

**SCHOOL PERSONNEL TOOLKIT:
SUPPORTING GRIEVING STUDENTS
IN THE AGE OF COVID-19 AND BEYOND**



Sharing Grief. Finding Hope.

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Introduction to OUR HOUSE Grief Support Center

OUR HOUSE Grief Support Center is a non-profit organization that has supported children, adolescents, adults, schools, and those in the greater Los Angeles community who have experienced the death of someone close since 1993. We are recognized as a leader in the field of children's grief locally and nationally. We offer grief support groups in our three locations: West Los Angeles, Woodland Hills and Mid-City/Koreatown, and at 80 satellite locations throughout the city. We also provide professional education to social service professionals, educators, and medical professional and provide on-site grief responses at businesses and schools after the death of a member of their community.

Grief Support During Covid-19

- Bi-monthly grief support groups online via Zoom for adults
- Bi-monthly grief support groups online via Zoom for children ages 6-18 who've experienced the death of a parent or sibling
- All groups facilitated by licensed clinical OUR HOUSE staff and/or trained volunteers
- Referrals to individual therapists who specialize in grief therapy
- Assessments and consultations with school staff
- Grief education presentations to school staff via Zoom
- OUR HOUSE is a non-profit, non-sectarian organization

Grief Support Services for Schools During COVID-19:

Since 1997 public schools have turned to OUR HOUSE for support when a student or faculty member died. Our landmark School Program is one of the largest in the U.S. and serves over 800 students on campuses throughout the county with our evidence based 10-week curriculum. In addition, our staff clinicians responded to the call when a student or faculty member died by providing a short-term grief response for the most bereaved students and staff. Our educational trainings for school counselors and their interns give them the tools they need to effectively support grieving students and their guardians throughout the school year.

Explaining Death to Children when Someone Dies Due to COVID-19

When someone dies of COVID-19, a child or teen is likely to experience thoughts and feelings unlike those experienced when deaths are due to other causes. As with deaths due to other causes, it is important to be truthful about the cause and to provide age appropriate explanations to questions that children may have. Since this disease is new to human beings, feeling prepared requires knowledge. Like other parenting responsibilities, preparation can alleviate confusion that caregivers might experience if caught off-guard. The following are questions that children as young as 3 or 4 might ask:

What is COVID-19?

- Explain that it is a flu like other flus, but it has never been experienced by people before.
- That's why there isn't a cure for it or a vaccine to prevent it yet.
- Scientists think that the first person who got COVID-19 caught it from an animal.
- What makes it most different from other flus is that it is very contagious, and that's why it's important to wash hands frequently for at least 20 seconds, use hand sanitizer and face masks when coming in from outside or coming in contact with anything from outside the home, and maintain physical distance of at least 6 feet from people outside the home.

Children will naturally want to know why their person got the disease

- It wasn't their fault or the fault of their person who died
- The disease is highly contagious, so even if they were practicing physical distancing and using gloves and masks, the disease was passed to them by someone with COVID-19
- Because it's a new virus, there was no vaccine to prevent their person from getting the disease
- If the source of the contamination is unknown, tell the child that it is unclear how their person caught the disease

Children will want to know if you are going to get COVID-19 and die too?

- Although the disease is highly contagious, most people who get it recover and don't die
- Let your child know who would care for them if you were unable to care for them
- This will give them a sense of control over a situation that is making them feel scared and helpless
- Unlike deaths due to other causes, when someone dies due to COVID-19, families might not have had an opportunity to say good-bye prior to the death or participate in a mourning ritual. Participation in mourning rituals help even very young children begin their mourning processes by offering them opportunities to witness what happens to bodies after the death. They also benefit from the support available from friends and family at those gatherings.

Some things you can do with children and teens until a memorial service or celebration of life can take place

- Write or draw about the person who died
- Make an in-memory collage with paper, magazine clippings, or photos and glue
- Create a home altar or shrine
- Plant a tree or flower garden
- Make a memory box to gather keepsakes that remind you of the person who died
- Create an in-memory playlist of songs that remind you of that person
- Understand that there's no right or wrong way to grieve and that grief is a unique process for each person. Each adult and child will grieve in their own way rather than according to any stage model.
- Role model for children that it is okay to talk about the person who died and encourage them to come ask for support when they are feeling sad, mad, scared, lonely, anxious, guilty or worried because their person died.

