

axis



A PARENT'S GUIDE TO

TALKING ABOUT DEATH

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Most of us spend much time and energy trying to avoid the reality that we and those we love will die. But in facing the reality of death, we learn how to live rightly. We learn how to live in light of our limits and the brevity of our lives. And we learn to live in the hope of the resurrection.

— from [*Liturgy of the Ordinary*](#), by Tish Harrison Warren

A Parent's Guide to
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Why should we talk about death?

Knowing how heavy and personal the topic of death can be, we want to start by saying thank you. Thank you for opening this guide. Thank you for choosing to walk with your teen, helping them process or prepare for their own encounters with death. Thank you for showing up for them even as you might feel like you're breaking apart. We pray that the Father would meet you here, in this moment in time, in these pages; wherever you're coming from, whatever emotional state you find yourself in. We trust that He will give us what we need, and be with us. Because of Jesus' righteousness, we enter into God's loving presence. In Jesus' name, amen.

Death has been called the ultimate statistic: 10 out of every 10 people will die. And although some professions come face-to-face with this reality on a more regular basis (doctors, nurses, police officers, butchers, the military), this conversation can feel quite difficult to begin because much of American society is structured to keep the rest of us from really thinking about it.

Since the 1800s, American culture has tried to [“sanitize” death](#). Bodies are embalmed to look more lifelike at funerals; loved ones often die in hospice or hospitals, not at home. If we do encounter death, our experience is often mediated by news outlets and screens, through impersonal statistics or final photos before someone dies.

[The dead often come to us by photograph](#) — in our morning newspapers, in our social-media feeds, on our computer screens next to advertisements for diamond watches or cruises or yoga pants. And many of us fear that we don't know how to look at them, or what to do in response to what we see. We feel helpless. Useless. And then we feel ashamed. Better not to look at all. Better to avoid images of the dead.

And then there's imaginary death. Think about the body count in Marvel movies like [Avengers: Endgame](#). A building burns on screen as we sip a Coke; the camera pans to a bloody fistfight and we munch on a fistful of popcorn. Through modern entertainment, we can witness more tragedy in an hour than most people experience in a lifetime, but it's all detached. Witnessing a bomb detonate in real life might give people PTSD; seeing the same thing on screen may make us tear up for a moment, but when the movie ends

we move on with our day, unphased.

So how do we respond when death comes crashing back into our awareness? How will your teen handle news of school shootings, virus outbreaks, and opioid overdoses? This is the world that your teen is navigating, and they need your guidance. In courageously facing the reality of death, there is an invitation for you and your teen to focus on what really matters in life.

How should Christians think about death?

Christians serve the One who has overcome death and the grave. This should fill us with a tremendous sense of awe and worshipful gratitude, but we can't get there until we truly reckon with what was overcome. In a [sermon series](#) on the book of Ephesians, Dr. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones puts it like this:

My dear friends, you and I don't realize what the power of God in us is because we've never quite realized the power of death. Read your Bible again and keep your eye on what it says about the power of death. Death is something that holds us, it binds us, it bends us, it chains us! There is nothing that so holds and grips and grasps as death.

The Bible was not written through people whose lives were insulated from death. Israel lived through most of the Old Testament under the shadow of some oppressive empire. Death was the ever-present weapon, wielded against anyone who even thought about transgressing. The Roman practice of crucifixion made those who were dying into warning signs, discouraging onlookers from daring to provoke their wrath.

It is against this historical backdrop that the Apostle Paul writes in [1 Corinthians 15](#):

When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory.' 'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?' The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

In short, we should regard death soberly, but not with fear.

But will I traumatize my teen?

Counterintuitively, there's often more power (guilt/shame/fear) around the things that we don't talk about, the topics that are socially taboo. [Joy Clarkson describes](#) her first Ash Wednesday service, literally centered on the statement, "remember you are dust and to dust you shall return."

