

How to guide teens through a parents, illness and death

Talking to your teenage children about their loved one's end of life is one of the hardest conversations you'll face. Here's a guide to approach it with honesty, empathy, and clarity, tailored to their developmental stage:

1. Prepare Yourself First:

- Take a moment to process your own emotions. It's okay to feel overwhelmed or sad—acknowledging your feelings will help you stay composed.
- Plan what you want to say, but don't script it too rigidly; teens can sense inauthenticity.
- Consider their personalities and how each might react. Some may want details, others may shut down.

2. Choose the Right Setting:

- Find a quiet, private space where you won't be interrupted, like at home in a comfortable setting.
- Have the conversation together as a family, but be ready for one-on-one follow-ups, as each child may process differently.
- Timing matters—pick a moment when they're not rushed or stressed, like a weekend afternoon.

3. Be Honest and Direct:

- Use clear language: "Our loved one's health has gotten worse, and the doctors have told us they are nearing the end of their life." Avoid euphemisms like "going to sleep," which can confuse or scare teens.
- Explain the situation in age-appropriate terms. For example: "Their body is not able to keep going, and the doctors are focused on keeping them comfortable."
- Be truthful about the uncertainty: "We don't know exactly how long, but it could be

weeks or months."

4. Acknowledge Their Feelings:

- Teens may react with anger, sadness, withdrawal, or even seeming indifference—it's all normal. Say, "It's okay to feel whatever you're feeling—sad, angry, or even confused. We're in this together."
- Let them know they don't have to respond right away: "You might need time to think about this, and that's okay."
- Validate their emotions: "This is really hard, and it's normal to feel overwhelmed."

5. Encourage Questions:

- Invite them to ask anything: "Is there anything you want to know about what's happening?" Teens often have practical questions (e.g., "What will happen to us?" or "Will they be in pain?").
- Answer honestly, even if it's "I don't know, but I'll find out." If they ask about death, explain it gently: "When someone passes, their body stops working, but we'll keep their memory alive."

6. Reassure Them About the Future:

- Teens worry about stability. Reassure them: "We'll still have our home, and I'll be here for you. We'll figure this out together."
- If changes are coming (e.g., financial or logistical), share only what's certain and avoid overwhelming them with hypotheticals.

7. Encourage Connection with Their Loved One:

- Suggest ways they can spend time with them: "They would love to hear about your day or watch a movie with you. Even small moments mean a lot."
- If they're hesitant, normalize it: "It's okay if you're not ready to talk to them about this. You can just be with them in your own way."
- Share ideas like writing letters, sharing memories, or doing something meaningful together, but don't push.

8. Address Their Role and Boundaries:

- Teens may feel pressure to “step up” or hide their emotions. Say, “You don’t have to be strong or take on adult responsibilities. Your job is to be you.”
- If they want to help, suggest small, meaningful tasks like helping with a sibling or spending time with their loved one.

9. Offer Ongoing Support:

- Let them know you’re there: “You can come to me anytime with questions or just to talk.”
- Mention other trusted adults (e.g., a grandparent, counselor, or family friend) they can turn to.
- Watch for signs of distress (e.g., withdrawal, anger, or changes in behavior) and consider professional support like a therapist or school counselor if needed.

10. Model Grief and Hope:

- It’s okay to show your emotions: “I’m sad too, and it’s okay for us to cry together.” This gives them permission to grieve.
- Balance honesty with hope: “This is really hard, but we’ll find ways to keep their love with us and support each other.”

Additional Tips:

- **Keep Checking In:** Teens process slowly and may not open up immediately. Revisit the conversation: “How are you feeling about our loved one’s passing? Anything you want to talk about?”
- **Involve Them in Next Steps:** If appropriate, ask if they want to be part of discussions about care or memorial plans, but don’t burden them with decisions.
- **Use Resources:** Books like *When a Parent Is Dying* or websites like the American Hospice Foundation (hospicefoundation.org) offer teen-friendly guidance.
- **Self-Care for You:** You’re carrying a lot. Lean on your support system to stay strong for your kids.