Recommendations for Supporting Grieving Students During the Time of COVID-19

Although it is always recommended that you be honest when speaking with children about the cause of death and that you answer all their questions, you may encounter families that do not share this view. Encouraging guardians to be truthful, when possible, will decrease the problems that will ensue when children eventually learn the truth. The following guidelines are true when speaking to children about deaths due to COVID-19 or those due to other causes.

1. **Explain the cause of the death and about the pandemic using simple, truthful language.** The older the child, the more information they will want to know. Respond to any questions the child might ask, as this indicates they are old enough for more information. If you don't have answers to certain questions, it's okay to say, "I don't know the answer to that question, but I will try to find out" or, it may even be preferable to say, "That is a good question for you to ask your parents."
2. **Be clear about the unique nature of this disease:** Because it is contagious, and currently neither a vaccine or treatment is available, students are likely to experience a myriad of thoughts and feelings during the school day. They may need support from their school counselor or social worker. If they have experienced a death, they will need grief support as well. Although you can't fix it for them you can provide a safe space for them by listening without judgement, providing empathic responses, a place to get a break from class and to call home if needed. They can also practice a coping strategy.
3. **Encourage children to share memories of their person who died and refer to their person by name or use the term they used.** For example, use "papa" if that's what they called their loved one. Try to use the verb "died" rather than a euphemism for death such as "lost" or "passed". That is less confusing, demonstrates that you can tolerate conversations about death and the deceased, and that the student doesn't need to take care of you like they do the grieving adults at home.
4. **Encourage students individually or in groups to share thoughts and feelings about the pandemic and about loved ones who've died.** Discuss funerals or memorials they've attended virtually or in-person, as this normalizes these life cycle events and models for children that it is okay to talk about these topics with each other. Discuss ways to be supportive of one another, especially the children who have experienced the death of someone close due to COVID-19 or other causes.

5. **Expressive Arts activities help children and teens process their thoughts and emotions and then enables them to verbalize their grief and other losses more easily.** Some examples include:
 - Writing condolence letters or cards to a family in need
 - Reading Grief Books from OUR HOUSE Recommended Book List
 - Drawing pictures of feelings about COVID-19
 - For younger children, ask, "If sadness were an animal, what would it look like?"
 - Drawing the image that pops into your brain when you are trying to concentrate

6. **An important part of the grieving process for children and adults is engaging in rituals that honor the memory of loved ones who've died.** Children and teens can make a memory collage using clippings from magazines. If a student or faculty member dies, they can decorate a bulletin board, their locker, or chair. This is especially important because COVID-19 has made it challenging to memorialize loved ones in the traditional way. A campus memorial activity, such as a tree planting or candlelight ceremony, can provide the sense of community that comforts grievers as they start their mourning process.

7. **Remember, grief is a natural response to death.** Most children will adapt to their life without the deceased without developing any mental health problems. If a child exhibits signs of more severe distress, feel free to call OUR HOUSE for a consult or consider referring the child for outside psychological services.

8. **Remember to prioritize your own self-care.** Your students and your family and friends need you to be the best you that you can be. (See our section on self-care.)

Developmental Stages and Children's Grief Response

Age: 6-10

Developmental Stage:

- Concrete operations: they think about or understand death-related concepts in concrete ways but may still struggle to understand the permanence and irreversibility of death.
 - Focus on the details of what happened
- Makes efforts towards independence
- Displays some egocentricity
- Short attention and sadness span

Grief Reactions:

- May believe the death was their fault due to egocentricity
- May ask questions repeatedly to try and master concepts
- Experience a range of emotions but may lack the vocabulary to express them verbally
- Express their feelings through behavior rather than words.
 - Negative behaviors are their way of letting us know they are in pain since they cannot verbalize the intense emotions associated with their grief.
- May somaticize feelings without understanding physical sensation is a manifestation of their emotions.
 - For example, they may focus on tummy aches rather than identifying they feel nervous being away from home.

