

# PATHWAYS CENTER for GRIEF & LOSS

## GUIDELINES FOR FAMILIES: HELPING ADOLESCENTS COPE DURING A LOVED ONE'S SERIOUS ILLNESS

### Earlier Adolescence, 12 to 14 Years

- This age group tends to go back and forth between dependence and independence, often accompanied by anger and a strong focus on themselves.
- If there is an increased need for help in the household due to the parent's illness, they may withdraw emotionally which can come across as uncaring and selfish.
- On a "normal" day their behavior is inconsistent, and they will avoid displays of public affection by a parent. This is often exaggerated by the stress of having an ill family member.
- In fear of being different from their peers, teens may appear to be callous. They often are out of the house so they can remain involved in peer activities (sports, school clubs, "hangin' out" at the mall).
- Enlist the help of other caring adults to provide transportation as needed in order to allow the teen to continue participation in peer activities.

### Later Adolescence, 15 to 18 Years

- This age group struggles to balance their own needs with the needs of the family; they tend to be a little more constrained than early adolescents in expressing their anger and frustration.
- Although they may be resentful of the demands of the home situation, these teens are often more empathetic about family needs.
- If demands in the home feel excessive, the later adolescent may retreat emotionally and avoid being at home.
- Later adolescents are generally becoming more comfortable with their increased independence, as they anticipate entering college or the workforce following graduation. However, stressors at home during the progression of their loved one's illness might trigger anxiety about their ability to handle independence in the future.
- Regardless of the age of the adolescent, it is important to keep the school informed about serious illness in the family. The goal is for teachers and staff to be supportive without drawing attention to the student.

*Adapted with permission from Christ, GH, Siegel, K and Christ, AE.  
Adolescent Grief. JAMA 2002; 288: 1269-1278.*



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