



holding what hurts.

TALKING TO KIDS ABOUT GRIEF



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WELCOME TO THE GUIDE

Helping your child navigate grief can be a journey of connection.

While we cannot shield our children from the pain of loss, we can build a bridge of understanding that makes "big feelings" of grief feel less overwhelming. Talking about grief before a major loss occurs - by exploring smaller transitions like moving or the end of a school year - helps children develop a "grief vocabulary." Having these words ready acts as a safety net, making future losses feel less frightening because they aren't being met with silence.

However, there is no "perfect" time to start. Whether you are proactively building these tools or find yourself in the middle of a difficult season, the best place to begin is exactly where you are. This guide is designed to help you honor your own internal response, respect your child's unique developmental pace, and foster open communication through a gentle, structured framework.

To help you feel grounded as you lead your family, we encourage you to start with our first workbook, *Holding What Hurts*. This resource helps create a safety net for you first, ensuring you have the support needed to tend to your own heart while you guide your child through theirs.

With care,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Angela Schilaty". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

Angela Schilaty
Registered Mental Health Counselor Intern
Supervised by Cheyenne Starczewski MH18469

WHEN TO SEEK EXTRA SUPPORT

While grief is a natural part of life, you are not meant to walk this path alone. There are times when the intensity of the experience requires professional intervention. Please reach out for support if you notice:

- Thoughts of hurting yourself or feeling that life is not worth living.
- Persistent substance misuse as a way to numb or cope.
- Severe isolation or an inability to function in daily life.
- Inability to accept the reality of the loss.
- Constant, overwhelming despair or frequent panic attacks.
- Avoiding all reminders of the loss to the point that it restricts your ability to live.

Please Note: This program is for educational purposes and is not a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis, or therapy. If you are in an extreme emotional storm right now, please reach out to a trusted friend or use these vital resources:

Emergency: 911

Florida 211: Dial 2-1-1

National Suicide & Crisis Lifeline: 988 (Call or Text)

Crisis Text Line: Text HOME to 741741

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01

MODULE 1

HONORING YOUR JOURNEY

Imagine if we were both given a piece of paper and asked to rip it into the shape of a heart. Even though we're both making the same thing, our hearts would look completely different because we are different people.

Your child's "heart" will look different than yours, and that is exactly how it should be. It is important to remember that your pain is yours and their pain is theirs. Even though you are walking through this grief together, your experiences are not the same. Their feelings don't make yours any less important, and your feelings don't take away from theirs. Every grief experience is valid and real.

When we try to compare grief - deciding who is more "sad" or who has it "worse" - it can push us apart. But when we honor our own feelings while respecting that theirs are separate and unique, we open the door to connection. That connection is often the most important part of healing.

You don't need to have all the answers or the perfect words to make the pain go away. Simply by being there with patience and an open heart, you are showing your child that they are safe. You are teaching them that they don't have to carry this burden alone and that in your family, every feeling is welcome and held with care.

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MODULE 2

HONORING BOTH JOURNEYS

It is important to remember that it isn't your child's job to fix your pain. There is a big difference between letting them see that you are hurting (which shows them that all feelings are natural) versus accidentally expecting them to make you feel better.

When you get clear on what you need for your own healing, you create the space to truly be there for your child while they process theirs.

A Moment to Reflect

Take a breath and ask yourself these questions to see how you are doing:

- **Holding Space:** Can I hold my own pain and theirs at the same time? Do I feel upset if their grief looks different than mine?
- **Managing Expectations:** Am I expecting my child to "bounce back" faster than they are ready?
- **The "Okay" Trap:** Do I feel like I need my child to be "okay" just so that I can feel stable?
- **Finding Support:** Since my child can't fix my pain, who can? Who do I turn to when things feel too heavy for me?

Building Your Village

When you build your own "village" of support, you take a heavy burden off your child's shoulders; they no longer have to be your emotional anchor. This allows you to show up with the patience and strength they need to navigate their own journey.

BUILDING YOUR VILLAGE

Think of a time you successfully navigated a difficult challenge. Who or what helped you through it, and how can you access those same resources today?

What is one small, manageable action you can take this week to connect with a person or resource that helps you feel steady and capable?

**GRIEF IS NOT MEANT TO BE WALKED THROUGH IN ISOLATION.
IDENTIFYING YOUR OWN SUPPORT NETWORK IS ONE OF THE
MOST PROACTIVE THINGS YOU CAN DO FOR YOUR FAMILY.**

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MODULE 3

HONORING YOUR INTERNAL RESPONSE

If you start to feel overwhelmed - that feeling where it's hard to think clearly - it is okay to be honest about it. You don't have to force your way through those intense moments. When you take a moment to calm yourself, you are actually teaching your child how to handle big feelings too.

