HOW TO HELP CHILDREN WITH ANTICIPATORY GRIEF

“Anticipatory grief” is a form of grief that occurs when there is an opportunity to anticipate the death of someone (or oneself). It is similar to the normal process of mourning, but it occurs before the actual death (in anticipation of the death).

Children and teens can be helped with coping tasks in a variety of ways. Whereas the particular issues and specific content discussed must be varied and adapted to the age of the child and the situation, it is helpful for parents and adults to keep these tips in mind.

The information in this handout is provided by the Healing Patch. It is our hope it will provide you with some support and comfort during a difficult time.

1. **Tell the truth.** Keeping information causes children to feel confused, unable to turn to adults for help, and mistrustful of other information. Avoid any unnecessary information.

2. **Be simple & direct.** Use correct words and language. Although this may be difficult for adults, saying someone has died is preferable to potentially confusing euphemisms such as “he went to sleep,” “he passed on,” and “we’ve lost him.”

3. **Reassure children they are not to blame.**

4. **Model appropriate responses.** Do not hide emotions. Explain feelings as a way to help children understand their own, but keep expression of strong, dramatic feelings for private times with other adults.

5. **Find ways for the child to be involved with family if at all possible.** Participating in hospital routines or funeral rituals in whatever way they feel most comfortable can demystify events for children and provide closure.

6. **Encourage the child to talk & ask questions.** Find out what a child thinks and feels, and correct any misconceptions or misinformation.

7. **Become attuned to & respond to the child’s own pace for revealing feelings.** Offer opportunities for comfort by being available whenever the child/teen is ready or is experiencing some strong emotion.

8. **Allow & encourage expression in private ways**, e.g. use of journals, art.

9. **Acknowledge & affirm children’s expressions.** Accept and normalize their response.

10. **Have more than one conversation.** A child’s familiarity, interest, and questions about difficult situations change over time. Be available and look for teachable moments or opportunities for further exploration.

11. **Provide understanding, support, & extra guidance or assistance** with school assignments, social obligations, and home chores as necessary over time.

12. **Explore their feelings about the situation or death.** Understand their beliefs and how being confronted with death can stimulate related personal feelings.

13. **Realize children may make comparisons.** They may comment and wish for things to be the way they used to be, compare times before and after events, compare the surviving parent to the one who died, or compare their life to that of others.

14. **Talk to & enlist the support of other adults**, such as teachers and coaches who are in contact with the children.

15. **Monitor a child’s response over time** and check out any concerns with a mental health professional.

16. **Encourage & help the child to collect keepsakes** and construct and maintain memories.

HEALING PATCH
A Children’s Grief Program