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About our Family Grief Journey Handbook...

Thank you for taking time to learn more about how to care for the grieving youth in your life.

This workbook is actually a collection of family-related articles and activity ideas from Hospice of Siouxland’s Grief Journey monthly newsletter. The articles were written to help adults understand more about what grief “looks like” in young people and to suggest strategies for understanding and supporting them.

The activities are offered because grief touches every part of one’s self: body, mind, and soul. Some activities will help family members identify and share emotions and thoughts surrounding the loved one’s death.

Other activities will give everyone a chance to release some of the physical energy that goes with those thoughts and emotions. Not just children but people of all ages can benefit from these hands-on projects.

We hope the information and ideas provide you with “gear” to put in your proverbial backpack to use as you lead your family in its unique grief journey.

When we train facilitators for our Family Grief Support Group, Camp Courage, and other programs, we let them know that the planned activity is not as important as the people right in front of them. They are instructed to adapt the activity to meet group’s needs, and to let the individuals make the activity what they need it to be.

Please do the same with the activities in this workbook! Say, for instance, you decide to think together about the future by doing the Bridge To The Future activity. But one child hears this and starts talking of a time he and the now-departed loved one watched a drawbridge go up and a ship pass beneath. If he draws a picture of this and shares it with everyone, do NOT get angry at him for not following instructions! Let the child share this joyful memory. If doing so sparks storytelling from others, the Bridge To The Future may have to wait for another day.

If you have questions or ideas, give us a call. Most of our program improvements come from volunteers and group participants! Watch for updated information and support programs at www.hospiceofsiovland.com or on our Facebook page (Hospice of Siouxland).

— Your friends at Hospice of Siouxland
Yes, Children Grieve

**Grief is a family affair.** It’s hard to reach out to your children or grandchildren when you are experiencing so much pain yourself. However, for children, it may seem that they have lost you, too.

Children do grieve. It’s different from adult grief but just as real. They have many questions but may be afraid to ask a distressed adult. They may have fears that show up in behavior. We do them a disservice when we attempt to hide our grief. To be able to show your emotions openly helps the child accept the naturalness and pain of death.

A single conversation won’t do it. It’s important to “stay tuned” and respond honestly to questions and observations from children. And remember — you don’t need to have all the answers. Here are a few DO’S and DON’TS for dealing with grieving children and teens:

**DO use the word “death.”** Saying “Daddy has gone on a long trip” or “Grandpa is sleeping” can cause confusion, anger, fear, resentment, and guilt that will be very difficult to resolve. Children need both trust and truth.

**DO leave room for a child’s doubts, questions, and differences of opinion.** It’s OK to say, “I have questions too. That’s why we need to talk and help each other.”

**DO allow children to release their emotions.** Let them name their feelings of hurt, sadness, anger, etc. Encourage them to express those feelings in a safe way. Have them draw a picture, write a story or poem.

**DO seek help from another understanding adult** if you feel unable to support your grieving child.

**DO give assurances of love and support.** Children may feel that you are mad at them. They want to do something to help. Letting them know their hugs are important when you are sad relieves them of a feeling of helplessness.

**DO encourage physical activity.** Exercise provides a healthy release of the stress produced by grief.

**DO spend time remembering good times.** Look at photos, talk of special family vacations and things the deceased person did with the child.

**DO help your child find ways to commemorate your loved one.** Children like ritual. Planting and caring for a tree, releasing balloons at the cemetery, or remembering the loved one in bedtime prayers are some ideas. Ask your child for input, too.

**DON’T encourage the child to replace the deceased by being “man of the house” or “little mother.”** Some children feel they need to “replace” a sibling who died. They may hear that from others or slide into the role on their own, but it is important for them to remain their own person.

**DON’T feel it is up to you to help your child “get over” grief.** Each child’s grief is as unique as your own. With love and support, they will find healing in their own time.
How Do We Teach the Children?

While in college, this author visited a school for blind children in a developing country.