Helpful Approaches:

- Use simple, direct words or phrases
- Encourage their attempts at self-care
- During difficult moments, offer choices rather than telling them what to do
- Provide time warning to prepare for transitions
- Avoiding euphemisms aids in ability to understand
- Offer physical outlets to release strong emotions
- The child may assume blame for the death.
 - Saying "It's not your fault" will not relieve those feelings.

Developmental Stages and Children's Grief Response

Age: 11-14

Developmental Stage:

- Formal operations
- Use logic appropriately, can think abstractly with hypothetical thinking
- Lack emotional maturity to process their thoughts and navigate interpersonal relationships in a mature way
- Displays magical thinking and egocentricity

Grief Reactions:

- Understand irreversibility of death and, to some degree, universality
- May have difficulty concentrating due to intrusive thoughts or images
- May be morbidly curious or phobic about death, obsess over surviving parent's health, and/or idolize person who died
- Difficulty identifying feelings, which may lead to acting-out behavior
- Self-conscious about showing their emotions on the outside
- They may struggle to hide their emotions and will need reassurance that it is natural to cry or rage when grieving

Helpful Approaches:

- Encourage them to ask questions of each other and provide support.
- Point out similarities between student's life experience and emotional experiences
- Set appropriate limits to keep students safe, when needed.
- Avoidance of the topic may create further anxiety; the difficult reality is better than uncertainty.
- Offer physical outlets.
- Offer opportunities for self-expression through art and music.
- Monitor for bullying, teasing and isolating behaviors
 - Look out for classism and "other-isms"
- Help teens stay in the moment and be present to enjoy the support and activities of their school day: teach mindfulness practice

Developmental Stages and Teen's Grief Response

Age: 15-17

Developmental Stage:

- Formal operations
- Working towards independence and differentiation from family of origin
- Understands universality but may deny own mortality and may engage in behaviors to tempt fate
- Understands abstract concepts
- Can do hypothetical and deductive reasoning
- They crave a peer group to identify with
 - Peer group at school with similarly bereaved peers meets this need

Grief Reactions:

- Reactions may appear similar to those of adults however, they can't process their emotions rationally and have difficulty monitoring their behavioral reactions the way healthy adults can
 - May cope with grief in ways that may be dangerous to self or others
- Grief reactions may be accompanied by depression, anxiety and/or PTSD due to exposure to repeated traumas or deaths.
- May have difficulty concentrating at times if they are experiencing flashbacks or intrusive images
- May attempt to bury feelings and focus instead on homework, extra curriculars and physical complaints (i.e. constant fatigue or aches)
- May exhibit risk taking behavior as if to "tempt fate" or challenge their own mortality
- May have stressors that their non-bereaved teens do not experience
 - Parental death may rush independence OR put it on hold. Older children may feel a need to put long-term plans on hold in order to look after the surviving parent, guardian or siblings and help with expenses

Helpful Approaches:

- May feel vulnerable and need to talk
- Facilitate connections between students that can continue after school ends
- Monitor for safety concerns including thoughts of suicide or self-harm
- Help teens stay in the moment and be present to enjoy the support and activities of the school day (help them practice mindfulness)

Preparing Children for Funerals or Memorial Services During the Time of COVID-19

Since the beginning of time human beings have practiced funerary rituals to honor those who have died. These rituals help the bereaved begin their mourning process and have a supportive element that benefits both adults and children. With the advent of the global pandemic, a family's ability to participate in formal mourning rituals in person has been directly impacted. In most cases, funerals and memorial services have been postponed until CDC guidelines permit large gatherings. Depending on the family's ability to talk about the death and respond to the lack of a graveside or chapel service, the young child's ability to understand death -- and especially what happens to bodies when a person dies, may result in confusion about the finality of death. It might also limit the family's ability to say their final good-byes. Consider the following:

1. Will an on-line gathering be planned instead? Will it be a celebration of the life of the deceased or will there be a camera at a private gravesite service that may still take place for the immediate family?
2. Will children be allowed to be part of the Zoom funerals or memorial services? How young a child should be included? Allowing children to attend wakes, viewings, services etc. gives children the chance to remain in close proximity to surviving family members during a very scary time. In this way their fears of further abandonment are eased. Young children will signal when they are ready to be "excused" through their restless or unfocused behavior.
3. Attendance at these rituals helps children with the crucial task of understanding death. The more they are included in family rituals and conversations about the death, the better able they will be to understand the finality of death and mourn the loss.
4. Participating in the mourning ritual gives children the opportunity to honor and memorialize their person that died. Invite children to attend by saying, "Please join us when we all go to say good-bye for the last time".
5. Offer simple, concrete, age-appropriate explanations for each ritual, preparing them for what to expect and who will be there.
6. Designate a person close to the child that is not the most directly impacted by the death to companion the child during the Zoom memorial ritual. This allows the most directly affected adults to stay present.
7. Share information about where you are going, what to expect, who will be there, etc.