It was such a relief. To have someone say it out loud. To say it out loud with a hundred other people. Death, the unalterable fact of life, was acknowledged in the company of others; modern life's best kept secret was looked in the face. And as we all went forward, I no longer felt alone in this mystery. I was accompanied by a great cloud of witnesses before me. And most of all, I suddenly knew I was accompanied by Jesus. The strange claim of my faith is that God made himself vulnerable to death.

Paradoxically, Jesus defeated death by dying. "He humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!" ([Phil 2:8](#)). Death is a central theme of Christianity. When someone follows in the way of Jesus, their old, false self is crucified with Him (they die), and a new life is given to them. Similarly, physical death gives way to bodily resurrection, to a life that lasts forever. Death is the doorway to these important, necessary, and beautiful events.

If your teen thinks about death a lot or is fascinated by all the gory details of, say, Egyptian mummification, they're not abnormal or doing anything wrong. [Lynnette Lounsbury](#), a high school writing teacher, explains,

In the past, death was such a part of everyday life it was simply and frankly discussed, our students crave opportunities to have candid discussions about their mortality...The problem with ignoring something, or brushing teenagers off by telling them not to be morbid, is that they become even more fascinated.

As you read the Bible you'll find plenty of death (and even graphic violence) in its pages. So when [Scripture encourages us](#) to think about "whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable," Paul isn't saying to ignore violence and pretend the world is prettier than it is. Death is a real part of our fallen world, and [Ecclesiastes insists](#) that we "take this to heart."

So far from traumatizing our kids, talking about death can be a way to ground them in reality. While teens are infamous for their cavalier attitudes toward risk and danger, talking about death can encourage them toward a sober understanding of the impact of their choices, and even help them remember that they have a limited amount of time to exist.

How should I talk to my kid about death?

Death visits our communities in radically different ways. It can be expected or unexpected, natural or unnatural. Talking about the death of a person who lives to see their grandchildren grow up is utterly different from talking about a 3-year-old dying in a car accident, or a 15-year-old taking her own life. Yet each instance of death feels gruesome, and strange, even though it's the one thing we can all be sure of. JRR Tolkien [put it this way](#):

There is no such thing as a natural death. Nothing that ever happens to man is natural, since his presence calls the whole world into question. All men must die, but for every man his death is an accident, and even if he knows it he would sense to it an unjustifiable violation.

Whether your child or your family has lost someone, or you're preemptively beginning this conversation, here are a few principles to keep in mind as you navigate your unique situation.

It's never too early to begin talking about death. [This article](#) has step-by-step advice for talking with children about death, with age-appropriate phrasing.

Be clear. It may seem kind to say that someone has passed away, but that phrase and others like it can be confusing. For instance, young children may become afraid to go to sleep if their loved one is “eternally asleep.” Instead, use the words “dead” and “died.”

Be honest. Children should know the real cause of death so they don't invent fake reasons which might involve guilt or shame. For example, “My mom must've done something wrong,” or “I caused my aunt's death when I said such and such.” You don't have to fully explain everything that happened, but communicating the main reason for death is important.

Clarify. What did your teen understand from what you told them? Do they have any questions about what happened? Does anything need to be explained again?

A note about pets: The [death of a pet](#) is often someone's first exposure to death. And our pets are tied to wonderful memories and experiences. A friend of ours reminisces about her family's two labs,

For me, both Bristol and Piper were companions that could never turn on me, lose my trust, or disagree on what we were going to do. It sounds silly and extreme, but in a way, you have to look at losing a pet like that as losing a confidant, someone or something that knows you and cannot judge you in the slightest.

Encourage your teen to vocalize any feelings they have. Rather than muscling through this loss, or comparing the pet's death to the "real" hardships that other people face, let your teen process that their friend is gone. And that's hard.

Our teens are always evaluating if we are safe people to express themselves with. How will we respond if they cry? If they lash out in anger? If they express sincere doubts and frustrations? How would we like to be responded to if we were in their shoes?

What questions do teens have about death?

