

# PATHWAYS CENTER *for* GRIEF & LOSS

## STRATEGIES TO HELP CHILDREN & TEENS COPE WITH ANXIETY AFTER LOSS

Anxiety is one of the most common grief reactions for children and teens. The world no longer feels safe, because they understand people die. Many wonder what else might happen, and these kinds of thoughts heighten their worries and fears. In addition, anxiety may change their eating or sleeping patterns. Adults can play a role in helping children and teens cope with their anxiety. Research confirms the psychological well-being of the caregiver is the best predictor of how children and teens will cope after a significant loss. Consider implementing some of the following to help your grieving children and teens:

- Validate their anxiety rather than trying to convince them they shouldn't feel anxious. Offer education that many children tend to feel anxious after a death
- For younger children it may help to use the word stress rather than anxiety, because they may not understand what anxious means.
- If the death was sudden, children may want to know how to call 911. Teens may want to know how to administer CPR.
- Talk openly about your will and what plans you have if something would happen to you.
- Promote regular exercise. This will help create a more positive mood and improve sleep.
- Be consistent with bedtime and routines related to sleeping.
- Encourage children to be involved in activities they enjoy.
- Introduce journaling or making a memory book – this is surprisingly therapeutic.
- Suggest writing worries on paper; then crumbling them up, tearing or burning them.
- Create a “Relaxation Space” or a “Relaxation Basket.”
  - Fill a basket with items that help relax your child such as a blanket, pleasing scents, food, music, books, and photographs.
  - Think of all five senses – sight, smell, hearing, touch, and taste.
- Become aware of your own anxiety level and be intentional about making choices to decrease your own stress.
- Model and encourage healthy eating habits.
- Teach and model simple breathing techniques. Breathe in through your nose, hold your breath, and then out for the count of three similar to blowing out a candle.
- See your doctor for an annual physical exam.
  - Your doctor may be able to reassure your children about your health status.
  - Show a copy of your physical to your teens who may be more reluctant to voice their anxiety
  - If you do have health concerns, be honest with your children. Don't promise everything will be fine.
- If anxiety appears pervasive and begins to interfere with their ability to function throughout the day, it may be necessary to seek support from a therapist or physician to discuss the possible benefits of medication.