

**FAMILIES: GRIEF & LOSS DURING THE HOLIDAYS**

# 30 Days of Mental Health

*Strengthening the capacity of educators and families to meet children's wellbeing and mental health needs!*

## Supporting Children Through Feelings of Grief and Loss



[30DaysOfMentalHealth.org](http://30DaysOfMentalHealth.org)

## Grief & Loss During the Holidays

### INTRODUCTION [use developmentally appropriate language when discussing with your child]

This guide can be used to talk with your child about how the loss of a loved one may affect them during the holiday season. It is often during the holidays when grief may be particularly strong. Traditionally, the holidays involve spending time with family members or observing communal religious practices. It is difficult to escape holiday commercials and TV shows that focus on loved ones gathering together. This means that for a grieving person, including children, the holidays can increase their level of loneliness, sadness, and anxiety.

If you are experiencing your own intense feelings of grief, concern, or even dread about the upcoming holiday, consider sharing this resource with a supportive, caring family member or friend who can support you and your child as you grieve together.



**Monitor your level of compassion fatigue as you support your child.** You may want to shield them from the pain and hurt or perhaps it triggers your own personal experiences of grief and loss. You may feel unprepared or too emotional to respond in helpful ways despite a sincere desire to help. These are all normal feelings and reactions. It is okay, not to be okay!

While it is important to ensure that your child is supported, you don't have to do it alone. Seek assistance from others when you notice that you have reached your emotional capacity. Collaborate with your support systems (e.g. trusted and caring family members, friends, and even community members).

Although we are emphasizing how you can support your child's feelings of grief and loss, you also need space to process your own feelings of grief. There are several actions that you can take to manage your grief and loss journey. Consider adopting new rituals in remembrance of the person such as regularly lighting a candle in their honor, writing a letter to the person, visiting the memorial or grave site. Rituals can and should be personalized based on what would be most helpful for **YOU**. Rituals do not have to be public or complicated, small acts of remembrance can be emotionally supportive.

### The Stages of Grief

Although there are universal stages of grief that most people experience, the intensity, duration, and expression is as unique to each person as is the healing process. Depending on the nature of the loss, it can be a powerful and overwhelming process that is accompanied by strong feelings, misunderstood behaviors, and major disruptions to a person's ability to manage daily life tasks.

Consider watching and discussing [this video](#) with your child and then talk about the stages of grief shown on the next page.

## 5 STAGES OF GRIEF



This article by Jodi Clarke provides a helpful [summary of the stages of grief](#).



## Recognizing the Signs of Healthy and Unhealthy Grief Responses in Your Child

It is also important for you to know when your child is exhibiting signs of healthy versus less healthy grieving, so that you can decide when to reach out to the school social worker, teacher, or principal for assistance.

Watch this [video](#) to learn more about ways that children cope with grief and loss and how to support them.

Most children will display healthy grief responses within weeks or months after the loss. However, it is critical to understand that adaptive grieving varies from person to person. Thus, we should not expect children to follow a rigid time frame for grieving.



### Time to Check-In

Remember to periodically check-in with your child to determine where they are emotionally; talking about grief can be difficult, particularly if the loss is recent. Never assume that your child is OK just because they are not openly showing their emotional response. Remember most people have been socialized to act as if everything is OK even when it isn't.

Sometimes it is hard for children and youth to find the words to communicate how they are feeling. Try asking a question and giving them a few response options:

**Question 1:** How are you feeling at this moment?

- a) confused; b) numb; c) relaxed d) upset; e) sad; f) something else

**Question 2:** How difficult is it to talk about how you are feeling / or talk about (INSERT NAME)?

- a) very difficult; b) moderately difficult; c) neither difficult or easy

**Question 3:** What do you need right now?

- a) time alone; b) a quick break from family time; c) to take a few deep breaths; d) support from a supportive/trusted person; e) other??

