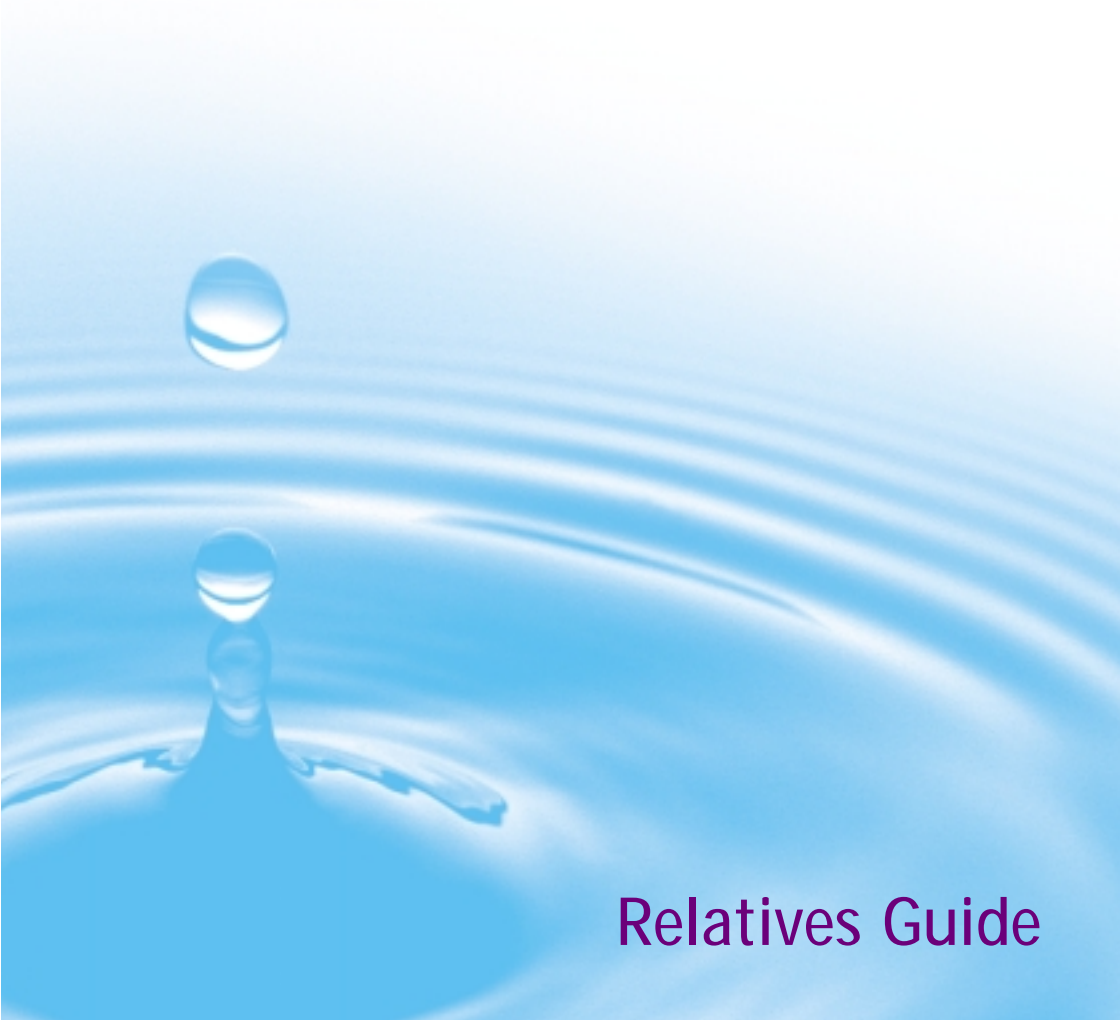


Dealing with sudden death
in adolescence
Ages 10-18



Relatives Guide

This booklet has been produced by:

The ROYAL
HOSPITALS



Victims Unit: Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister



General development

Adolescents have a clearer understanding of death than younger children. They understand the long-term consequences, and think about their own mortality.

Adolescents care about what other people think of them, especially their friends. Socialising and being liked by friends outside the family becomes more important. They change their interests and ways of coping – girls are more likely to talk about their emotions and boys are more likely to act them out.

Adolescence is a natural period of change. Physical and mental changes bring emotions very close to the surface – right at the time when adolescents need to become more independent. Misunderstanding, and feeling misunderstood, is common for both parents and adolescent children. Privacy and control can become hot-topics.

Adolescents react with their emotions; their responses can appear exaggerated. This is a normal part of growing up. They take more risks (drugs, alcohol, sex), and feel more pressure to conform (to friends, fashion, or ideals).

