

## HELPING CHILDREN AND TEENS THROUGH ANTICIPATORY GRIEF: A GUIDE FOR WHEN A SPECIAL PERSON HAS A SERIOUS ILLNESS

**WHEN A FAMILY MEMBER OR SPECIAL PERSON HAS AN ADVANCED ILLNESS, IT MAY CAUSE SADNESS AND STRESS FOR ALL INVOLVED.** You may have been supporting your person with an illness for a long time, or you may have recently found out that your loved one has a serious illness. Both situations may lead to heartbreak and questions about how to navigate this time.

**YOU ARE NOT ALONE** if you are unsure what information to share with your child. Adults want to support their child or teenager during this difficult time while also minimizing their child's stress.

**HOPE'S ROAD UNDERSTANDS JUST HOW OVERWHELMING THESE CONVERSATIONS ARE TO HAVE WITH A CHILD OR TEEN.** We hope this guide can help answer some of your questions. The team is here to answer additional questions and provide emotional support for children, teens, and adults. We are praying for you, and we believe God is walking alongside you.

### WHAT IS ANTICIPATORY GRIEF?

**ANTICIPATORY GRIEF IS THE THOUGHTS, EMOTIONS, AND BEHAVIORS/PHYSICAL ASPECTS EXPERIENCED BEFORE A LOVED ONE PASSES AWAY.** Anticipatory grief may occur when a family member is terminally ill or near death. Below are some emotions and other anticipatory grief reactions that children and teenagers may experience.



**EMOTIONS:** Sad, moody, worried, anxious, scared, agitated, angry, numbness/shock, confusion, guilt.

**THOUGHTS:** Will this happen to me? Will my caregivers get sick or die? Is this my fault? Is my loved one in pain? Where will they go when they die? Can I catch it? Or general ongoing thoughts about death.

**BEHAVIORS:** Regressive behavior in young children (bed wetting, “baby talk”), crying, aggression, difficulty concentrating, isolation, appetite changes, sleeping more or sleeping less, hyperactivity.

**PHYSICAL ASPECTS:** Stomach aches, body aches, headaches, dizziness, decreased/increased energy, appetite and sleep changes. A child may share that they're feeling some of the same symptoms experienced by the person who is seriously ill.

**OTHER REACTIONS:** Interest in caring for the family member with advanced illness, adjusting and coping adequately to the changes when a loved one is sick, emotionally preparing for the death, continued fixation or great concern for the person.

Reactions to illness and death vary greatly by age. Please ask our team for additional information on grief reactions by age.

## HOW SHOULD I COMMUNICATE WITH THE CHILD OR TEEN IN MY LIFE?

**COMMUNICATE USING SIMPLE LANGUAGE** with a young child. Think about using straight forward or easy to understand words or concepts when talking about advanced illness or death with a young person. Follow your youth's cues, let their cues lead the conversation, and answer their questions honestly and as best you can. Keep in mind when talking with a young person that children under 2 years do not yet understand death as concept and that children start to understand that death is permanent by age 6.

**SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN OFTEN BENEFIT FROM DIRECT EXPLANATIONS.** It is recommended to use direct and honest language rather than telling a child their person is "lost/gone" or "sick." For example, phrases like, "We lost your aunt yesterday" may make a young child think the person will be found and come back. Or, saying, "Dad is really sick, and he might get even sicker" could cause confusion as very young children cannot distinguish a life limiting illness from a common sickness such as a cold.

Communicating with indirect language is often well intended as adults want to protect the children in their life. Using direct language will help lessen confusion and could reduce a child's worry in the long run.



**ADOLESCENTS AND TEENS UNDERSTAND THAT ADVANCED ILLNESS CAN LEAD TO DEATH, AND THEY UNDERSTAND DEATH IS PERMANENT.** Adolescents may feel isolated as their peers may not be going through a loss. This age group may feel especially worried or sad, and communicating their feelings may be difficult. Simply letting a teen know that you are ready to listen if they'd like to talk goes a long way. Share with this age group that everyone needs help from time to time and it's ok to ask for support. The Hope's Road program is beneficial in helping bereaved youth connect with one another to learn they are not alone in their grief.

## SHOULD I TELL THE CHILD OR TEEN IN MY LIFE A LOVED ONE HAS DIED OR IS TERMINALLY ILL?

**THERE ARE BENEFITS TO TELLING SCHOOL AGED CHILDREN, ADOLESCENTS, AND TEENS** who understand the finality of a death that a special person has an advanced illness and may die. Let's take a closer look at a child's understanding of death.

**CHILDREN UNDER THE AGE OF 2** do not understand that death is final and struggle to understand that a person has a serious illness. They may realize some aspects of advanced illness or death bit by bit as they age. It's important to say that even very young children can sense that a change has occurred when a loved one is terminally ill or dies, especially if this person was very close to them or a primary caregiver.