Young children may need more help to tell you how they are feeling. Try pulling up [this image](#) and asking them to point to the face that best demonstrates how they are feeling right now:

**Ask:** Which of these faces describes how you are feeling right now?

*Follow your child's lead and discuss as little or as much of these topics based on their willingness to talk.*



## Recognizing Signs of Childhood Traumatic Grief and How It Shows Up at School

The grieving process along with the signs and symptoms vary from child to child. Thus, it is important to recognize when unhealthy signs of grief may show up in different settings, such as in school. In general, children coping with grief and loss may start exhibiting school-related challenges, such as decreased desire to attend school or reduced academic performance. They may also withdraw from relationships with classmates and teachers. These are typical or healthy reactions to grief that may show up in school and may be brought to your attention by your child's teacher.

When grief responses are unhealthy, they can show up as the following changes in your child's behavior at school:

- **RE-EXPERIENCING;** Your child has frightening or otherwise distressing memories. These memories include thoughts or dreams of the person, how the person died. Younger children can experience a general increase in scary thoughts or dreams that may seem unrelated to the loss. These memories and fears may interfere with the child's ability or desire to remember happy times with the deceased person. Your child may also become very angry, upset, or physically ill when faced with reminders of the lost loved one.
  - **At school this may look like** daydreaming, not paying attention, or seeming distracted due to having intrusive thoughts about the death or the deceased person.
- **AVOIDANCE:** Your child attempts to avoid memories of the deceased person, even happy memories, because these may turn into thoughts about the traumatic nature of the person's death. This may also lead to them not wanting to go places and celebrate holidays that remind them of the person, such as visiting the cemetery or the family reminiscing about the person. They may even become angry when other family members or peers derive comfort or happiness from those activities.
  - **At school this may look like** withdrawing from activities such as holiday, birthday or other celebratory activities, not wanting to talk about certain topics), getting angry or changing the subject when certain subjects are raised. These topics may have little apparent relationship to the deceased or the way the person died and it may take some detective work on the teacher's part to make a connection.
- **HYPERAROUSAL:** Your child may have difficulty sleeping, increased anger, physical symptoms (e.g., headache, stomachache) or increased jumpiness such as in response to loud noises. Your child may be on increased alert and watch for the health and safety of other loved ones immediately following the loss. Additionally, as a result of reminders or thoughts related to the loss, your child may experience difficulty sleeping along with other challenges. These symptoms may be interspersed with periods of them appearing perfectly fine.
  - **At school this may look like** frequent headaches, stomachaches, asking to go to the nurse's office, decreased ability to concentrate or pay attention, or angry outbursts.
- **EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIORAL DYSREGULATION:** Your child may have trouble modulating feelings or behaviors, especially when reminded of the death or the person who died. For example, children may have new fears or more difficulty with anger, be more irritable, moody, bored, inattentive, or seem to 'go from zero to sixty' in terms of escalating emotional and behavioral outbursts.
  - **At school this may look like** angry outbursts without a known trigger, discussions about wanting to die themselves, self-blame or guilt associated with the loss (e.g., 'I should have known my mother would get killed' or 'I should have warned my brother not to walk home from school that way'), or even a sense of lost identity or change in personality.

## Considerations for Supporting Teenagers Coping with Grief and Loss

Grief can be particularly challenging for teens because they often have an adult understanding of death without adult coping skills. Additionally, after the loss of a family member, many teens may feel the responsibility of “taking care of the family,” which adds an additional layer of stress.

### Signs That Your Teen May Need Extra Help:

- Signs or symptoms of chronic depression or extended periods of sadness
- Persistent sleeping difficulties, restlessness, and low self-esteem
- Academic failure or indifference toward school-related activities, for an extended period of time
- Withdrawing from or worsening of relationships with family and friends, for an extended period of time
- Increase in risk-taking behaviors such as drug and alcohol abuse, fighting, and sexual experimentation
- Unwillingness to grieve or asserting their strength or maturity by denying emotional pain and suffering

When you notice these signs in your teen, it can be helpful to explore with their school or community mental health professionals the availability of support groups (at school, at community centers, or at church) that your teen can join, as well as individual therapy.