Whether from their own personal experience or from reading about an atrocity committed elsewhere in the world, an encounter with death will often bring questions about God's character and the nature of reality rocketing to the surface. A world that once seemed beautiful and exciting can suddenly feel dark and overwhelming. Here are some of the questions your teens might be wrestling with:

- How could God let something like this happen?
- Why isn't every death quick and painless? Why does God allow people to suffer before they die?
- How can I live in a world where things like this happen?
- How can I go on if I will never see this person again?
- Why are we alive if the whole point is to die and go to heaven someday?
- Does God really send people to hell after they die? Will my friend really be tortured forever for not believing in Jesus?
- What if I'm afraid of death? How can I not be afraid?

These questions are weighty. They are tied to traumas, fears, and hopes. Your teen needs you to tread lightly, to treat their objections and questions with respect, to acknowledge that people have been wrestling with these questions since the dawn of time, and that there aren't always satisfying answers.

Jewish society recognizes that death brings very painful questions to the surface, and that giving "an answer" isn't usually the point. The practice of [sitting shiva](#) is about being present with someone who is grieving, especially for the first seven days after someone has died. Not offering words of advice or wisdom. Not trying to "fix" an unfixable situation. Allowing torrents of grief and moments of numbness to come and go without offering unhelpful statements like "you'll see them again in heaven" or "they're in a better place now." Being present is enough.

[Shiva is a time](#) to...share memories and stories about the deceased. It's a time to honor a mourner's grief process without trying to correct or fix it, as the focus is on giving space to mourn without constraint. Your job as the visitor is to let mourners know you are there as unconditional support and presence.

We're not saying that teens should avoid tough theological questions (research could eventually be helpful). But after the loss of someone they love, information will probably fall flat.

Why is talking about death so hard?

[Julian of Norwich](#), a spiritual counselor of the 14th century, lived through six iterations of the black plague. During each outbreak, 50% (or more) of England's population succumbed to the disease. Julian lived through these epidemics over and over and over again. Six times. She had [questions for God](#), born out of her torturous experience. "Where are you? Do you care about what is happening to your world? If you knew what sin was going to do, why didn't you stop it? Why create us at all?"

Perhaps we are afraid to talk about death because Julian's questions are also our questions. What was God thinking when He set the world in motion? Is all this pain worth it? Maybe you're afraid of adding to your teen's confusion, especially if you don't have clear answers or peace of mind about the people you've loved and lost. But more

than clear-cut answers or easy theology, your teens need your honesty. They need your presence.

With death's prevalence, the medieval church realized that people needed a way to approach death, a way to air their fears of mortality and a painful end. Guidance about what to say and do as they walked with their loved ones to the grave. Enter: [the Ars Moriendi](#), the Art of Dying. The church walked bravely into the spaces of deepest grief, fiercest pain, and most gut-wrenching sickness to offer practical help. The comfort that Christ is with us even in the worst of what existence brings. Our teens need their own Ars Moriendi, even if it's complex and messy and incomplete. They have questions. Are we brave enough to listen? To face death for ourselves so that we can lead them well?

How does the death of a loved one impact a teen?

It feels like it would be easier to deal with death if the grieving process was the same for everyone. Five simple steps to work through. A clear finish line. Relief. Peace. But as we know, everyone's journey through grief is different. And a teen's process through grief is impacted by [many factors, including](#):

- * What kind of social support system do they have?
- * What were the circumstances of the death?
- * Did they unexpectedly find the body?
- * What was their relationship with the person who died like?
- * To what extent were they involved in the dying process?
- * What is their age and maturity level?
- * Do they have any previous experience with death?

While grief is different for everyone, here are some [common reactions to prepare for](#):

Buried emotions: *“[Teens grieve deeply](#) but often work very hard to hide their feelings. Fearing the vulnerability that comes with expression, they look for distractions rather than stay with the grief process long enough to find real relief. Feelings can be turned off quickly, much like flipping a light switch. Teens can act as if nothing has happened while they are breaking up inside.”*

Concern for you: If you are grieving the death of someone you love, your kids are concerned about you even as they're figuring out how to handle their own emotions.

Guilt: About an argument, about something your teen feels they should've done differently. Really they're asking, "Did I somehow cause this person I love to die? Maybe they wouldn't be dead if I had done this, said this, or avoided this." Reassure them that those thoughts are normal, and that they aren't actually responsible.

