. Just know there are others who understand what you are going through. Sometimes just knowing you aren't alone can keep you open to the hope of healing from your loss.

Grief counselors say:

If you're reading this, you've probably had someone die who was very important to you. Chances are you're thinking, "*Nobody understands what I'm going through.*" Or, "*Why did this have to happen?*"

When you go through the pain of a deep loss, it's hard to believe you'll ever feel normal again, let alone happy. Even though it might be impossible to believe right now, things will get better.

As Jenny shares her story with you, we'll share ideas on how you can find some relief from the pain of loss. We'll also add exercises to help you sort out your feelings. Like Jenny says, take what you want and leave the rest. But stay open as you read. If the exercises aren't for you, the knowledge can still be empowering.

Your Grief Story

Grief counselors say:

Jenny took a healthy step when she shared her story. Before you can be truly free from negative emotions related to grief, you have to really study the details of your loss. This might not seem logical. But by exploring your story, you get in touch with the emotions connected to the loss. Understanding why you feel the way you do is a step toward healing.

Use the space below to outline your story. Then write it out in a journal, blog, or short story, or make a video. Use the other exercises in this booklet to help add to it. Get all of the details out — good and bad. What do you miss? What makes you angry? Do you feel responsible? Describe your relationship to the person who died. How did you feel about him or her? How did you get along?

MY STORY

SA M

Everybody Grieves

The first thing I'd like to say is that it's okay to grieve. You have the right to be grieving, whether you have lost a friend, a family member, or a pet. No loss is too small. Nobody has the right to tell you that you shouldn't grieve over a certain loss.

Everybody will grieve at some point. Everyone is allowed to grieve. Everyone grieves differently. And what you feel is what YOU feel. It is not necessarily what anyone else feels. People might assume they know what you're thinking, but they probably don't. Don't let anyone tell you how you should or shouldn't feel.

Grief counselors say:

Everyone's grief is different because everyone's situation is different. You are an individual. Your relationship with the person who died is unique. The way the person died also makes your situation unique.

We're not mind readers. No one knows what anyone else is thinking. So you're the only one who knows the best way for you to express your feelings. As long as it's a healthy expression, do what feels right to you.

While everyone's grief journey is different, there are parts of the grieving process that are similar for everyone. What you're feeling is most likely normal. Knowing this doesn't fix the pain now. But it can help you to not feel so alone. Some common thoughts shared by grieving teens and adults:

- **Survival Guilt** — *"It should have been me."*
- **Magical Thinking** — *"If I had done things differently, she wouldn't have died."*
- **Regrets** — *"I wish I didn't have a fight with him before he left." "I never told him how much he meant to me."*
- **Relief** — *"She was suffering for so long. I feel guilty for feeling relieved she's gone." "She was abusive. Why should I feel sad?"*

The Many Emotions of Grief

The day my dad died felt very strange to me. When we got home from the hospital, I sat alone outside while my mom talked with our family. It felt like I was taking a breather for just a few minutes. I couldn't believe it when my mom told me I had been sitting there for almost an hour.

During the first year of grief, many people gave me their sympathy. I walked around saying, "Thank you," or "It's okay," and I was so numb that getting through the day wasn't that hard. My focus then was just on surviving moment to moment. I didn't even think about the next day, let alone the next year.

The second year after my dad died seemed a lot harder than the first. Facing the second Christmas without him, the second Father's Day, etc., it really hit me that he wasn't ever coming back. I felt dumbfounded.

Grief counselors say:

On page three, we list a few thoughts shared by other grieving people. There are a lot of emotions that are common to those who've lost someone they love. Other people who have grieved have felt:

angry *sad* *empty* *shocked* *tired* *nervous*
confused *ashamed* *alone* *depressed* *helpless*

Circle the emotions above that you have felt. What other feelings have you had, if any, that aren't listed?

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

As weird as it sounds, feeling like you're going crazy is normal when you're grieving. This is because all of these emotions are hitting you all at once. You may be:

- ☐ Walking around in a daze.
- ☐ Feeling lost, alone, empty.
- ☐ So angry you want to hit someone or something.
- ☐ Feeling out of control.
- ☐ Sure no one understands how you feel.
- ☐ Hurting too much to be able to think straight.
- ☐ Too shocked and numb to feel anything.

Check each one you've felt, if any. Write about these feelings in your story. If you do feel like you're going crazy, don't worry. Your brain and body are reacting just like they're supposed to. It may be hard to tell which feelings are "normal" and which ones might mean you need help. Consider seeing a therapist if you're struggling. Some think therapy is only for "crazy" people, but that's not true. Everyone can benefit from therapy. It's a healthy way to get through tough times.