The school had very little in the way of assistive technology, or even basic devices such as canes one sees visually challenged people use. As the headmaster explained accomplishments of the school's graduates despite such challenges, students were leaving class and headed down the hall to their next activity.

Our group ceased to listen to the headmaster and watched in amazement as the students found their way. It became clear that these young children counted on each other to do so. They stayed in literal touch with at least one other child constantly yet did not crash into each other. The ones in front and on the sides used their hands and ears to know when to turn down a hall or avoid an obstacle, and everyone behind them took the cue and followed along.

While everyone made a contribution to the effort, the leaders had to know the final destination and have a sense of landmarks along the way to know they were going in the right direction and not walking into danger.

If you are a grieving parent or grandparent trying to guide children in doing the same, you may feel like “the blind leading the blind.” Take some lessons from the physically blind children in the story above. Remember:

- You are a leader for the child, but don’t have to be the ONLY leader — be open to support and guidance from others.
- You and your child are part of a community. Reach out to your child and make sure you know where he/she is in this grief journey so they are not left behind or allowed to go astray.
- If you feel that you have lost touch with your child, try reestablishing contact by reaching out — let your child know where you are in the journey and listen hard for clues to where he/she is.
- Lean on your faith and lessons hard earned — this is not your first journey and you know how to navigate challenges even if it is not easy. Share what you have learned so that your child can do the same.
- Help children recognize landmarks in their grief journey by helping them name what they are experiencing at crucial points on the path. Let them know if it is an obstacle to fear and avoid, or one that must be faced and conquered before moving on. Teach by word and example what it takes to do so.
- Finally, keep the ultimate destination in mind and know you are not the first family to make this journey. Remind children that they (and you) will not always feel lost and in the dark, and that you are in this together.
Look at Those Kids ... Are They Done Grieving Already?

In a small farming community, a young husband and father of five young children died in a tractor accident during harvest season.

The next day, probably half the county came to the farm to express their sorrow and support for his young widow and children as well as his siblings and parents.

As the adults sat and comforted each other, people noted that the farmer’s children and their cousins and friends were riding horses and chasing each other like kids do. Comments were made about how resilient kids are, as if they were already done grieving because they were playing.

That would have been nice.

Instead, the children (like the adults) took years to work through their grief and all the implications of their father’s death on their lives.

What the adults failed to realize was that the kids were playing together because they were on a grief break.

Sitting around being sad together for hours or days is not something children do. Instead, they may express sadness or sit with adults quietly for a while, then slide off a lap and go outside to play. After all, kids don’t do anything else as long as adults so why would they mourn as long as adults do?

So don’t judge children to be done grieving just because they are having fun. In the same vein, don’t worry about them “going backward” if they have a difficult day or break down in tears after a period of seeming “back to normal.” They are likely to move in and out of outwardly grieving many times over the months and years after a loved one’s death.

Rather, enjoy watching them have fun, give guidance when they misbehave, and feel privileged when they show you their grief directly.
Most children speak their first words while still in diapers, adding to their vocabulary at a staggering rate in the preschool years and beyond. However, their ability to verbalize emotions and other abstract concepts does not come until later.

Then when "later" comes (teen years) and they are able to understand abstract concepts like emotions, their parents are not always at the top of the list of people with whom they want to share them.

To know these things can help a parent be more understanding when a child is not willing or able to answer the question "How are you feeling today?"

The first strategy is to use our eyes in addition to our ears. Ask yourself:

- Does my child look stressed?
- Is my child jumping from one play activity to another, never finishing anything? Perhaps struggling to fall asleep or waking up during the night?
- Am I asked for more hugs or homework help than usual?
- Do tears come more often? Is my child acting in ways I haven’t seen for a couple years (wetting the bed, picky eating, tantrums, quickly gives up on tasks)?
- Do I seem to break up more fights than a hockey referee?
- Does homework go undone?
- Does my child lack motivation in an activity he/she used to enjoy?

These are all examples of ways grief can make itself known in a young person, similar to the common changes discussed in adult behavior.