8. Give the child the option to stay for all or part of the time, to view the gravesite service or open casket viewing or not. Let them know they can change their mind if they want and that there is no penalty for not participating.

Ways children can participate in mourning rituals:

- Choose flowers, decorations, music, readings, or write their own thoughts to share
- Make a video or collage to share during the Zoom service or email to guests
- Help select the casket or urn
- Decide whether to place something in the casket or cremation box
- Select clothing for the deceased
- Help construct wording for the headstone
- Discuss where to scatter the ashes, adhering to legal guidelines
- Help close the casket and/or serve as a pall bearer
- Light a memorial candle
- Plan a balloon or dove release
- Discuss the option to join a grief support group
- Help children make decisions regarding how to mark the anniversary of the death and other special occasions

Coping Skills for Children & Teens

When children and teens experience big, challenging feelings and emotions, sometimes there is someone to go to for support and comfort and sometimes there is not. The following coping skills are ways that grieving children and teens can comfort themselves when difficult thoughts and feelings arise.

Candle/flower breathing: Pretend you are holding the best smelling flower you've ever smelled in one hand and a lit birthday candle in the other. Close your eyes and breath in the smell of the flower for a count of three. Hold your breath for a count of three, and then exhale as though blowing out the candle for a count of three. Now repeat with your hands in your lap, imagining the candle and flower in your mind. Repeat again for a total of three times.

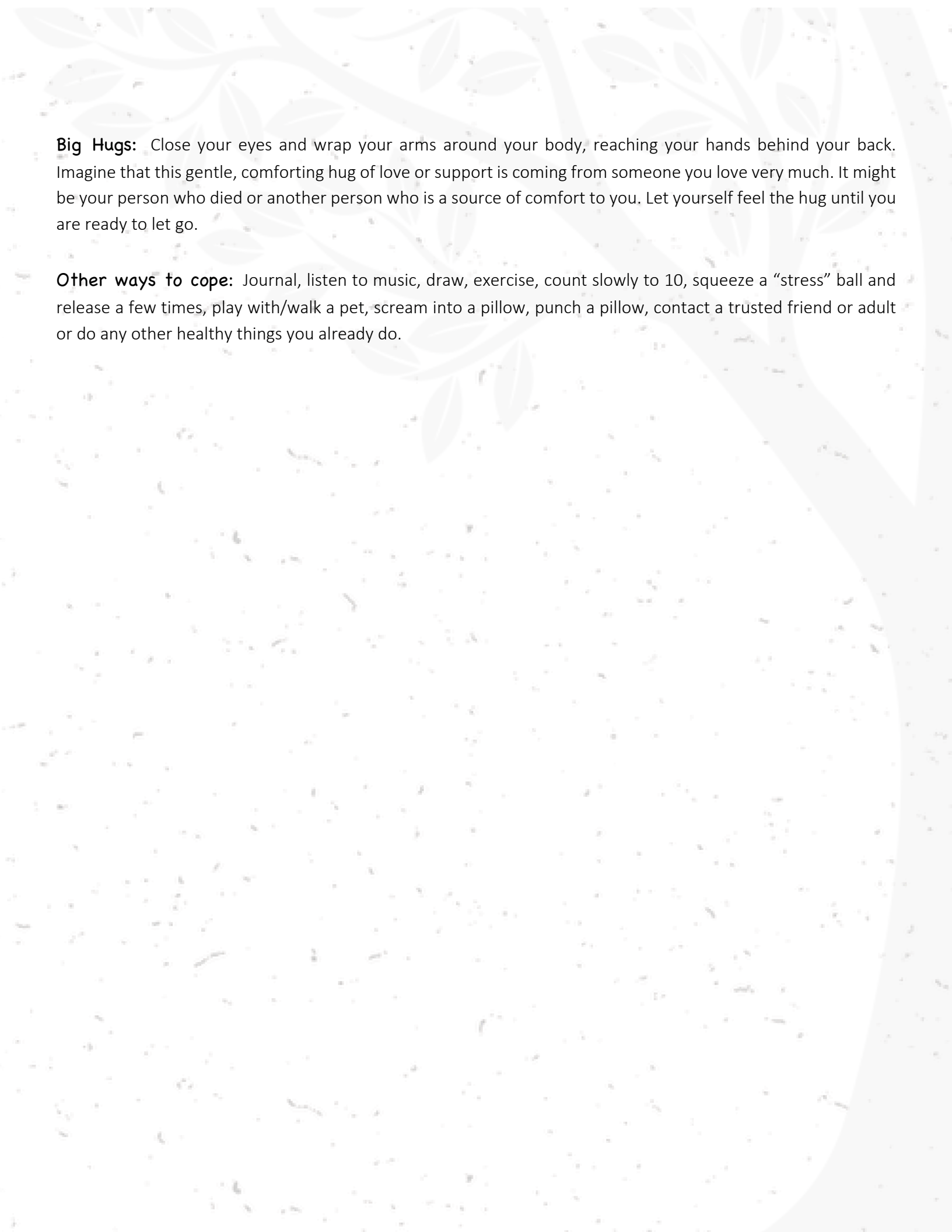
Pizza breathing: Pretend you are holding a hot piece of delicious pizza on plate. Imagine that it is your very favorite kind of pizza. Hold it in front of you and take a deep breath in, smelling the pizza, for a count of three. Hold that breath in for a count of three, then blow on the pizza to cool it off for a count of three. Repeat this 2-3 times to calm your breathing.