Anger: "[Children often express anger about the death](#). They may focus on someone they feel is responsible. They may feel angry at God. They may feel angry at the person who died for leaving them. Family members sometimes become the focus of this anger, because they are near and are 'safe' targets."

Risky behavior: "[Older children and teens](#) may drive recklessly, get into fights, drink alcohol, smoke cigarettes or use drugs. They may become involved in sexual activity or delinquency. They may start to have problems at school or conflicts with friends."

Fear: Your teen may be afraid that they'll forget the person, and feel guilty about even having that fear ("If this person means so much to me, how could I possibly forget about them?").

Be ready. For tears. Angry outbursts. Confusion. Silence. Numbness. Sarcastic comments. Slammed doors. If you're concerned about your teen's health, [this article](#) can help you to know which behaviors indicate unhealthy coping and are signs to get professional help.

What if death seems appealing to my teen?

Talking about death as an abstract concept is fine, but what if our teens are fascinated by dying? What if they are experiencing so much pain that they just want to be done with it all?

"It is an odd and frightening sensation to wish you were dead. After my husband died I fervently wished I could die, too. The first time I read that grieving people sometimes fantasize about death, I was relieved. My entire life I had appreciated

the gift of life; to suddenly and frequently wish it away was a disconcerting and lonely experience.” —[Michele Hernandez](#)

Relief: from endless homework, stress at home, trauma, bullying, self-consciousness, constant social anxiety...sometimes, especially after losing someone else, death can seem like the only way to escape a life that’s falling apart or emotions that don’t make sense.

[GinaMarie Guarino](#), a licensed mental health counselor, explains the difference between passive suicidal ideation and active suicidal ideation: “People tend to get thoughts about death and dying confused with suicidal thoughts...While inquisitive thoughts about death and dying are common, actual suicidal thoughts are not and should be taken seriously.” **Passive suicidal ideation** sounds like “I wish I could take a long nap and never wake up.” **Active suicidal ideation** means that someone has a plan in place for taking their life, and can be the next step for someone who is experiencing passive suicidal ideation, especially if they continue to feel hopeless and overwhelmed.

We recommend reading our [Parent’s Guide to Suicide and Self-Harm](#) for more detailed information. **If you even suspect that your child is struggling with any form of suicidal ideation, stop reading this guide and immediately seek help.** Contact your family physician and tell them your teen is at risk of suicide and must be seen immediately. If a doctor cannot see them right away for whatever reason, do not leave your child alone until they can be seen and evaluated by a healthcare professional qualified to assess adolescent behavioral health. If necessary, take your child to the nearest emergency room or urgent care center, demand priority, and do not leave the physician’s office until next-steps are in place (such as referral to a specialist, assessments, evaluations, treatment plans, outpatient/inpatient programs, etc.).

What does my teen need?

As you listen for the Holy Spirit’s invitation, think about how your teen might experience God’s love through your presence in their life. Here are some initial ideas:

Comfort and attention. We want our community to notice our pain. Your teen will want their friends to text them, to ask if they’re doing okay. This isn’t selfish. We encourage you to say that this desire for support is normal and good.

Consistent check-ins. If it's helpful, set a reminder on your phone to check in weekly at first (through a text, call, or time together), then every few weeks, and then monthly. Especially as time passes, people will forget that your teen is still grieving.

Don't press for answers. Your teen may not have the words to explain how they're doing, but they still want to be asked if they're okay. Give space to process as they're ready. But don't be offended and or freak out if they don't know how to answer your questions.

Just be together. Do some activities that don't require intense processing. Watch a show, drive around and get your errands done, hike, play basketball (or whatever sport your teen enjoys), feed some ducks, get your nails done, play a video game...

Give permission to let go. Here's a question to ask your teen as you feel they're ready: "Now that this person is gone, do you have a hole that needs filling?" Was the person who died a friend, mentor, or adventure buddy? It's okay to have another best friend, even though it's perfectly normal to feel guilty about replacing someone. Your teen probably wants to talk through their emotions and fears surrounding "moving on," including whether that's bad, what that looks like, etc.