Ways to Take a Pause

- **Breathe together:** "I really want to hear what you're saying, but I can feel my heart racing. Can we take a deep breath together for a minute?"
- **Step away for a moment:** "You have some really big feelings right now and I want to make sure I'm listening well. I'm going to go get a drink of water to clear my head, and then I'll be right back so we can keep talking."

Simple Ways to Feel Grounded

- **Temperature Shift:** Drink some cold water. It helps "snap" your system out of that stressed-out feeling.
- **Box Breathing:** Breathe in for four seconds, hold for four, breathe out for four, and hold for four. Repeat this until you feel steady.
- **Butterfly Hugs:** Cross your arms over your chest, placing your hands gently on your shoulders and alternate tapping your hands back and forth, like butterfly wings.

The Power of Coming Back

If a conversation feels like too much, it is okay to hit the pause button. The most important part is letting your child know they are important and you aren't leaving them alone. When you say, "Let's take a short walk and keep talking when we get back," you are building trust. You are showing them that even when things get stormy, you are committed to walking through it together.

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MODULE 4

HONORING THE INVESTMENT: BUILDING EMOTIONAL TRUST

Our goal isn't to shield children from pain – which is an inevitable part of life – but to show them they can experience it safely. You are teaching them that it is okay to feel and that, no matter how big the emotion, they never have to carry it alone.

Your Role as a Safe Harbor

Children take their cues from the adults around them. When emotions are avoided or minimized, children often learn to suppress their own experiences. By naming your own feelings and honoring your boundaries, you create the space to fully show up for your child's unique journey.

Investing in Trust

Think of your relationship like a savings account for a dream vacation. You don't wait until the day you leave to gather funds; you make small, consistent contributions over time. Every time you truly listen – without rushing to "fix" their feelings – you are making a deposit into the relationship's "emotional savings account." Each moment of calm, patient presence builds a foundation of security, proving that you are a safe harbor when the world feels unpredictable.

Why Start Now?

There is no perfect time to begin these conversations. Whether or not you have recently experienced a major loss or want to start the conversation early, now is the right time. By practicing non-judgmental listening in small, everyday moments – like a lost toy or a missed goal – you are building the resilience and trust that will sustain you both when the greater storms arrive.

HONORING THE CONNECTION

What is one small moment today where you offered presence instead of a "fix," making a "deposit" in your relationship's savings account?

What is one intentional way you can practice "saving" for your connection this week, ensuring your child knows their big feelings are always welcome?

**SMALL, CONSISTENT DEPOSITS OF PATIENCE AND LISTENING CREATE
THE SAFETY YOUR CHILD NEEDS TO NAVIGATE ANY STORM.**

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MODULE 5

HONORING YOUR CHILD'S GRIEF

Children don't always have the words to say "I'm grieving."

Instead, their feelings often show up in how they act or play. Some children might even hide their feelings to try and protect you. It is important to remember that just because a child isn't crying or acting out doesn't mean they aren't feeling the loss deep inside.

Understanding "Child Logic"

When children process loss, they often struggle with the "Three Cs." They might secretly worry that they **Caused the loss**, could have **Controlled it**, or can somehow **Cure it**. They aren't just looking for facts; they are looking for safety. They need to know they are secure and that they will be taken care of.

How to Show Up for Them

- **Be Clear:** Use simple, honest words. Avoid confusing phrases like "they went to sleep," which can be scary for a child.
- **Listen Without Fixing:** Your child needs to be heard, not corrected. Try saying, "I notice you seem really sad today," to let them know you see them.
- **Make Space for All Feelings:** Anger, confusion, and even laughter are all natural parts of grief.
- **Keep a Routine:** Daily rhythms help children feel safe, but be sure to offer them plenty of grace and flexibility.
- **Use Creative Outlets:** Drawing, music, and play give a voice to feelings that are still too big for words.

Remember, grief isn't a straight line. As your child grows and understands the world differently, they may revisit these feelings. That isn't a step backward, it is just a natural part of their healing journey.

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MODULE 6

HONORING YOUR CHILD'S DEVELOPMENTAL PACE

We would never expect a toddler to fix a broken heater or a baby to pay the mortgage, yet in the wake of grief, we sometimes inadvertently expect children to process loss in ways that are beyond their developmental reach. Honoring your child's grief means meeting them exactly where they are, rather than where we might expect them to be.