Butterfly breathing: Make an X with your wrists in front of you, palms open wide with fingers spread, and palms facing you. Touch the pads of your thumbs together. Your hands should now look like a butterfly! With your hands in this shape, lay them on your chest with your thumbs at the base of your neck and your fingers laying against your collarbones. Take long slow breaths in and out while fluttering your fingers against your collarbones. Notice how the feeling reverberates in your chest!

Spaghetti relaxation: Using your whole body, pretend you're a hard piece of uncooked spaghetti. Breathe in and tighten your body all the way from head to toe, holding your breath. Hold this for a count of three. Now exhale and relax your body all over like a piece of cooked spaghetti to the count of three. Repeat as needed.

Visualization: You can shift away from painful thoughts by imagining a safe or happy place. Close your eyes and picture yourself in that place. Notice the sounds, smells, and anyone else who is in that space with you and memorize how it feels in your safe or happy place. Then open your eyes and notice any change in your mood or expression. You can do this whenever you need to comfort yourself, and on special days or times when you really miss your person who died.

Pop paper bag: Pick your biggest upset feeling and write or draw about it on a small paper bag. Next, blow that feeling into your bag. When you pop the bag imagine releasing that feeling out of your body and into the air so that you don't have to carry it around inside you for the rest of the day.



Big Hugs: Close your eyes and wrap your arms around your body, reaching your hands behind your back. Imagine that this gentle, comforting hug of love or support is coming from someone you love very much. It might be your person who died or another person who is a source of comfort to you. Let yourself feel the hug until you are ready to let go.

Other ways to cope: Journal, listen to music, draw, exercise, count slowly to 10, squeeze a “stress” ball and release a few times, play with/walk a pet, scream into a pillow, punch a pillow, contact a trusted friend or adult or do any other healthy things you already do.

Caring for the Caregiver: Preventing Vicarious Traumatization

While work with grieving children is rewarding, teachers and care providers may become overwhelmed or even experience some grief-related symptoms. This is a natural reaction when working with grievors or trauma survivors and must be recognized, understood, and addressed to guard against vicarious traumatization. This is especially important during the time of COVID-19 as your own worries and stressors may have increased. Taking very good care of yourself is one of the most important things you can do for those in your care.