Remembering together. We recently heard a story about Trey and his family. On the day that his grandmother passed away, they went to the store, bought some cookies & cream ice cream, and ate it after dinner as a way of remembering and honoring her (you guessed it, she loved cookies & cream). Community helps us hold those we've lost (stories, photos, continuing to talk about them). Simply saying, "Wow, grandad would've loved looking at these flowers with us" or, "Being at this restaurant makes me miss your mom. This was her favorite place to eat," are small but important ways to model healthy grief by letting your teen see a glimpse of your internal world.

Ask your teen: What's something you admired about ____ that you hope to be more like? Did they have a hobby that you want to try out (like maybe they were a runner, so now you're thinking about jogging)?

Take them to counseling. Inviting a professional to help your teen process their grief has nothing to do with your ability to help your teen. You're not losing your importance as a parent, you're simply giving your teen every possible outlet for figuring things out and healing.

A friend of ours explains,

A friend I really cared about died my freshman year of high school in a tornado. I remember calling my mom as soon as I got home from school, and she dropped everything and came straight home, which was critical. What I think I needed afterward, and what probably never occurred to her, was months of serious grief counseling. My parents were there for me, certainly. I wasn't isolated. But I had no tools to process the experience.

Help them think through what to say. Another friend of ours lost her sister unexpectedly about 18 months ago, and she's noticed that innocent get-to-know-you conversations can get uncomfortable if someone asks if she has siblings. Should she say that she only has three because her sister is dead? What if she says that she has four siblings and then someone asks, "Oh, where do they live?" Long pause. "Well... my sister is dead. But the rest of them live here, here, and here." Yikes. Now she's managing a stranger's awkwardness, and her own peace with her sister's death is called into question anytime she has this weirdly vulnerable interaction.

Our friend found it really helpful to talk with her parents about how they are handling interactions like that, and was encouraged that they don't always know how to respond either.

Be gracious with yourself. Processing your own grief while watching out for your child is so difficult. Give yourself lots of grace in this process.

What if I don't know what to say?

One of the most humbling and striking examples of grief is found in [John 11:35](#). Jesus' close friends, Mary and Martha, are mourning the death of their brother Lazarus. It's a rough story. They sent word to Jesus, begging him to come to their town to heal Lazarus. But Jesus waited...days. When he finally arrives, both sisters accuse him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Blunt. Angry. Confused. They must have felt abandoned and betrayed. Jesus would heal strangers, but not his own friend? Surprisingly, Jesus doesn't defend himself or explain his reasoning. He doesn't tell them to have more faith or to be less emotional. Instead, he cries. He joins them in their pain, even though he knows he's about to raise Lazarus from the dead, and that's

been his goal all along. But he also knows that eventual restoration doesn't change Mary and Martha's feelings in the moment; so instead of insisting that they change, Jesus joins them there.

Even though we hold death as part of God's larger story (the eventual restoration and renewal of all things), there is room in Christianity for real anguish, confusion, and even anger. The [psalms](#) are full of lamentations. God isn't asking us to have "more appropriate" emotional responses to death. God's response in Jesus was to grieve with His friends. Can you offer this type of support to your teen in their questions and in their pain? Are you willing to grieve with them instead of trying to fix or deemphasize when death inevitably touches someone they care about?

Most of us just want and need to be listened to. Your teen isn't looking for a sermon. They want a hug, a good cry, and an "I'm sorry. That sucks." Exhale. You don't need to have all the answers.

This is uncomfortable, and we don't have to make it comfortable. Perhaps the best thing you can do is to be there with them. You are in this together. And Christ is with you as well.