Grief at Different Stages

While the experience of loss is universal, the way it shows up is deeply unique to each developmental stage:

- **0–3 Years:** They understand absence more than death itself. Your primary role is to provide comfort, physical proximity, and steady, consistent routines.
- **3–5 Years:** Death may seem temporary or reversible to them. Use clear, honest language – avoiding metaphors like "sleeping" – and be prepared to answer the same questions repeatedly.
- **6–10 Years:** They now understand that death is universal, but may fear it is "contagious." Offer frequent, gentle reassurance and factual information to calm their anxieties.
- **10–12 Years:** While they understand death is permanent, they may internalize it or connect it to punishment. Keep an eye out for withdrawal or uncharacteristic behavior.
- **13–28 Years:** Because this phase is already consumed with forming an identity, grief often overlaps with their sense of self. Support them by exploring existential questions while actively protecting them from the weight of "*parentification*" – the tendency to step into adult roles too soon.

By honoring their developmental stage, you release them from the pressure to "keep it together" and provide the safety they need to grieve in their own way.

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MODULE 7

HONORING COMMUNICATION

When your child navigates these feelings, you don't need perfect answers. Use these grounding phrases to provide safety and anchor your child:

- **Validate their pain:** "It makes sense that you are sad. I am here with you, and you don't have to carry this alone."
- **Invite curiosity:** "It makes sense that you have questions. I want to help you understand as much as you need to know."
- **Release responsibility:** "I want to remind you that you are not responsible for what happened. You did not cause this, and there is nothing you could have done to change it."

This journey is not about getting it right every time; it is about the effort to show up. Relationships naturally move through cycles of connecting, misstepping, and repairing. It is completely normal to have moments where you get it right, and moments where you unintentionally miss the mark.

What matters most is that you try. When you make a mistake, owning it and reaching out to try again is exactly where deep trust is built. If you don't have the "right" words, simply return to your child, offer a sincere apology, and reconnect. The goal isn't to navigate this perfectly, but to show your child that they are never alone in their grief. Through the power of co-regulation and your consistent willingness to show up, you provide the security they need.

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MODULE 8

HONORING THE PROCESS

The most challenging part of grief is the realization that we cannot "fix" it for anyone – not even for those we love most. Naturally, we ache to erase the pain, smooth the sharp edges, and restore the peace that has been lost.

However, honoring the process means recognizing that your role is not to be a fixer. Your role is to be a witness. Your task is to love them, to sit in the discomfort alongside them, and to listen without an agenda. When we try to "fix" grief, we often unintentionally silence it.

Phrases meant to comfort – like "at least..." or "everything happens for a reason" – often act as walls rather than bridges.

Phrases that likely create barriers:

- "Everything happens for a reason."
- "You're young; you have plenty of time."
- "You just need to stay positive."
- "They wouldn't want you to be sad."
- "I know exactly how you feel." (Even with similar experiences, your grief is unique; comparing grief can minimize theirs.)

Instead, try simpler, more grounding responses: "I am so sorry this is happening," "I am here with you," or simply, "I don't know what to say, but I am listening."

HONORING THE PROCESS

What is one specific way I can ground myself when I feel the urge to "fix" my child's pain, so I can offer calm, steady presence instead?

What small, intentional action can I take today to signal to my child that I am a safe person to sit with, even when their feelings are big and difficult to navigate?

YOU ARE NOT HERE TO RESOLVE THEIR PAIN, BUT TO HONOR IT. BY CHOOSING PRESENCE OVER FIXING, YOU PROVIDE THE SAFETY YOUR CHILD NEEDS TO FIND THEIR OWN PATH THROUGH THE STORM.

NEXT STEPS IN YOUR HEALING

Thank you for choosing to work through this workbook. By prioritizing these practices, you are meeting your child exactly where they are. Through your calm presence and honest communication, you are building a safe harbor where their emotions are always welcome and held with care.

Taking Care of Yourself

The best way to support your child is to make sure you are supported too. You are navigating big life changes, and you are doing an incredible job. Please know that you do not have to walk this path alone.

Support Designed for You

As a Registered Mental Health Counselor Intern, I specialize in helping people navigate life's big shifts and build lasting resilience. Whether you are looking for in-person support or the convenience of telehealth, I am here to help you find your footing.

I provide services throughout Florida and accept insurance to ensure you can get the care you need.

If you are ready for a little extra support to process your journey, I would be honored to walk alongside you. Please reach out if you are looking for a supportive space to grow.

With Care,



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