Possible Symptoms of Vicarious Traumatization:

- Symptoms of depression, including sadness, poor concentration, and sleep disturbance
- Preoccupation with illness, death, and dying or visualizing death scenes
- Apathy or withdrawal from social relationships
- Feelings of powerlessness, anxiety, survivor guilt, or anger
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Feeling depleted
- Forgetfulness or “foggy brain”

Coping Strategies for Preventing Vicarious Traumatization:

Physical

- Getting adequate exercise
- Getting adequate sleep
- Eating nutritious food
- Taking breaks often
- Taking care of your body with activities like massage, stretching, warm bath, wearing comfortable clothing, etc.
- Listen to your body. When you are experiencing stress or feeling overwhelmed, where do you feel it in your body? What does it feel like? When you notice these physical reactions, you are being given a message that it’s time to take care of yourself.

Psychological

- Finding balance – involve yourself in a variety of activities at a moderate pace. For example, find space in your schedule for personal “down time”, social contact, and time for hobbies and personal interests.
- Schedule time to relax daily and for longer periods of time like vacations
- Creativity: play an instrument, color in a coloring book, paint, sew, collage, cook, etc.

- Practice saying “no” when necessary
- Nurture helpful skills like meditation, time-management, and clear communication
- Ritual/spiritual practice may be helpful. This can take many forms but may be as simple as paying attention to one’s breathing and approaching one’s life with mindfulness.
- Humor

Social Support

- Asking for assistance – one of the most important and effective ways to protect yourself from becoming overwhelmed is to talk about challenges with a supervisor or trusted colleague so that you do not end up carrying the entire load yourself. This is not a sign of weakness or of lack of capability; rather, it is one of the most important skills to learn as a person who works in the role of “helper.”
- Setting appropriate boundaries with your time, personal space, and relationships
- Making sure that you devote adequate time to relationships in your life that provide balance, comfort, and care.

Child and Teen Book List

Death of a Parent:

A Tiny Step Forward - *A boy copes with the death of his mom by keeping the memories of the good times and the love they shared alive.* Charlene Khaghan & Jill Starishevsky. Ages 4-10

Always My Dad - *A small picture book about the enduring love a young boy finds after the death of his father.* Kathryn Graf. Ages 5-10

Because the Sky is Everywhere - *A child looks everywhere for his father until he learns an important lesson.* Nancy Sharp. Ages 3-8

Everett Anderson's Goodbye - *Young boy experiences grief following the death of his father.* Lucille Clifton. Ages 3-9

A Journey with Mrs. Beens: A Children's Storybook of Grief Support - *A lovely book about two children whose mother died.* Marsha Ann Dobler. Ages 3-9. Available for New Hope Grief Support Community.

My BIG DUMB Invisible DRAGON - *A metaphorical tale about a young boy's journey after his mother's death. Focus is on his reactions and how he learns to cope.* Angie Lucas. Ages 4-11

Not the End: A Child's Journey Through Grief - *Created to give hope to children grieving the death of a parent.* Mari Dombkowski. Ages 6-12

Not the End of the Chavez Family - *True story about one family's journey after the father dies.* Mari Dombkowski. Written in English and in Spanish. Ages 6-12

Sad but OK- My Daddy Died Today - *Chapter book chronicling a family's journey through cancer, death, and grief.* Barbara Frisbie Juneau. Ages 8-12

Saying Goodbye to Daddy - *Gentle treatment of death, funerals, grief as a multi-generational family grieves the death of the adult son, husband and father.* Judith Vigna. Ages 6-12

Death of a Grandparent:

Birds of a Feather: A Children's Story of Love, Loss and What Came Next - Tom Crice. Ages 5-11

Children Also Grieve: Talking about Death & Healing - *A story about a dog in a family whose grandfather died; has room to create scrapbook.* Linda Goldman. Ages 5-10

Finding Grandpa Everywhere - *A young child discovers memories of a grandparent.* John Hodge. Ages 3-10. Available through the Centering Corporation, www.centering.org.

