

WHEN YOUR WORLD IS ALREADY UPSIDE DOWN

Supporting Grieving Children and Teens During the COVID-19 Global Health Crisis

How rapidly and radically things are changing in our world and everyday lives, in ways we couldn't imagine even a month ago. At that time, children, teens, young adults, and adult caregivers in our grief support groups were saying things like:

- *Since our person died, our whole lives have been turned upside down.*
- *People just don't understand. They think we should be over it or move on.*
- *It is so helpful — and in some cases, a lifesaver — for us to come to The Dougy Center and be with others who understand.*

And now, in the midst of personal loss and life changes, we're needing to alter and disrupt our daily lives even more. Although physical distancing doesn't mean we can't still find ways to connect, it's hard to substitute technology for in-person hugs, tears, and nods of understanding. On top of this, the person we would have turned to for support in all of this might be the person who died.

We'll practice physical distancing for the sake of our children's health and our own, and with awareness of the global severity and our interconnections, but we can still acknowledge

that this is all really hard.

We are using the term physical distancing rather than social distancing in recognition that it's important to try and stay connected while being physically apart. There are so many changes to our daily lives, including our kids being out of school (and still wanting to play with each other and be kids), our inability to travel freely, fears about spreading or getting the virus, and disruptions in our jobs, income, and economic concerns. These just add to what families were already grappling with in their grief.



We fervently hope that ultimately some good will emerge out of this global tragedy, but right now, grieving families face greater risks of social isolation, including their grief being minimized or forgotten in the face of this global health crisis. Here are some comments we're hearing from grieving families:

- *I thought things could not possibly get any worse after De'Angelos' death and now this...*

- *We barely got to acknowledge that Patricia was gone and now it feels like our grief must take a back seat to the other issues thrown in our faces.*
- *After Cala died, my children were already struggling in school. Now they're going to miss so much class time. Will they ever catch up?*

The question now is, how do we possibly stay healthy and connected with the changes and anxiety added to what we were already dealing with? Here are some ideas to consider:

Engage in family self-care

Engaging in family self-care means attending to your physical, mental, and emotional health in whatever ways are accessible to you and your children. Children and teens are tuned into the adults in their lives and are watching for cues and leadership about how to respond. Grieving children and teens are already more likely to be concerned about health and safety, and these fears may grow stronger during this time. Engaging in family self-care is one way to help them cope with these worries.

Think: body, brain, heart

Body: What can you do to move your body each day, even if you're staying at home? Stretching, jumping jacks, chair dancing, and push-up challenges are some options. Remember to drink water, eat nourishing food, and get enough sleep.

Brain: Consider limiting media consumption and implementing practices to support your nervous system such as taking a few deep breaths, meditation, and this simple exercise to get grounded in your senses. You can do this on your own or make it into a game with your children:

Take a moment to notice your surroundings and find 5 things you see, 4 things you hear, 3 things you feel, 2 things you smell, and 1 thing you can taste.



Heart: Make room for whatever emotions and thoughts come up for you and your children. Whatever each of you are feeling or thinking, consider responding with something like: "It's okay that you're feeling this way/thinking those thoughts. I'm so glad you shared them with me. What do you think would be most helpful in this moment?" Take time to attend to your own emotional state, so you are aware of what you bring to interactions with your family. Cultivate compassion and remind yourself, "I'm doing the best I can in this moment."

Here are some resources for self, family, and community care during this time:

[Movement Activities for Grief Tip Sheet](#)

[Self-Care Planning Tip Sheet](#)

[Grief Out Loud Ep. 106 Grief & Anxiety - Claire Bidwell Smith, LCPC](#)

Establish routines

Consider creating new daily routines and rituals. You can work as a family to set a schedule and small goals for each day. Routine and consistency can help establish a sense of control in a situation that feels very out of control. Examples of mini goals might include writing a book, organizing a room/drawer/



closet, reaching out to one friend or family member a day, doing an art project, writing in a journal, or taking a daily walk.