Along with these resources, continue to offer your support by listening to and validating their reactions to the loss. Being present within them while they experience uncomfortable and maybe even painful emotions, shows that you are available to answer questions and offer care—this is what teens need in their journey to healing. Check out the Center for Disease Control’s (CDC) recommendation for [helping youth cope with grief and loss](#).



Parents, If you believe that you would benefit from brief therapy/counseling support, the [National Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Association](#) may be a good starting place as they offer a 24/7 helpline:

**1-800-662-HELP (4357)**



## How Loss Associated With The COVID-19 Pandemic Can Impact Holiday Celebrations

Many families experienced the loss of loved ones due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As we approach the holiday season, an overwhelming sense of emotions can be felt in regard to the best ways to support you and your family coping with such loss. The best first step is to start discussing the holidays with them and share ways in which things may look or feel different. Within this same conversation, also explore direct questions such as “What can we do to make this year special?,” or explore ways to readjust previous traditions that are still meaningful and symbolic of your family’s values.

By having these conversations with your child, you are helping them to regain a sense of healthy control over their lives, which is often lost during times of traumatic events or experiences. If you are unsure of how to start the conversation, there are many developmentally appropriate children’s books and stories that can be used such as [Kai’s Journey](#), which walks through a young boy’s way of navigating a significant loss in his family. You can locate additional story books about grief and loss [here](#).

### Activities that Can Be Done at Home to Help Children Express their Feelings

- **Write about the loss** by giving them sentence starters such as:
  - Grief feels like \_\_\_\_\_.
  - The best thing someone did to help me feel better was \_\_\_\_\_.
  - It makes me smile when I think of NAME OF PERSON doing \_\_\_\_\_.
  - The thing I remember most about NAME OF PERSON is \_\_\_\_\_.
- **Help your child make a card** for the deceased person and inside of the card, write a few of the reasons why that person is special.
- **Develop a memory box** to help your child remember the deceased person and have a safe place to put things that belonged to that individual as well as art or writings they make for them. This will take about 45 minutes to complete but doesn’t have to be completed in one day.
  - Materials needed: Shoe boxes with lids, photos and personal items of the person who died, construction paper, magazines, scissors, and glue.
  - Directions: Decorate the box with materials, pictures and photos, etc. Then ask them to place memory objects, pictures, poems or written memories in the box.
- **Create a scream box** that gives your child permission and a secret/safe place to experience tough emotions associated with the loss. The box will be designed in a way that allows for screams to be muffled so that no one can hear them when they use it.
  - Materials needed: Empty box (e.g. shoe or cereal box), newspapers, a box of tissues, plus a paper towel tube, tape, and items to decorate the outside of the box, such as colorful paper, markers and stickers.
  - Directions: Fill the box with crumpled up newspaper, then close the top of the box. Next, mark a circle on the top of the box using one end of the paper towel tube. Then cut out the hole following the circle. Make sure the hole is big enough to insert the paper towel tube. Place the paper towel tube into the hole in the box, leaving half of it sticking out of the box top. Tape the tube in place (half in/half out) and stuff the tube halfway with tissue. Lastly, if they desire, they can wrap the box and the tube with colorful paper. Encourage them to decorate it with markers, stickers, or anything else they want to personalize the box.



*It is also important to continue with home routines, supportive discipline, and high expectations. Continuing the usual routines and expectations at home can offer the sense of comfort that is essential for children trying to restore a sense of normalcy during times when they are coping with a traumatic event. This must be based on your child's needs; they may need some room to not be their "usual self" emotionally or even behaviorally, or they may also benefit from functioning as normally as possible.*

**RESOURCES FOR YOU TO LEARN MORE:**

- [Helping grieving children through the holidays](#)
- [Getting through the holidays](#)
- [Supporting grieving children during the season of family](#)
- [Seven ways to help grieving children during the holidays](#)
- [Holiday tips for grieving families](#)
- [Seven tips to support grieving children during the holidays](#)
- [Grief during the holidays](#)
- [Parents supporting their children mourning during the COVID-19 pandemic](#)