Feeling a mix of difficult emotions is normal. But there are warning signs to look out for. Talk to a parent, teacher, therapist, minister, or a friend now if:

- You feel completely hopeless, helpless, and worthless.
- You say or think things like, "I wish I was never born" or "I wish I was dead."
- You start skipping school or getting bad grades.
- You give away clothes, jewelry, and other personal items.
- You eat or sleep a lot more or a lot less than you used to.
- You stop caring about personal hygiene.
- You withdraw completely from friends and family.
- You find no enjoyment at all in anything you do.
- You feel physically ill all the time, for really long periods of time.
- You start driving recklessly, abusing drugs or alcohol, or engaging in risky sexual behavior.

Trying to dull the pain with risky behaviors does not help. As awful as it is, grief is something you have to let yourself feel. The longer you put off grieving, the more intense the feelings will be later.

Your Feelings Are YOUR Feelings

Many adults, and even other teens, may have preset ideas about grief. Some might think you should just "get over it" when you're not ready to. Some may think that you should be sad for longer than you actually are. Remember, you are grieving on your own timetable. You might take a long time to get over your grief, or you might heal sooner than you thought.

While I was grieving the loss of my dad, a friend said, "It's been a year already. You're still grieving?" I tried not to get upset. She had not experienced a big loss before. I explained that, yes, I still needed support from friends and family. She seemed surprised.

You might find that not everyone will be as sensitive to your feelings as you would like them to be. If someone thinks that you should be over your grief and you're not, hang in there. Try not to take it personally.

Grief counselors say:

The length of time someone feels like they are actively grieving depends on the person. It depends on how sudden the death was. It depends on how much support you get. Just like everyone's grief is different, so is everyone's timetable for grieving.

You may come across people who do not get what you are going through at all. This could include some of your closest friends. Keep in mind that death is a touchy subject for a lot of people. And it's usually an unfamiliar subject for many young people.

If someone has never been through a tragic loss, try to understand that it may be hard for the person to relate to you. You might want to reach out to others who have experienced a similar loss. Connecting with people who have been through grief can also help you to not feel so alone.

Remember:

- It's normal to feel like there's a hole in your heart when someone you cared about dies.
- If a parent or guardian died, it's normal to feel abandoned or to lose trust in adults.
- Having issues with friends or family is part of finding out who you are.
- It's okay to not want to talk about your loss. But it's not okay to *never* talk about it. Try to find someone you trust to talk to.
- There are people who understand what you're going through. If you can't connect with someone you know, contact us. Or try the resources below. Always be safe and only use trustworthy resources. Never give out personal information online.

The Dougy Center

1 (866) 775-5683

www.dougy.org/grief-resources/help-for-teens/

Open to Hope Foundation

www.opentohope.com/your-grief/children-teens/

The Compassionate Friends

www.compassionatefriends.org

Girls and Boys Town National Hotline

1 (800) 448-3000



Grief Is Not Easy, Especially for Teens

If you hear other teenagers' stories, you'll notice most of our grief can be bizarre. As a teen, I know I'm unpredictable. My moods can change often. These big changes in our moods can complicate our grief. Also, we're not treated like adults, so we might feel frustrated or left out.

Grief can also be hard for teens if friends start to avoid us. If this happens to you, it's not because of anything you've done wrong. A lot of people feel awkward talking about death or grief. Still, this can be really hard to deal with because our friends mean a lot to us.

Grief counselors say:

The teen years can be filled with promise. They can also be the most challenging, confusing, and frustrating years of your life. You're juggling friends, family, school, extracurricular activities, and work. It's no surprise that most teens feel completely stressed.

This can be the most difficult time to deal with loss and death. You were probably already feeling overwhelmed in some ways before your loss. Now everything feels 10 times worse. Loss creates change, and *more* change isn't something you need right now.

Some grieving teens also find they have to give up on some of their old friends — another big loss. This can be a really hard time. Make sure you are finding the support you need. Here are four things that made a big difference for many grieving teens:

- **Take care of yourself (regular sleep, meals, and exercise).**
- **Stay close to people who care about you.**
- **Connect with people who have been through a similar loss.**
- **Ask for help from your family, friends, and teachers.**

Grieving teens tell us that loss is hard because:

- They were already asking, *"Where do I belong? How do I fit in?"* before the loss. Afterward, the questions were even harder to answer.
- Loss made them feel different from their friends. It made them stand out in a way they didn't want to stand out. They felt sad but didn't want to cry in front of other people.
- Sometimes they just wanted to forget about the loss and have fun again. But then thinking this way made them feel guilty.
- Their parents got overprotective after the loss. Some felt like their parents didn't trust them at a time when they wanted more freedom.