Adolescents with special needs or circumstances are similar to other people on the same level of understanding. You may find it helpful to read the guidelines in this series for younger children (5-10 years) or adults if this applies to you.

Adolescent's reactions to sudden death

Adolescents understand death – your child understands that death is final and happens to everyone. They think about loss, and what this means for the future. However, they have less experience than adults, so learning to cope will be a new challenge. They may want to understand how the death occurred, and who is to blame.

Adolescents are sensitive to emotions – but often hold back feelings they are uncomfortable with. They use friends for emotional support. Girls seek out friends they can relate to if given the chance.

Adolescents need to understand what happened – they may feel that what happened was unfair or undeserved, or that there is no justice

without someone to blame or punish. Making sense and finding a meaning for what happened can take a long time. Many families must wait for criminal or scientific investigations to discover the truth – for some this will never be known.


Memories and feelings are hard to forget – memories or fears about what happened can be upsetting, distracting, and hard to control. They leave your teenage child feeling nervous, unsafe, and reminded of what happened. Some things (reminders) will bring these feelings to mind more than others.

Sudden death is frightening – this fear is difficult to control or forget. Your teenage child may be more nervous or feel unsafe at different times. This is a natural bodily reaction after a strong fright. Dealing with confused feelings and the shock of what happened makes going back to old routines and friendships more difficult. It may also exaggerate difficulties at home, school, and other settings. Anxiety and upset can lead to fatigue and vulnerability to illness.

Stress – feeling frightened or unsafe, or thinking a lot about what happened uses up time and energy needed for other things (growth, education, pastimes). Over days and weeks this drains your child's body (and leaves it open to illness or injury). Your adolescent child may show signs of being irritable, easily startled, or nervous of things that remind them of the trauma. Nightmares, social withdrawal, poor concentration and difficulties in school are common signs of stress in adolescents.

Adolescents can be overwhelmed – sudden death is harder to deal with than normal shock or bereavement. Your teenager may find anger, blame, or guilt difficult to talk about. Media involvement and criminal proceedings can make this process longer and more public. The death may affect your family and the community, who will find out about what happened.

School sometimes becomes a relief from the unreality of what has happened. Sometimes dramatic changes occur in the behaviour of your adolescent son or daughter as they avoid or confront different feelings (class-clowning, risk-taking, social withdrawal, or sudden maturity).



Fearing the worst – your teenager may feel guilty or embarrassed about how they acted or wish they had been more patient with the person who died. They realise that what has happened affects their home and social life, and that things can never go back to the way they were. They may feel hopeless or different from other adolescents. They need reassurance that things can get better with time.

What makes things worse?

Witnessing a sudden death – will frighten most adolescents. Your teenager will need explanations and reassurance about what happened. Some things that they see, hear, smell, taste, or feel at the time will be remembered in great detail. This can make coming to terms with what happened more difficult and upsetting.

Adolescents have private beliefs and emotions – your teenage child may believe that the death could have been avoided somehow. Blame and the need for retribution may be important to them. These feelings are not always shared openly – particularly in the family. Talk about these issues and encourage your child to open up about private fears and anger.

Family, friends, and the community – are important sources of support to your teenager. Sudden death can make them feel isolated, especially for younger teenagers, who may rely more on the family again for a time. They may need support going back to old friendships, clubs, etc.

Adolescents can hide their feelings – your teenage child may hide their feelings because they don't want to make you feel worse. They may not want to talk to friends or teachers, and pretend they are doing better than they are (such as playing the clown when they are actually very upset).

Routines and safety – your teenage child feels safest when they are with friends or family in a familiar place. Sudden death disrupt these routines, and make your child's world less predictable.

Sudden death of someone from school poses particular problems – daily reminders of the person who died; the upset of other pupils; and insensitive actions of other pupils. Because this occurs in a school setting, it is difficult to know how the death is affecting your child.

Adolescence is a naturally stressful time– exams, friends, biology, and conflict are big pressures in adolescence. Sudden death makes these pressures harder to cope with. Dealing with emotions and understanding the world in a more mature way takes support and reassurance.

Children with special needs or circumstances

Teenagers with special needs and circumstances react according to their levels of understanding and emotional support. With care and understanding they can recover, but cope best with simple explanations of death and trauma, and encouragement to talk and ask questions. You may wish to refer to other guidelines which best reflect the level of understanding or behaviours of the individual adolescent.

Guidelines

Adolescents use friends and family for support following a sudden death. They cope in creative and unusual ways, but may hide how they feel, or need help coming to terms with anger, blame, or unfairness.