**CHILDREN BETWEEN THE AGES OF 2-5 SEE DEATH AS TEMPORARY. CHILDREN START TO UNDERSTAND THAT DEATH IS PERMANENT AROUND 6 YEARS OF AGE.** Therefore, caregivers may choose to share information about a loved one's serious illness or impending death at any age guided by the child's developmental stage and best interests.

**HAVING CONVERSATIONS** about advanced illness and death may help address a child's concerns. Children are often aware when something is wrong. Answering their questions may help children process their fears, worries, and other emotions in a healthy way. Children can have their questions answered. Children often worry for their parents or primary caregivers safety after a death and reminded them that their parent or primary caregiver will always ensure their safe is important. However, there is not a one-size-fits all approach to these conversations and families should consider what's best for their child.

**THESE CONVERSATIONS CAN FEEL OVERWHELMING, AND HOPE'S ROAD IS AVAILABLE TO YOU FOR CONTINUED SUPPORT AND GUIDANCE.**

### **EXAMPLE CONVERSATION REGARDING ADVANCED ILLNESS OR DEATH WITH A CHILD:**

“Grandma has a disease called cancer. The medicine for cancer isn't making her better anymore and she may die in a few weeks. I want you to know that a lot of times when people are sick or have diseases, they get better. Death happens to everyone, and I also plan to be a part of your life and live for a long time. I will always make sure you are safe and cared for. This is very scary and sad. What are you thinking about?”

“Aunt Bev's heart stopped beating and she died. This is very sad and surprising news. What are you feeling right now?”

**HOPE'S ROAD ENCOURAGES FAMILIES TO INCORPORATE THEIR FAITH AND RELIGIOUS VIEWS** into their conversations about death and dying as they see fit. For instance, if a family is Christian, they may decide to have conversations about heaven and God's promises and Jesus' love,

comfort, and support to all people. A family's faith community can be very helpful in times like these.

## WHAT REACTIONS SHOULD I EXPECT FROM A CHILD OR TEEN?

**SOME OF THE EMOTIONS AND REACTIONS MENTIONED ON THE FIRST PAGES MAY BE EXPERIENCED BY YOUTH.** Other times children and teens may cope adequately with grief or with a special person's health decline. Young individuals sometimes do not express many emotions or talk about the loss/change. This is normal as individuals process grief in their own time. A child feels comforted simply knowing adults are there for support if needed. Consider the first conversation about illness or death the starting point. Over time, a child may share their feelings more and more. It may help to set up dedicated time to check in with your youth to talk as a family. You can add a craft, game, or art project to help bring additional comfort.

**IN YOUNGER CHILDREN, SOMETIMES BEHAVIORS OR PHYSICAL ISSUES** such as decreased energy or a stomachache are observed prior to emotional expression or instead of emotional changes. If this happens, offer to talk with your child about their feelings. Or engage in a game or art activity with your youth that helps with emotional expression. Hope's Road has a lot of suggestions for grief activities that encourage emotional expression.

Think of your first conversation about their feelings regarding serious illness or death as a starting point. Over time, a young person may open up more and share additional emotions and thoughts as they process what's happening. One helpful approach is to set aside dedicated time to check-in with each other regularly as a family.

## SUPPORT NETWORK

**HOPE'S ROAD RECOMMENDS PRAYER, IDENTIFYING A FRIEND/FAMILY SUPPORT NETWORK, AND FAITH COMMUNITY WHEN APPLICABLE IN TIMES OF GRIEF AND LOSS.** Additionally, our team has spiritual and bereavement coordinators available to support and guide you.



**THINK ABOUT LETTING YOUR CHILD OR TEEN'S SCHOOL/SCHOOL COUNSELOR** know if a friend or family member is dying or has died for the school to be prepared to support your child.

## MEETING A YOUTH'S INDIVIDUAL NEEDS:

**ALWAYS COMMUNICATE WITH YOUR YOUNG PERSON'S DOCTOR OR THERAPIST IF APPLICABLE** with behavior, mood, or mental health challenges that concern you. **CALL/TEXT 988** in crisis situations/if you or your youth are experiencing thoughts of suicide.

This guide contains recommendations only, and we know each child and family are unique. Thus, find the strategy or approach that best suits your child and family.

Caring for yourself right now is equally as important as caring for the child in your life. We are here to walk alongside you on your grief journey and can help navigate the changes. Please always feel comfortable calling **THE BEREAVEMENT TEAM MONDAY-FRIDAY 8:00AM-4:30PM 1-800-720-2557** for support. Calls can be scheduled outside of these hours as well. You remain in our hearts and prayers.