**Helping Children & Teens Cope with Grief & Loss**

Grief is so hard to deal with and due to the COVID-19 pandemic our worldwide community is going to be dealing with a lot of grief and loss. What is going to be especially hard is that some of our normal rituals around grief (wakes and funerals) are also going to be disrupted due to social distancing, so people may experience more difficulties without having expected closure rituals.

My intention in this blog post is to compile resources you could use with your children to help them cope with grief and loss. I am including resources which could easily be done at home with limited supplies or in a telehealth session with a counselor.

A Metaphor to Explain Grief to Kids

Losing someone you care about is like being hit in the chest with a **gigantic block of ice** that sticks to your chest. The ice block is so big, you can **barely focus** on or see anything else that is going on. It feels so **heavy** on your chest, it makes it difficult to do ordinary things. You may feel like you are having trouble breathing or thinking clearly. You might even **lose interest** in doing things you used to enjoy like baseball or dancing…

But **you won’t feel like this forever**. You need to learn to **adjust your life** to do things differently and in a new way because you have this giant ice block on your chest now. So you **change some of your routines** and as time goes by **you learn how** to do the special things in your life, like birthday parties and holidays, with this big block of ice on your chest.

And **with each day** that passes and with each new thing that you do, over time, the giant ice ball **slowly melts** because each day, very slowly, **one tiny drip** melts off. As time goes by, without you even noticing it, the ice block gets smaller and lighter as it melts, to the point where you don’t even notice it anymore and it **doesn’t disrupt your life like it once did**. You **always remember** the big block of ice but it **no longer weighs you down** or interferes with your daily life.

Normalizing Feelings

One of the most important concepts for a grieving child or teen to understand is that **the entire range and complexity of their feelings is okay and expected.** We really want to normalize what children and teens are feeling and let them know that this is a journey and process that will take time to heal. The only way to get through the grief process is by **experiencing those feelings, even though they are uncomfortable**. Talking to children about what to expect with their thoughts, feelings and behavior, as well as the stages of grief can also be useful. According to [Psychology Today](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/conditions/bereavement" \t "_blank):

“The bereaved may experience crying spells, trouble sleeping, changes in appetite, or lack of productivity at work. At first, one may find it hard to accept that the loss has actually occurred. Feelings of anger may also arise. The anger may be directed toward doctors and nurses, God, other loved ones, oneself, or even the person who has died. The grieving person may experience feelings of guilt, with sentiments such as 'I should have…', 'I could have…', or 'I wish I had…' Emotions may be very intense, and the bereaved person may have mood swings. These are all normal reactions to loss.”

Teaching Children About the Stages of Grief

One of the ways to normalize feelings during the grief process is to explain to kids that grief is a **process and a journey**. Depending on their age, it can be helpful to teach them about the stages of grief so they know what to expect. You want to emphasize that these stages **may not always be experienced in a linear fashion**. Sometimes it’s one step forward, two steps back.

In 1969 Elisabeth Kübler-Ross developed the [5 stages of grief](https://grief.com/the-five-stages-of-grief/" \t "_blank) model which included the stages of **denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance**. In 2011 Wright adapted this model to incorporate [7 stages of grief](https://www.recover-from-grief.com/7-stages-of-grief.html" \t "_blank), which are illustrated above and include:

* Shock and denial
* Pain and guilt
* Anger and bargaining
* Depression, reflection and loneliness
* The upward turn
* Reconstruction and working through
* Acceptance and hope

Grief Activity: Create a Tangled Ball of Grief Art

H. Norman Wright created this image of a tangled ball of emotions involved in grief. This is a great representation of the complexity of the feelings involved with the grief process. This model helps normalize the full range of emotions, and can also lead to a discussion about the **process** of grief and how it is a journey that takes time to heal. For example, if you were to try to unravel this ball, it could not be done easily and quickly, it would take some time and work.

After sharing the image with the child who is grieving, they can then **create their own tangled ball of grief art**. All you need is paper and either markers, crayons or colored pencils. The child can create a key and then choose a different color to represent each different emotion to then create their own tangled ball of grief. This is a project that might be nice to revisit and re-do over time.