...Responding to Your Child’s Behavior

You notice signs of grief in your child’s behavior. Now what?

First, take mental inventory of the changes in your child’s life. A loved one’s death is a major change that can trigger other changes, and may coincide with unrelated changes (transition from one school to another, moving or having a relative move in, one less parent at home, taking the bus for the first time, less money to spend, etc.).

How these changes are prioritized is not for the adult to decide — the child does that in his/her own mind.

Pick one change in life and ask your child what that is like. If it is not an issue they struggle with, you have at least shown compassion and interest and opened the door to discussing changes that DO impact your child.

Explain briefly that you notice behavioral changes and wonder if he/she is having a hard time with all the changes in life these days.

If you are comfortable doing so, share the ways in which the death and related changes are hard on you. Use words your child understands. Use your judgment on where to insert a hug or hand on the shoulder as a way to communicate love and provide comfort.

Most of all, DO NOT LECTURE! This process will happen many times, so don't feel like you need to spill out all your parenting wisdom at once.
Do Children Understand Death? Do Adults?

Children have a different sense of time than adults do.

This is obvious if you have ever gone on a car ride with a child. Preschoolers ask “Are we there yet?” 1,000 times on a four-hour trip because they do not understand what four hours is, not because your psychiatrist paid them to drive you crazy!

This different perspective on time is one reason why children struggle with understanding that their loved one will not be back in the earthly sense.

You do your best explaining that Grandpa is in heaven and will be there waiting when Grandma dies, and your 3-year-old child shakes her head in understanding. Then, when you tell the same child you are going to visit Grandma, she asks if Grandpa will be there.

What did you do wrong? Nothing. Your child politely listened to you explain a concept that is beyond her understanding right now. Children do this daily.

Think of how many words young children hear every day. Now think how many of those words are new to them. They understand new words and concepts more deeply when they experience them in their daily life.

When it comes to questions about life, death, and life after death, how different are we adults? We understand how long the four-hour car trip will be, but do we really understand forever? We explain heaven to our children, but do we really know what it is like? Adults tell us, “I have finally accepted that she isn’t coming back” months after their loved one has died. Some also express the need to form a picture in their head of where their loved one is so they can remain connected.

So be patient with yourself and the children you love. Listen carefully to their questions. Answer in a simple manner that they can understand. Repeat as often as needed.

To answer a child’s questions, an adult has to boil his or her own understanding down to the basics. Sometimes start by asking what they think. Invite your children to draw a picture to explain it to you. Just like an adult, children often formulate their thoughts as they form words and images. In this way, your child will deepen his or her understanding and, if you listen carefully, you might learn something yourself.
Help Children of Different Ages Process Their Feelings

Just as adults and children experience grief differently, children of different ages may do so as well.

It can be helpful for children of different ages to sort out their thoughts and feelings after the loss of a loved one, even if that process looks different than what an adult would do. Let children choose the tools and the medium that suits them at this time in their life. After all, grief can be hard enough to handle without trying to process it in a way that feels like speaking a foreign language.

Use these age-appropriate insights to help you help children grieve:

**TODDLERS**
Toddlers through early school-age children may be more comfortable exploring and expressing thoughts and emotions in their play. This is less likely to happen if they are playing a repetitive video game just to pass the time. Leaving room for imaginative play gives them time and space to “play it out” just like an adult needs time to get to what is really on his or her mind when talking to a friend.

**ELEMENTARY SCHOOLERS**
Elementary schoolers read books that rely on pictures to help tell a story. Let them use pictures to tell their own story about their loved one. Just like many adults sort things out while talking, children often sort out thoughts and memories by having a picture and writing a story about it (or telling you what to write). Help them make a memory page for each picture for a memory book they can add to with photos and artwork.

**MIDDLE & HIGH SCHOOLERS**
Middle and high school youth are less reliant on pictures but may want to use them to create a scrapbook. They may have done this for school, scout or 4-H projects. Now it just has a different focus. Also, since most kids this age have cell phones, they may find it natural to take pictures of places and things that relate to their loved one and post them online to express themselves and find space to make sense of their loss.