In what ways is loss hard for you? Add this to your story.

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How to help your parents help you:

For some grieving teens, especially those who lost a brother or sister, dealing with parents (or guardians) can make grief harder. If you feel like your parents are smothering you, consider sharing this list of tips with them. Revise it as you see fit and then talk about it.

1. I need your support more than your criticism right now. I already feel judged by other people, including some of my friends.
2. Ask open-ended questions. *"How have you been since he died?"*
3. Explain, don't lecture. I hate lectures.
4. Accept the way I feel, even if my anger/sadness/etc. upsets you.
5. Talk about the loss in small doses. If I don't want to talk and you have something to say, set a short time limit and stick to it.
6. Try not to take the way I respond to you so personally.

Grief Attacks: Everybody Has Them

A "grief attack" is a time when a wave of grief comes crashing down on you. You suddenly feel like crying when someone says something. It might be a song that sets you off. Or it could even be a smell. This has happened to me a lot since my dad died.

Sometimes things I'd expect to trigger a grief attack might not trigger one at all. (Like seeing someone who looks just like Dad.) Other times really random things would trigger an attack. (Like the time I cried when my dad's old microwave broke.) I find that my grief attacks can seem really weird, especially because I think differently from the adults around me.

You don't need to feel embarrassed when you have a grief attack. Most people who have experienced a painful loss have had them. If you're in a situation where you're afraid to show your emotions, hiding them at the time is okay. Just be sure to let it out later. Share your grief with a person you trust or vent in a healthy way.



Grief counselors say:

Grieving teens say they are set off by the smallest things. It can be scary to get so sad, angry, and upset. Some feel like striking out at others or like their bodies are on edge.

This is a normal response to a stressful event. It's called a fight-or-flight response or "overdrive." It's a burst of hormones that gave our early ancestors energy to face or run away from danger. Fight or flight is helpful — when your life is in danger. But it can be exhausting when it's triggered again and again while you're grieving.

Since this response always comes by surprise, it's helpful to have a plan ready. **Check off some ideas to try. Keep a note with these ideas in your pocket or phone as a reminder to help you through grief attacks.**

- ☐ Tell yourself, "My mind has triggered a hormonal hit. My body is responding in a normal way. I am safe. This will pass."
- ☐ Breathe deeply. Oxygen helps balance the effect of the hormones. Yawn to relax your throat if you have a lump that won't go away.
- ☐ Overdrive decreases your blood sugar. Get water or a snack.
- ☐ Wash your hands or face, or put a cold towel on your neck.
- ☐ Take time alone. Meditate or listen to music in your room.
- ☐ Go to the guidance counselor's office if you're at school. You can talk to the counselor or just ask for a quiet place to sit.
- ☐ Exercise helps relax your body and clear your mind.
- ☐ Shout, scream, or hit a pillow.
- ☐ Cry. There is nothing wrong with crying — it is not a sign of weakness. Crying lowers blood pressure and tension, helping you relax.

How else could you deal with overdrive?

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

One Step at a Time

Grief counselors say:

We wish we could tell you that you'll feel a little better every day. But that's not how grief works. It's normal to have setbacks. Don't be hard on yourself when they happen. Just know that the waves of grief will be less intense over time.

Wanting to feel better again is an essential part of healing. That may sound like common sense, but it's still worth saying. When you're under a lot of stress, it can be hard to want to take care of your health. It's important to try to take small steps to care for yourself.

The key is to make the first steps so small it seems ridiculous. Keep taking small steps forward until you're ready for a bigger step. How big or small a step seems is different for everyone.

Below is a list of steps provided by other grieving teens. Pick one step to start. Check it off when you're done. Take a minute to give yourself credit for moving forward. When you are ready, try another step. Keep going at your own pace.