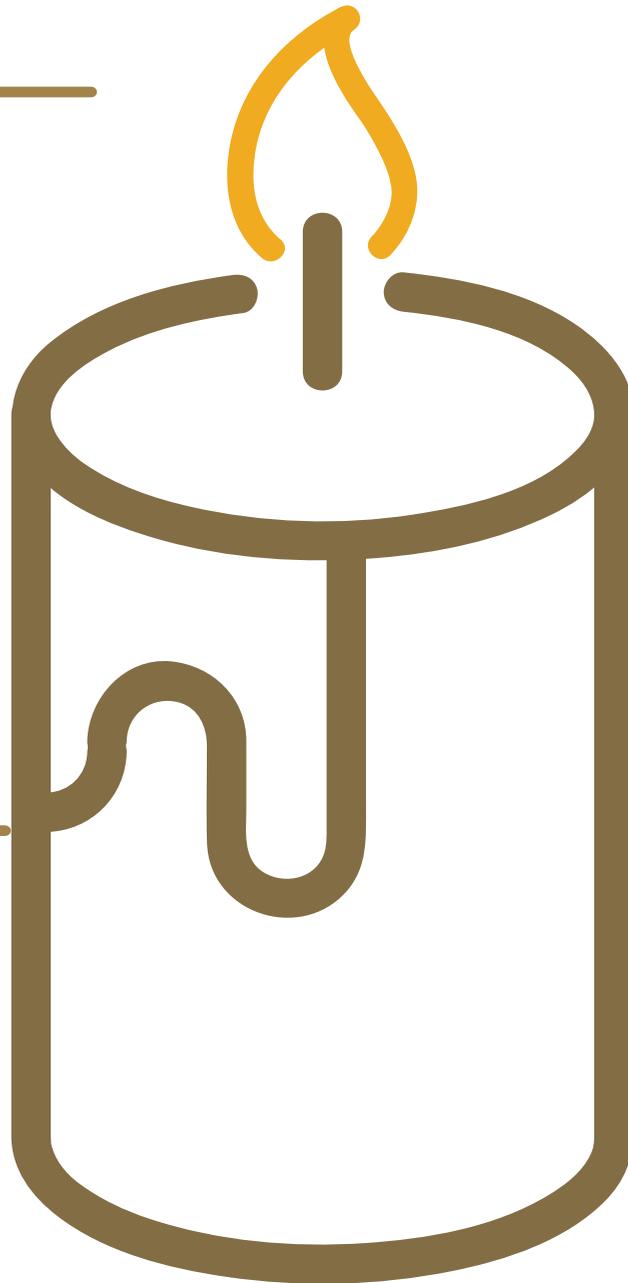
**Use the graphic organizers on the next two pages to engage your child in an activity to reflect on grief and loss.**



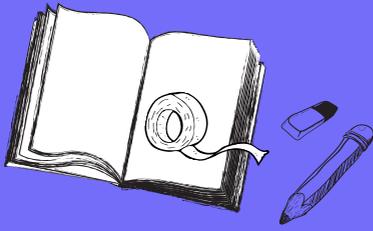
## Activity for Younger Children

# Light a Candle Memorial to Remember Our Loved Ones During the Holidays

Help your child list some of their favorite memories of and feelings of sadness about the person who passed on. Consider doing this as a whole family activity. Once some favorite memories and feelings have been listed, consider lighting a candle and reading them aloud.



Activity for Older Children



# My Grief Journal

Read the prompts below and respond by filling each space provided with images and words that come into mind.

My greatest memory with you:

I miss you because:

I smile when I think of you because...

It is OK to be sad when I miss you because...

## Share Your Grade Level Adaptation

Email it to [info@30DaysOfMentalHealth.org](mailto:info@30DaysOfMentalHealth.org)

Please share your grade level adaptations with us and we will share it with other educators that have taken the pledge.

Email us your name, name of school, and grade level for the adaptation. Describe your adaptation and/or attach it to your email.

## The 30 Days of Mental Health lesson are developed by the TREP Project.

The **TREP Project** is a research-practice translation project that works to connect research on the science of trauma with the realities of school and classroom management. We aim to create schools and classrooms that can meet the social, emotional, and academic needs of students coping with toxic levels of stress and trauma.