**YOUTH & ADULTS**
Another option for youth (and adults) is a guided journal that gives them food for thought and questions to respond to by drawing or writing. This can be especially helpful for those who have “griever’s block” and don’t know where to start. Let us know if you are interested in materials like this and we can help you find one that meets your needs.
Oh, Those Crazy Kids!

We discussed earlier about how children and teens are not exempt from grief.

They are also not exempt from “the crazies.” Looking at it through this lens, it’s no surprise to see them struggling more than usual with school, friendships, and household chores. As a parent or guardian of a grieving child, it can be hard to know how to respond.

Keep these two key points in mind to help you help your child through his or her grief journey:

Frustration is Natural

It’s natural for parents to be frustrated when children don’t follow through with their age-appropriate responsibilities. After all, you have enough going on coping with the death of your spouse, parent, or child. Why did they choose NOW to start throwing temper tantrums again, miss homework assignments or get into a fight in gym class? Do they think you have the energy to deal with their moodiness and back talk?

Yet as adults we want friends and family and supervisors to understand that we are not “feeling ourselves” these days. It will go better for yourself and the children in your life if you do the same with them.

Check In With and Guide Your Grieving Child

Without rewarding misbehavior, take time to check in with and guide your child so he/she can learn to deal with grief in a constructive manner. Does your child feel overwhelmed with school work? Will he/she let you meet with school staff to discuss temporary accommodations or extra tutoring that may be available? Is your child resentful of having to clean his/her room while trying to deal with the death of a loved one? Aren’t you?

Affirm your child’s feelings, then offer to work on both your child’s chores and some of yours with which he/she can help. You may build a sense of being in this together and both feel less isolated. After all, the last thing you need is to be angry at each other about dirty dishes in the sink or overwhelmed at work and school with no idea how to get help.
Give Someone Else A Chance to Love Them

Let’s be realistic — the chances that you can be that loving, understanding adult for your grieving child will increase if you take some time for yourself.

For some adults, the temptation is to circle the wagons and hover over your children in a protective stance. This may work for a while but it does not allow you to do your own grief work. It can also deprive your child of the chance to take a break and just go play.

So don’t turn down every offer from trusted friends to have them over for the night or come over to play (“hang out” if you have a middle or high schooler).

And when those offers come — or you seek them out — use your “you time” wisely so you are refreshed and ready to be the person you and your child love so much!
Handling Depression In Grieving Children

Children are vulnerable to depression while grieving just like adults.

If children have been treated for emotional issues such as anxiety or depression prior to the illness or death of their loved one, these issues are likely to recur or worsen during the grieving process.

The first response can be to talk with children about what they learned in past treatment and how to apply that to their current situation.

Often, coping strategies learned in therapy can be adapted to help with new scenarios that arise. Returning to the child’s former therapist or a grief counselor may be beneficial as well.

If your child has never been diagnosed with behavioral or emotional problems, you may be wondering what to look for. Many signs of clinical depression — such as changes in sleeping or eating patterns, lack of interest in formerly enjoyable activities, a drop in school performance, complaining of vague stomachaches or headaches, actually becoming sick more often, and fatigue — are also signs of grief. The difference is in the intensity and duration of these changes in mood or behavior.

If such negative behaviors or depressed moods arise in your child, rather than wait for these behaviors to become entrenched, seek help from a grief counselor.

If the child’s grief response continues to significantly interfere with daily functioning (e.g., an A or B student is now failing in school or a socially connected child is isolating him/herself) or a child threatens to hurt him/herself or someone else, contact a grief counselor or mental health counselor who can determine the level of risk and appropriate treatment.
Navigating the Holidays With Grieving Children

As adults, we often feel we need to do things “for the children.”

This pressure is especially strong when it comes to holiday traditions.

There can be a sense that family traditions have been the same since the beginning of time.

