

The Grieving High School Student

High school students are often philosophical about life and death and believe that death won't happen to them. While functioning at the formal operational stage of cognitive development, they appear to use "adult" approaches of problem solving and abstract thinking in dealing with their grief. However, it is important to remember that high school students are not yet adults. In their attempts to make sense of the world and what has happened to them, you may see depression, denial, anger, risk-taking and acting-out behaviors. You may see teens fighting against their vulnerability because they want very much to be independent.

How to Help

- Allow for regression and dependency
- Encourage expression of feelings such as sorrow, anger, guilt, regret
- Understand and allow for variation in maturity level
- Answer questions honestly and provide factual information
- Model appropriate responses, showing the students your own grief
- Avoid power struggles and allow choices
- Help students understand and resolve feelings of helplessness
- Assist students with plans for completion of assignments
- Allow for some flexibility in assignments, e.g. be willing to adapt assignments to topics relevant to the student's current experience

Common Behaviors to Expect

- Withdrawal from parents and other adults
- Angry outbursts
- Increased risk-taking behaviors [substances, reckless driving, sexual behaviors]
- Pushing the limits of rules
- Lack of concentration; inability to focus
- Hanging out with a small group of friends
- Sad face, evidence of crying
- Sleepiness, exhaustion