

GRIEF IS A LONG

J JOURNEY

The death of a loved one brings up many questions. Children young and old try to understand why things like this happen. *How could this happen to my family? What does this mean for my future?*

Adult caregivers are also left with many of the same questions that our children struggle with. But, in addition to grieving the loss of our loved ones, we also carry the burden of trying to hold the grief of our children.

This sometimes leaves us with very big questions and worries. One of the common worries we hear at the Highmark Caring Place is that while some children seem fine in the days, weeks and even months following the death, what about down the road? Will our children be okay or will they have problems?

This is a very normal question for adult caregivers. Though there is no one single answer that can be given for all children, what we have seen is that children will grieve their loved one over time and experience that grief differently at various points in their lives. So not only will the feelings of grief appear and re-appear in a child's life at many points, the grief may also look different as the child grows.

Many things can trigger a "grief burst," or a return to some deeper feelings of grief. All the big (and sometimes small) changes that children experience in their lives are potential triggers for grief. Celebrating a holiday or other special day, for example, can bring memories of the person who died rushing back in. Milestones in a child's life, like graduations, learning to drive, etc., can be a trigger. Daily reminders like songs, smells, or mementos can bring feelings of grief back. Even just growing up can trigger grief – it means something different to be 13 without the loved one than it meant when the child was three.

What we have seen is that grief is a lifelong journey. Despite the messages we receive from the culture around us that we will "get over it" or that we need to "move on," what we have learned is that we will continue to carry with us our entire lives those who have died and have meant so much to us.

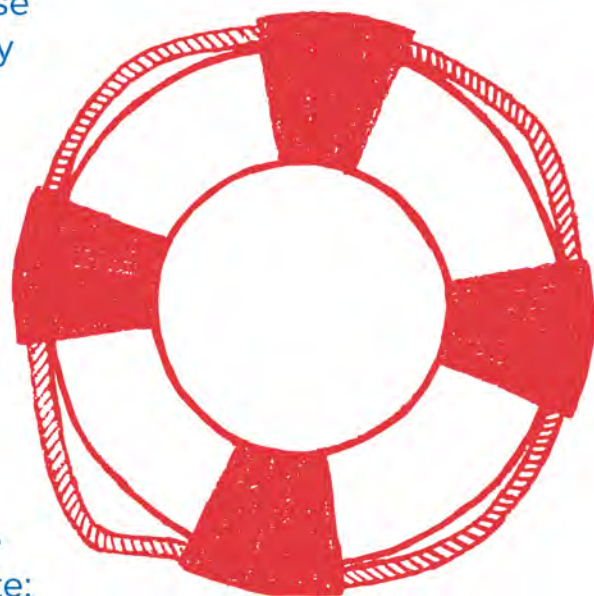


The journey of grief is long, so at times the path will be smooth and the memories of our person will bring us laughter, joy and happiness. At other times the path will be dark and difficult, and our memories will bring tears, as we feel their absence more deeply once again. However, one thing we also know is there is hope – hope that it won't always hurt so badly.

Something we have also seen is that children do best by having a supportive adult presence in their lives; as well as being provided with ways to manage their fears, anger or worries during the hard times; and by having a space where they can feel safe when the world begins to feel scary again.

Here are some ideas to help children feel safe, supported and loved during their journeys of grief:

1. We can encourage our children to talk about their loved one at different times and during different experiences. This will help to normalize conversations about the person who died, and it allows our children to know that it's safe to talk about their person.
2. We can model the full range of emotions for our children – it's important to let them know that it's okay to feel sad, angry, guilty, scared, happy, or whatever else it is that they're feeling. It's helpful to use statements like, "Sometimes I feel angry because daddy died; I wonder if you feel that way too?"
3. There's no reason to assume that if our children are not talking about it -- or not talking to us about it -- that they are not coping well or not "working through it." It can be helpful when a child has some way to express their grief, but everyone has their own timing for when they feel ready. When they are ready, what is important is that the child has someone to talk to – a supportive group of friends, a teacher, a guidance counselor or another family member. We can encourage our children to express their grief and not take it personally if that person they open up to isn't us.
4. We can help our children identify those people, places and activities that help make them feel safe. Something that might help younger children feel safe is working with them to make a support "caterpillar" or "butterfly" using crayons and paper. For older children, we can help them make a support "bridge" using popsicle sticks. These projects can be unique ways that our children can identify something supportive in their lives to recall when times get tough. When we notice our children having a more difficult time, we can reference these things and encourage them to do something they've identified. *(See links on page three for details on how to do these activities.)*
5. As a family, we can talk about and identify occasions when times may be harder than normal – holidays, celebrations, traditions, etc. – and then, continuing to work as a family, we can create a plan for what will help everyone to feel supported during those times. For some children, that will be distance and not having to participate;



for others, it might be doing something to remember their person. And for some children, it will just be the acknowledgement that we are there when they need us.

6. It's important to find ways that we and our families can remember our person together. When children feel as though they can keep a connection with their person and know that they aren't "crazy" for talking to or thinking about their person who died, that can help keep the relationship with that person alive. One creative way to do this is to create a memory box to fill with belongings, photos or notes to the person who died.

7. Most important, we can listen gently, without judgment, and not feel like we have to fix everything. It's OK to say "I don't know" and to let our children know we have some of the same questions they have.

If you feel that your child is having difficulty coping, and that their grief is impacting their ability to participate in school, work or at home, it is perfectly okay to ask for help from a professional. Talk to your child's school about resources available, reach out to a therapist, or contact the Highmark Caring Place. **Finally, remember that the Highmark Caring Place is always here for your family.**

"WE ARE HERE FOR EACH OTHER!"

RESOURCES:

<https://www.highmarkcaringplace.com/cp2/volunteers/artsCraftsMemoryBoxes.shtml>

<https://www.highmarkcaringplace.com/cp2/volunteers/artsCraftsGriefBridges.shtml>

<https://www.highmarkcaringplace.com/cp2/volunteers/artsCraftsCatepillars.shtml>