In reality, all traditions had to start somewhere and usually evolve over time. Children may not remember what happened last year, not to mention prior years. And teens are as likely to complain about holiday traditions as they are to cling to them, so don’t try to guess which way they will go!

Here are tips on navigating the holidays and other special days with children while you are either “not feeling it,” or if the death of your loved makes it impossible to keep traditions the same:

• **Get input from the children:** Your children may have great ideas on how to make special days special in a new way, and if you allow them, they may be happy to get involved in making it happen. Of course, you may wind up going sledding and eating macaroni and cheese in front of the fireplace after decorating the house with a million homemade snowflakes, but if no permanent damage is done, it may make for a great memory and can’t be any more fattening than the usual holiday meal.

• **Enlist help of friends and family:** Maybe it is enough just to find somewhere else to go and let your kids enjoy someone else’s holiday spirit! The change may be enough to move the focus from “what is wrong with this picture” to “what is right in this moment.” At the very least, a change of scene will give the kids a chance to have fun and enjoy the holiday without your feeling pressure to “put on a happy face.”

• **Talk it through:** We often stress the importance of communication with children, and the holidays are no exception. Do not assume that they feel this or feel that. Check in with them. Ask how they are feeling as the holidays approach. What are they looking forward to? Are they concerned about or dreading anything specific? Let them know if you are struggling to get in the celebratory mood as well, and assure them you will get by and it is OK for them to enjoy themselves.

• **Learn more about the holiday itself:** Many special days have their roots in religious or historical events involving something more meaningful and challenging than gift exchanges, overindulging in rich foods and watching football games. Perhaps therein lies some inspiration as you are in the midst of your grief.
FAMILY ACTIVITY: Balloon Launch

A loved one’s death brings us face to face with some of the big mysteries in life.

One of the biggest mysteries is how to remain connected to the deceased. That person is no longer present in the same manner as before, so connecting with him or her cannot be done in the same way as before.

One way to strengthen the sense of connection for young and less young alike is a balloon launch. Feel free to follow these steps or adapt them to suit your family:

- Gather in an enjoyable outdoor setting with plenty of open space. Choose a day when you can expect good weather! If it is too cold the balloons may not “launch” well.

- Bring a helium balloon for each person attending the balloon release. Party stores or floral shops often sell them. Ask the supplier to leave a few feet of string on each balloon.

- Bring note cards or slips of paper with holes punched them to tie to balloon strings; pens or markers, and scissors.

- Figure out which way the wind is blowing and set up in an area allowing for lots of room for the wind to carry the balloons above and beyond any nearby trees, power lines or buildings.

- Instruct everyone to write a note or draw a picture for the deceased.

- Now one at a time, slide a note card onto a balloon string, and tie the end of that string onto the person’s wrist.

- When everyone is ready, cut the strings to release the balloons with their messages while keeping the remaining loop on each person’s wrist. Let it sink in — wait until people naturally start talking again rather than being in a hurry to move on.

- Explain that the string left around their wrist can be left on as a reminder of this day and the love they still have for their loved one.
FAMILY ACTIVITY: Bridge to the Future

Here’s an activity to help you and your family members work through grief:

1. Have each family member take a piece of paper and fold it in thirds the short way, like a letter that has to go in an envelope.

2. On the section furthest to the left, each person draws pictures of or writes words that describe the family as they see it now.

3. On the section furthest to the right, each person draws pictures of or writes words that describe the family as they want it to be in the future.

4. Each family member opens up the paper so they can see the left panel (now) and right panel (preferred future). Draw a bridge connecting the present to the future.

5. Take some time to write words or draw pictures of what has to happen to get the family across that bridge to the preferred future.