Grief Activity: Create Support Art inspired by *The Invisible String*

*[The Invisible String](https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/031648623X/ref=as_li_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=031648623X&linkCode=as2&tag=wholechildcou-20&linkId=86d6afd02988db4ba0cd0fa7ccf2b52f" \t "_blank)* [by Patrice Karst](https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/031648623X/ref=as_li_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=031648623X&linkCode=as2&tag=wholechildcou-20&linkId=86d6afd02988db4ba0cd0fa7ccf2b52f" \t "_blank) is an excellent book for grief, or even to use when a child is missing someone that they care about. For this activity you need a piece of paper and either markers, crayons or colored pencils. After reading The Invisible String, have the child write their name in their favorite color in the middle of the paper. Next, have the child write down the names of people and pets in their lives that they are connected to with an invisible string. They will then surround their own name with the names of the people that care about them. The kids often like to pick special colors that they associate with each of the different people and share why they chose each color: "I picked green for my Uncle because he has a green truck."

Depending on the age and developmental level of the child, they may need some scaffolding with this activity. I may help with writing the names or ask prompting questions such as: “What about the family that doesn’t live with you? What about people at school? What about friends? Neighbors? People at church? People on your sports team?” etc. When the child is done listing people, I always have them reflect on how it feels to see their name, surrounded by all the people they are connected to with invisible strings. We then decide where in their house they can hang up their Support Art so they will see it often as a reminder.

Grief Activity: Create a Memory Box

*[The Memory Box](https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1506426727/ref=as_li_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1506426727&linkCode=as2&tag=wholechildcou-20&linkId=e988bea3fe13c5cceee28c8a3797b558" \t "_blank)* [by Joanna Rawland](https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1506426727/ref=as_li_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1506426727&linkCode=as2&tag=wholechildcou-20&linkId=e988bea3fe13c5cceee28c8a3797b558" \t "_blank) is a great book about remembering a loved one and grieving. You can read the story and then have the child [create their own memory box](https://www.wikihow.com/Make-a-Memory-Box" \t "_blank). You can use a shoebox or another box from around the house, decorate it and fill it with memorable items such as cards, drawings, ticket stubs and pictures. If you don’t have a spare box lying around, you could make a smaller memory box by creating 2 of these folding [origami boxes](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N8p_MIq4ngU" \t "_blank) and putting them together.

Grief Activity: The Dougy Center

[The Dougy Center: The National Center for Grieving Children and Families](https://www.dougy.org/" \t "_blank) is an **incredible and comprehensive** resource with loads of activities including a podcast, articles, videos, a safety plan, a support group search and much more. They also have a great [toolkit for kids and teens](https://www.tdcschooltoolkit.org/kids" \t "_blank) that offers free printable activities to do.

Grief Activity: Create an Art and Writing Journal

When a child or teen experiences a loss, they need a **healthy, safe place to express their uncomfortable thoughts and feelings**. The process of creating art in and of itself often helps people feel relaxed. When dealing with a loss, children and teens may try to push their uncomfortable feelings away and try not to acknowledge or deal with them. From a psychological perspective, this is not very beneficial.

The famous psychologist Carl Jung said that “what you resist not only persists, but will grow in size.” Creating art and writing can give children and teens a healthy outlet to express those uncomfortable feelings.

When things are difficult, words may fail us and may not be able to capture the complexity of our feelings and experiences. **When words fail, images can capture and express feelings and experiences more accurately**. Creating art offers a nonverbal form of expression and is extremely helpful when words are not enough.

Grief Activity: Learn Coping Skills

There is a delicate balancing act as a counselor when working with grieving people. On one hand, in order to grieve you know that people need to **go through the process of experiencing all of their feelings**. If they try to push their feelings down, ignore, or sidestep their feelings, they will have a lot of other issues to contend with (such as physical complaints.) However you don't want people to get get TOO STUCK in their feelings or become depressed. If you find that your child is stuck in their feelings, or you think they may be depressed, they will benefit from working with a counselor.

Resources on Grief and Loss

**Sesame Street** has [great resources on grief](https://sesamestreetincommunities.org/topics/grief/" \t "_blank) for younger children. https://www.sesamestreet.org/caring

[Good Grief](https://good-grief.org/" \t "_blank) is a **very comprehensive** website that offers many resources. One of the most helpful things they have is this breakdown of [how grief looks differently by age](https://good-grief.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Grief-in-Developmental-Stages.pdf" \t "_blank) from 2-18. https://good-grief.org/