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|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Listen to a favorite album | <input type="checkbox"/> Check out a new band |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Take a nap | <input type="checkbox"/> Buy yourself a present |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Play with a pet | <input type="checkbox"/> Call or text a friend |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Workout, bike, or swim | <input type="checkbox"/> Eat your favorite meal |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Watch a movie or read | <input type="checkbox"/> Take a bubble bath |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Get a massage | <input type="checkbox"/> Volunteer |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Meditate or take yoga | <input type="checkbox"/> Draw or paint |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Start a journal | <input type="checkbox"/> Learn a musical instrument |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Go to the zoo or circus | <input type="checkbox"/> Watch the sun rise or set |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Try a new sport | <input type="checkbox"/> Dance |

Write a list of your own healthy steps and check them off as you go:

- | | |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |

Try these exercises whenever you need a break from grief:

BALANCING BOARD: *Imagine standing on a skateboard. On one side are all your feelings of hurt, anger, or sadness. To keep upright, balance those feelings with happy, uplifting thoughts.*

1. Get quiet. Relax. Drift back to a really pleasant memory.
2. Take a few relaxing breaths in and out. Let yourself replay the emotions of that memory. Continue to take deep breaths. Stay connected to the memory for as long as it feels good.
3. Say out loud, "I am a normal person experiencing an abnormal event." (Hearing yourself say the words engages both sides of the brain.)

HAPPINESS LINK: *Try this technique anytime, anywhere. No one will even know you're doing it. It's another way to help your mind and body relax and get in sync with each other.*

1. Select a pleasant thought. Hold it in your mind as you touch your thumb and index finger together to make a circle (or link).
2. You can think of new things each time. Make a list of thoughts you can connect with again and again:

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|---------|---------|
| • _____ | • _____ |
| • _____ | • _____ |
| • _____ | • _____ |

THOUGHT STOPPING: *When you can't let grief get in the way — like during a test — tell yourself to stop for that period of time. We know it's easier said than done. Below are tips to help.*

1. Put a rubber band around your wrist. Snap it when you need to concentrate. Or wear a bracelet, watch, or necklace that you can turn backwards. Take a break from grieving until you turn it back around.
2. If this works for you, try the opposite. Instead of taking breaks from grief, give yourself certain times of the day to grieve. This way you control your grief, instead of letting it control you.

On the Healing Road to Peace

An important goal for me on my grief journey has been getting to the point where I feel at peace and happy again. My life won't ever be the same without my lost loved ones (especially my dad). But it was important for me to give myself the chance to heal inside. I needed to come to terms with my grief. This allowed me to find my norm again and get back to everyday life.

I think we can reach this goal gradually by talking about our losses. It helps to share our feelings with someone close. And it helps to express ourselves creatively. We can also make remembering our loved ones part of our everyday life, instead of waiting for anniversaries or holidays.

If you're not ready to do a specific activity that reminds you of your loved one, that's okay, too. Try something that feels more comfortable, stretching your comfort zone little by little when you are ready.

Grief counselors say:

You've lost someone you love. You are not the same person you once were. But you can find a "new normal" by taking one small step at a time. Then one day, you'll start feeling like you can be happy again. You'll start taking healthy steps on your own automatically.

At that point, you may want to find ways of including memories of your loved one in your "new life." Keeping a connection can be as simple or involved as you want it to be. Some people just think about their loved one each day when they wake up. Others create their own special rituals to honor their loved ones. There's no right or wrong way to keep a connection — whatever you choose to do will be right for you.

Below are ideas to keep connected. Add your own ideas.

- Write a letter to or a poem about your loved one.
- Express yourself online in healthy, safe ways. Start a website or blog. Share photos or thoughts on social media. Be sure to review your social media privacy settings.
- Pick a special day to celebrate your loved one’s life. Celebrate his or her birthday. Or on the anniversary of your loved one’s death, spend the day doing something that he or she loved.
- Make a playlist of his or her favorite songs.
- Wear or carry an item that was special to your loved one.
- Volunteer for a cause your loved one believed in. Or, in honor of your loved one, do something you’ve always wanted to do but haven’t yet.

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What if I don’t want to stay connected?

Relationships aren’t always happy and positive. Sometimes we lose people in our lives that we didn’t get along with. Sometimes they may have been outright abusive.

If you had a bad relationship with the person who died, it’s okay to be angry. It’s okay to want to cut ties with those memories. Just be sure to work on releasing your anger over time.

Write a letter saying everything you’ve wanted to say to the person, then tear it up into tiny pieces. Release your anger as you destroy the words. If you can’t seem to let go of your anger, reach out for support. Consider seeing a counselor or therapist to help you find your road to peace.

Final Thoughts

There are a lot of books and websites that offer support and suggestions to help you work through your grief. Many organizations in your community may also offer more information or support groups to connect you with other grieving teens.

You could start with the organization that provided this booklet. Don't be afraid to call them for information, or ask someone to help you make contact. You don't need to go it alone.

I hope that in time you will feel okay with where you are in your grief journey. No matter how you grieve or how long it takes for life to seem normal again, you *will* get through this!

Best wishes on your journey,


Jenny



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