Immediate needs

Adolescents need to feel safe – help your teenage child feel safe both after a sudden death and in the long term. Go back to daily routines (going to school/work, pastimes), avoid unexplained separations, take their concerns about safety seriously, and do what you can to help them feel safe.

- Have consistent routines at home and in school
- Avoid unexplained separations – where separations are necessary they should be planned and predictable
- Give time and emotional reassurance.
- Have a safety routine (locking doors/windows, leaving lights on at night).
- Take fears about safety seriously

Clear communication – clear and honest information helps avoid misunderstandings and fears. Talk about what happened, how you feel, and how things have changed.

- Give truthful explanations

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- Reduce confusion your teenager has over what happened
 - Give as much detail as necessary – they may know or guess if you are holding back

Make the loss real – encourage your teenage child to take part in mourning ceremonies, do not hide your own feelings or the feelings of others, and keep mementoes of the person who died for the future.

- Encourage your child to take part in mourning ceremonies (seeing the dead, funeral)
- Share your own feelings of sadness – be aware that excessive displays of emotion can be overwhelming or frightening
- Keep reminders of the person who died present
- Offer your teenager their own personal keepsake of the person who died

Long-term needs

Adolescents need to understand – allow more time for talking about difficult topics (like unfairness, anger, or blame). It is normal for people of all ages to need to talk about these things over again – as their feelings change with time. Visit the grave or places where your child feels close to the person who died, look through photo albums, and expect new questions about what happened.

- Allow questions and conversations
- Look at albums and photographs
- Encourage your teenager to visit the grave or other relevant places
- Talk about feelings of injustice and need for retribution

Coping with emotions – talk with your child about their feelings, confront fears and emotions, and let them know that these are normal. Be optimistic about the future.

- Talk with your teenage child about their worries
- Talk with your teenage child about other strong feelings (anger, blame, regret, etc)
- Reassure them that what they feel is normal, and that things can get

better with time and support

- Encourage creative ways of coping – your child will cope in different ways to you. Help your teenager find what works best for them
- Adolescents cope by talking to friends as well as family

Get back into a routine – change and lack of routine is stressful.

Adolescents feel safest when they know what to do and what to expect.


Predictability in people, places, times, and activities make comfortable, safe routines. These include:

- Mealtimes at same time and place each day
- Going back to school or work
- Regular time to spend with friends
- Time for sports, clubs, hobbies
- Sleeping habits

Deal with reminders – some things will remind your teenager of the sudden death or trigger unpleasant feelings or worries. Manage these reminders and triggers so that they have regular breaks from things that remind them of what happened and a place to go to relax and talk.

- Avoid unnecessary reminders of what happened until your teenage child feels ready for them
- Special times like anniversaries and birthdays will remind them of what happened
- Prepare for court cases, coroner's investigations, and public interest by talking to your teenager about what will happen. Talk about what details will be discussed, and how this makes them feel
- Be prepared for media interest in your family or in other cases that may remind your teenager of their own experience.
- Talk about what to do when reminders of what happened are upsetting.
- Practice this so that you know it will work for them
- Reassure them that reminders and triggers become weaker and fewer over time.

Growth and the future – expect new feelings and questions about what happened as your teenage child grows up. Keepsakes and anniversaries will be special to them in the future.

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- Let your teenager change their opinions, memories, and concerns over time
 - Hold onto mementoes and keepsakes
 - Involve them in anniversaries and significant occasions
 - Younger teenagers will have new questions about what happened again in the future
 - Be optimistic about the future – things can get better.

The future

Grief is different for each person, so it is difficult to say much about the future. Sudden death can be shocking, and change a teenager's life forever. However, most adolescents can cope with time and the support of family and friends. The most intense grief and upset will usually be experienced within the first two years.

Be prepared for your child (especially younger adolescents) to think about what happened again as they understand more about themselves and the world. They may change their mind about what it means to them. Remember that adolescence is a confusing time anyway, and makes understanding and coping with a sudden death harder for your child. Talking, remembering, and sharing feelings will help them deal with what has happened.

¹ see adult guidelines in this series

Books for teenagers

“Straight talk about death for teenagers” by Earl Grollman.

Publisher: Beacon Press. ISBN 0-8070-2501-1

“Facing change: falling apart and coming together again in the teen years” by

D. O’Toole. Publisher: Compassion Press. ISBN 1-878321-11-0

“Tiger eyes” by Judy Blume. Publisher: MacMillan. ISBN 0-330-26954-2

“The Charlie Barber treatment” by C. Lloyd.

Publisher: Walker. ISBN 0-7445-5457-8

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