Here's an idea for making a schedule

together. Use a big sheet of paper or white/chalk board that everyone can write on. Block out times specifically for family self-care activities for the body, brain, and heart. Include things that happen at regular times (meals, walking the dog, bedtimes) so there is a foundation of structure built into each day. In creating a schedule and focusing on routines, remember to also be flexible. When we are stressed, our ability to focus can be compromised, so if your children need extra unstructured time, make space for that too.

Reach out and stay connected

Under the best of circumstances grief can feel isolating, so during this time it's especially important to cultivate social connections. Thanks to our digital world, there are many ways to stay connected even with physical distancing. If you have access to technology, schedule video chats or phone calls with friends and family. Explore websites, podcasts, and groups on social media. We've included a list of grief specific ones at the end of this resource. If you don't have access to technology, consider writing letters and postcards.

Be honest with kids about what you know and don't know

Encourage children and teens to ask what

they're wondering about. Just as with grief, there are going to be questions you have the answers to and ones that you don't. It's okay if the answer is, "I don't know." Reassure children that as soon as you know more, you will tell them. Children and teens who have access to technology are likely to look up information and share with their friends. It can help to have a conversation about identifying reliable sources to decrease misinformation.

Make time for grief & remembering the person who died

With so much happening, children and teens might worry there's no time or space for their grief. Consider setting aside time to talk either as a family or one on one with kids and teens about what's coming up for them in their grief. Potential discussion starters include:

- "How is your grief behaving today?"
- "What do you miss the most about them today?"
- "What's a funny/favorite memory you can think of?"
- "What do you think they would be doing/saying during this time?"
- "How would things be different for us if they were here?"
- "What's helping you the most?"

[See this Tip Sheet for more question ideas.](#)

If visiting a cemetery or other location is part of your family's grief routine and you're not able to go because of physical distancing requirements, consider creating a space in your home with photos and special items where you and your family can connect with the person who died.

Embrace diversions

Remind children and teens that it's okay to still have fun and take breaks — both from grief and concerns about the global health crisis. As a family, you can create a list of ways to have fun, including solo and group activities. Examples include board games, puzzles, watching silly movies and videos, scavenger hunts, dance parties, making playlists, or having a talent show. If you have access to technology, consider inviting friends and family to participate remotely in the talent show.

These are just a few tips for supporting grief for yourself and your family during this health crisis. With these suggestions in mind, it's important to note that many factors go into whether these tips will be accessible for people, including physical mobility, financial resources, work constraints, and emotional and physical vulnerabilities. Adapt these as needed for your family and if you need additional resources, support, or information, please contact us.

For additional tips on supporting grieving children and teens, please visit our website www.dougy.org for Tip Sheets, podcast episodes, activities, guidebooks, and workbooks.

Resources

Online resources for parents/caregivers

[Hot Young Widows Club](#)

[Soaring Spirits](#)

[Modern Loss](#)

[What's Your Grief](#)

Podcasts & online communities

[Grief Out Loud](#)

[The Widowed Parent Podcast](#)

[Coming Back](#)

[Terrible, Thanks for Asking](#)

Online resources for children & teens

[The Dougy Center's School](#)

[& Community Toolkit](#)

[SLAP'D](#)

About COVID-19

[Talking to children about COVID-19](#)

[Coping with stress during infectious disease outbreaks](#)

Additional resources

[Trauma Informed Oregon](#)

[American Foundation for Suicide Prevention](#)

Need more support? Text 741741 or call 1-800-273-8255 to reach someone at the Crisis Line 24/7.



The Dougy Center

The National Center for Grieving Children & Families

Our Mission

The Dougy Center provides support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families grieving a death can share their experiences. Our *Pathways* program provides support for families living with an advanced serious illness.

The Dougy Center Bookstore/Resources

The Dougy Center has been helping children, teens, young adults and their parents cope with death since 1982. Our practical, easy-to-use materials are based on what we have learned from more than 45,000 Dougy Center participants. To order online, visit dougy.org or tdcbookstore.org, or call 503.775.5683.