I know I Made it Happen - *Deals with self-blame when a series of bad things happen including a grandparent's death.* Lynn Bennett Blackburn. Ages 6-12

Saying Goodbye to Grandma - *In depth look at a family gathering for the funeral of a beloved grandmother* Jane Resh Thomas. Ages 8-12

Something Very Sad Happened: A toddler's guide to understanding death - *A mother tells her son about the death of his Grandmother.* Bonnie Zucker. Ages 2-5

Until We Meet Again - *Children react to death of grandfather.* Susan Jones. Ages 3-10

What's Heaven? - *Children react to death of grandfather.* Maria Shriver. Ages 3-8

Wishes for One More Day - Melanie Joy Pastor. Ages 3-10

Zayde Comes to Live - Sheri Sinykin. Ages 4-10

Zeydeh: A Story Guide to Help Jewish Children Cope with Loss and Bereavement - Moshe Halevi Spero. Ages 6-12

Death of a Sibling:

Alicia Afterimage - Lulu Delacre. Ages 12-adult

Always My Brother - Jean Reagen. Ages 6-11

A Birthday Present for Daniel - Juliet Rothman. Ages 3-9

The Empty Place: A Child's Guide through Grief - Roberta Temes, PhD. Ages 3-8

Thumpy's Story - *Bunnies learn about death, grief and love when their sibling dies. Good Explanations for younger children.* Nancy C. Dodge. Ages 3-8

Where's Our Baby? - *Captures the essence of a young child's need to understand why Mom returns from the hospital without the baby brother he'd been looking forward to meeting.* Valerie Oldfield. Ages 4-10

Death by Suicide:

Bart Speaks Out - *An interactive story and workbook for children dealing specifically with a death by suicide. Uses photos of dogs to soften the impact.* Linda Goldman, M.S. Ages 3-10

But I Didn't Get to Say Good-Bye - *A book for parents and professionals helping child suicide survivors; portions may be read aloud with older children.* Barbara Rubel.

Books for Grief in General:

Bereaved Children and Teens: A Support Guide for Parents and Professionals - Edited by Earl A. Grollman. Ages 3-18 (appropriate for older teens)

Brave Bart - *A cat experiences both a post-traumatic stress reaction and grief following a bad, scary thing.* Caroline Sheppard, ACSW. Ages 3-14

Day of the Dead - *A village in Mexico prepares and celebrates this holiday which honors the memories of their loved ones.* Tony Johnston & Jeanette Winter. Ages 3-10

My Grief Journal: for Grieving Children/Teens* - *Offers the opportunity to draw or write about memories & feelings after death.* OUR HOUSE Grief Support Center. Ages 3-10 and 11-18 *can be purchased through OUR HOUSE website

The Rhino Who Swallowed a Storm - *Gentle story about how we can overcome tragic events with support.* LeVar Burton & Susan Schaefer Bernardo. Ages 5-11

When Dinosaurs Die - Laurie Krasny Brown and Marc Brown. Ages 6-12

My Good Grief Journal for Kids - *An iPad app for grieving children and their adults.* Ages 6-12
Website: <http://mygoodgriefjournalforkids.com/>

Death of a Pet:

My Pet Died: Let's Make a Book about It - Rachel Biale

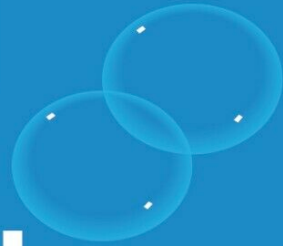
"Oh Where has my Pet Gone?": a pet loss memory book - Sally Sibbit. Ages 3-103

When Only the Love Remains: The Pain of Pet Loss - Emily Margaret Stuparyk

The Tenth Good Thing About Barney - *Death, Grief and the afterlife as experienced by a young boy following the death of his dear cat.* Judith Viorst. Ages 3-8



KEEP
CALM
AND
WASH
YOUR
HANDS



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Health and Human Services
Centers for Disease
Control and Prevention

CS243041A



Contact OUR HOUSE Grief Support Center

www.OurHouse-Grief.Org

ourhouse@ourhouse-grief.org

310.473.1511

818.222.3344

Lauren Schneider, LCSW

Clinical Director of Child & Adolescent Programs

lauren@ourhouse-grief.org

Carolyn Christ, AMFT*

Assoc. Clinical Coordinator of School & Children's Programs

carolyn@ourhouse-grief.org

*contact Carolyn for questions regarding grief support groups at your school

Talya Schlesinger, MSW

Assoc. Clinical Coordinator of Camp & Children's Programs

talya@ourhouse-grief.org