6. Give each family member a chance to share what he/she has on the paper. Depending on the attention span of your children (or yourselves), this may be best done in more than one session. Perhaps it can be done once a day at a meal? At night before bed? Find a time that works for the entire family if possible.
FAMILY ACTIVITY: Super Hero Helps Children Cope

When it comes to helping children deal with grief, direct questions like “What’s wrong?” may get a shrug or “nothing” from your children. This activity may help you and your children better understand what could help them in their grief:

1. Hand out paper and drawing materials to each person. Explain that everyone is to create their own Grief Super Hero. They are to include or describe the special powers or equipment their hero has for helping them in their grief journey. This is not an art contest, just a chance to use your imagination.

2. Once everyone has completed their drawing, invite them to share what they drew. Make sure they talk about their hero’s special powers and how those powers would be helpful to them now.

3. After everyone shares about their Grief Super Hero, talk about how the family might be able to address identified problems that the super hero was going to solve. Sometimes a child is reluctant to tell you about a problem because they are not sure anything can be done about it but having the chance to design a super hero to solve the problem can free up the discussion.

Even if you do not know how to resolve the issues that are troubling your child 100 percent, you will have learned more about your child’s experience and they will feel supported by you through this creative activity. Both of these go a long way toward helping you both in your grief journey!
Healing Ritual: The Burn Pot

While medical professionals work to heal the body, many faiths and spiritual traditions have their own approaches to healing the mind and spirit.

If you’re a part of a faith community and are struggling with guilt or other emotions, look first to what that faith tells you for guidance or insight into how to deal with these feelings.

For those who do not belong to a faith community or are looking for an alternative way to deal with guilt and other challenging emotions, this exercise may be helpful. It can be done individually or in a small group:

1. Gather up a pen or pencil and some paper or note cards.
2. Start a wood or charcoal fire in a bucket, fire pit, hibachi or clay pot. Only a small fire is needed.
3. While the fire burns, write down things causing you emotional and spiritual pain. Use a separate piece for each issue.
4. One at a time, place the pieces of paper or cards on the fire.
5. Meditate upon that piece’s words and issue as it is consumed by the fire.
6. When ready, place the next piece of paper onto the fire and meditate upon the words or message or feelings that led to your writing them.
7. Repeat until you are done.
8. If you prefer, say your thoughts from your note aloud as you put it in the fire.
9. You may not feel ready to place some of your cards in the fire. If so, sit with them while the fire dies down. Consider the obstacles that are blocking you from letting go of this feeling.
10. As the fire dies down, imagine your mind and spirit quieting and cooling down. If you have papers you weren’t ready to let go of quite yet, keep them in a private place so that, when ready, you can release them as well.
Simple Activities to Help People of All Ages Deal With Anger-related Grief

Are you and your children or other family members taking your anger out on each other? Can you cut the tension at home with a knife? Try some of these activities to make it easier for anger and other feelings to be expressed.

**Throw or Skip Stones**
Find a place where you can walk to the edge of a lake, pond, creek, or river. Spread out along the waterside. Take turns picking up rocks and throwing them in the water, yelling out whatever you are angry or upset about as you do so. As you calm down, watch the ripples caused when the rocks hit the water. When everyone’s feelings have lost their edge, have a competition to see who can get the most skips before their rock finally submerges.

**Channel Your Inner Shredder**
Have everyone write down what they are angry about, or draw a simple picture of a moment when they felt angry. Share what is on your papers with each other. When ready, run the papers through a paper shredder or, if preferred, tear them to shreds by hand or using scissors. Or wad them up and have an indoor snowball fight if everyone can have fun with that.

**Hit a Punching Bag or Pull Weeds or Move Furniture or...**
These activities may seem unrelated, but doing some “heavy work" leaves your nervous system in a relaxed state — as long as you don’t argue about how to rearrange the furniture! These types of activities build a sense of being connected to each other and counteracts the sense of isolation that comes with harboring feelings you feel cannot be shared with others.

**Take a Hike**
Even most cities have parks or riverside trails meant for walking. Get out and make use of one. After some quiet, share what is “bugging” you. Ideally, others will do the same. Then keep going long enough to enjoy the natural setting and get some exercise. Start sharing something more positive about your loved one or about everyday life. If the spirit moves and your joints allow, grab hands and skip down the path!