Related Axis Resources

- [The Culture Translator](#), a **free** weekly email that offers biblical insight on all things teen-related
- [A Parent's Guide to Suicide & Self-Harm Prevention](#)
- [A Parent's Guide to Walking through Grief](#)
- [A Parent's Guide to COVID-19](#)
- [A Parent's Guide to Fear & Worry](#)
- [Suicide Video Kit](#)
- [10-Day Teen Talk: Suicide](#)
- Check out [axis.org](#) for even more resources!
- If you'd like access to all of our digital resources, both current and yet to come, for one low yearly or monthly fee, check out the [All Axis Pass!](#)

Additional Resources

- [Order of the Good Death](#)
- [The Art of Dying Well](#)

Watch:

- [“Overcoming Death Denial In Your Family,” Ask A Mortician](#)
- [“Talk to Your Children About Death,” Ask A Mortician](#)
- [“Confronting Your Death,” Ask A Mortician](#)

Read:

- [“The Grieving Teen,” American Hospice Foundation](#)
- [Jewish Funeral Prayers and Poems](#), cake
- [“Death and Grief,” TeensHealth](#)
- [“Ars Moriendi,” The Art of Dying Well](#)
- [“Coping with Losing a Pet,” HelpGuide](#)
- [“Why We Need to Take Pet Loss Seriously,” Scientific American](#)
- [“Tips for Offering Condolences,” cake](#)
- [“How to Talk to Kids About Death, Step by Step,” Parents](#)
- [“The Dog Isn’t Sleeping: How to Talk with Children About Death,” NPR](#)
- [Talking to Adolescents About Death](#), Lakeview Middle School
- [“The Do’s and Don’ts of Talking with a Child about Death,” Psychology Today](#)
- [“Young people are dying to talk about death,” The Guardian](#)
- [The Great Divorce](#), C.S. Lewis
- [Being Mortal](#), Atul Gawande

Listen:

- [“We’re All Going to Die,” Speaking with Joy](#)
- [“95. Mimi Dixon - Julian of Norwich,” Renovare](#)
- [“#18 Hell and Heaven,” Ask NT Wright Anything](#)
- [“Dust We Are And Shall Return,” The Brilliance](#)
- [“DUST,” Kings Kaleidoscope](#)
- [“Centering Prayer,” The Liturgists](#)
- [“Vapor,” The Liturgists](#)

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Reflection Questions

- As I imagine talking with my teen about death, what emotions rise to the surface?
- What was my first experience with death?
- What has my experience with grief been like? Are there any losses in my life that I haven't fully processed?
- When someone I love dies, what is my natural first response? What coping mechanisms do I tend to go towards (these can be healthy or unhealthy)?
- How did my parents or caretakers respond to and talk about death? What did they do well? What do I want to do differently with my own teen?

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Discussion Questions

- Are you afraid to talk about death? Why or why not?
- What legacy do you hope to leave for the people who come after you? What legacies have been left for you by your older relatives and mentors?
- What does culture teach us about death? What are the pros and cons of these messages?

Questions to ask when a death happens in your teen's community:

- How can we support this person who has lost a loved one?
- Practically, what will it look like to show up for them this week, 6 months from now, and 3 years from now?

Questions to ask when your teen is close to someone who died:

- In the midst of this loss, what are you feeling that you didn't expect to feel?
- In the midst of this loss, what would be most comforting for you?
- What can it look like to celebrate this person's life and continue to remember them?
- What qualities did you love about this person? Are there any ways that you hope to be more like them?

Hint: Screen shot or print this page to refer back to later!

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Recap

- This is a difficult topic. Thank you for choosing to walk with your teen through personal grief and loss, or for preparing them to encounter death.
- Western society is structured to keep us from thinking about death. Teens encounter death through media and entertainment, but often these glimpses of death are gory or fantastical. They need honest conversations about mortality to begin grappling with their own limitations.
- Christians have a nuanced understanding of death. Christ conquered death. And yet death is terrible. We don't have to be afraid of dying. Yet some of our deepest pain comes from encountering death.
- Teens have tough questions about death. Be willing to really listen to them.
- Spend time with your teen. Be with them. Even if you don't have answers. They are looking for comfort more than cliches or trite answers anyway. Even when it feels uncomfortable. Even when your heart is breaking. Your presence is enough.

Hint: Screen shot or print this page to refer back to later!