SUPPORTING CHILDREN THROUGH CHANGE

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CONTACT DETAILS

HELLO@GROWWITHGRIEF.COM.AU
+61450805909
WWW.GROWWITHGRIEF.COM.AU

INTRODUCTION

HELPLINES:

LIFELINE
13 11 14

GRIEFLINE
1300 845 745

RESOURCES:

WOMBATS WISH
www.wombatswish.org.au
Resources for parents, schools and children, in addition to camps and programs.

AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR GRIEF AND BEREAVEMENT (ACGB)
www.grief.org.au
Recent studies and information on grief and loss.

FEEL THE MAGIC
www.feelthemagic.org.au
Camps and support groups for children who have lost a parent, guardian or sibling across Australia.

THE COMPASSIONATE FRIENDS VICTORIA
www.tfcv.org.au
Support for bereaved parents and siblings.

REMEMBER...

- Do what you can when you can. Any genuine attempt to help will be appreciated by a grieving child or young person.
- Use this as a guide, not a step-by-step document.
- There is more than one way to help. Choose the things you feel most comfortable with and get support with things you don't.
- Be aware of referral pathways and know that you don’t have to be an expert - you can refer to relevant supports for help.
- Look after yourself - talking about death and supporting distressed children can be emotionally demanding. Always reach out and access your support systems and/or profesional support to process your feelings and experiences.

WHAT DO I SAY?

Sometimes our natural reaction to death is not to talk about it. We assume that the bereaved person will not want to, that they will view us as nosey, and we fear that by mentioning it we will upset them.
But, as we often say, the worst thing that could happen... already has. You are unlikely to make it worse and, in fact, acknowledging and validating the experience that a child or young person is going through is likely to be helpful and positive to them.

Most bereaved children will at some point be very glad to have the chance to talk about what has happened, and will appreciate that an adult cares enough to ask about them and their feelings.

Here are some of the most common tips we give to those people supporting a bereaved child or young person:

BE HONEST

Grief and death is not an easy subject for anyone. Don't be afraid to admit your own feelings, too. Model the fact that difficult feelings are okay and totally normal.

USE CLEAR LANGUAGE

Trying to avoid the loss by using phrases such as "gone to a better place" or "your loss" may cause confusion for young children.
Using clear, direct language such as "died" and "dead" avoids the likelihood of misunderstanding.

WHAT DO I SAY?

EXPECT QUESTIONS

Children will often ask a lot of questions when faced with grief and loss, some of which may be straightforward and others which may be more complex. It's not uncommon for a child to ask the same question, multiple times whilst they try to gain understanding of what has happened.

If you feel unable to answer a question honestly, let them know that you can't give them an answer but you will look into providing an answer for them at a later date.

NORMALISE FEELINGS

Validate and reassure the child that the way they are feeling is a normal reaction to grief and that it isn't something to be ashamed of. Don't assume that a child will feel a certain way and allow them to share their experience without projecting your own expectation onto them.

CULTURAL AWARENESS

Always ensure you are aware of the child's cultural background and beliefs and avoid projecting your own belief systems onto the child. It is often best to remain unbiased and follow the child's lead when it comes to religious or cultural rituals.

COMMON REACTIONS

ACROSS AGE GROUPS (PRIMARY)

3-5years

- Do not fully understand the permanence of death
- Withdrawal or showing a lack of response
- Strong emotional reactions
- Behavioural changes
- Temporary regression
- Blaming themselves for the loss/death
- Increased fear response to change

5-12years

- May not yet fully understand permanence of death
- Blaming themselves for the loss/death
- Increased anxiety for their own safety and those around them
- Withdrawal from usual activities
- Strong emotional reactions
- Puddle jumping between emotions
- Behavioural changes
- Eating and sleeping habits may change
- Temporary regression
- Forgetful and easily distracted
- Physical complaints
- Asking blunt questions

SUITABLE FOR AGES 0-12YEARS

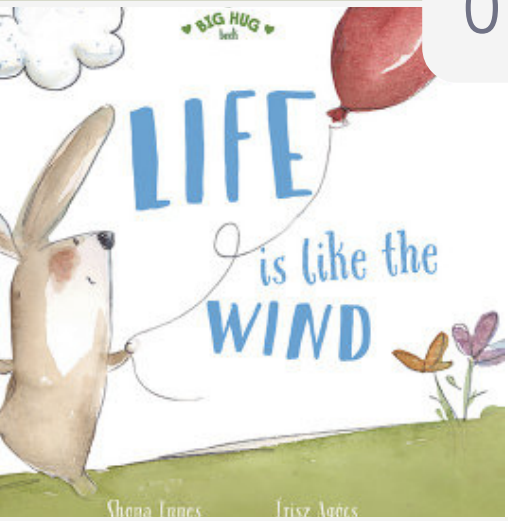
BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

01

The Invisible String by Patrice Karst

A perfect book for children experiencing separation anxiety, loss and grief. Appropriate for all ages, it explores questions about the intangible yet unbreakable connections between us, and opens up deeper conversations about love.

02



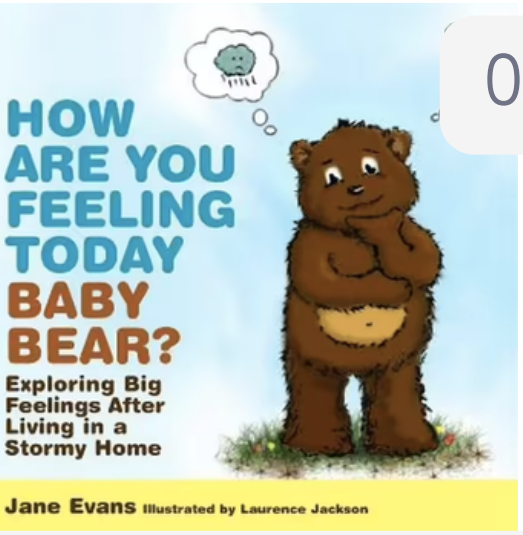
Life is Like the Wind by Shona Innes

A gentle and direct approach to the emotional issues that children face. It introduces the concept of death to young readers by likening life to the ever-moving wind, whilst also starting to explore the different beliefs people have about what happens after we die.

03

The Goodbye Book by Todd Parr

An accessible and wholesome book that looks at grief through the eyes of a fish and how to say goodbye. It's a great reminder that it's okay to not always know the answers and there will always be support around them.



04

How are you Feeling Today, Baby Bear? by Jane Evans

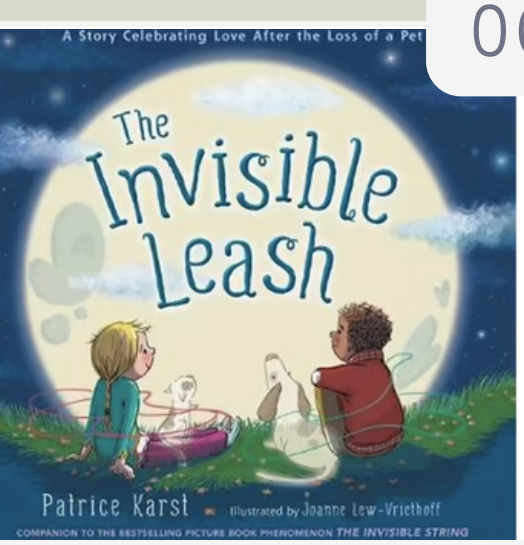
Whilst this book is written for children who have experienced violence at home, it is a great resource for starting the conversation about big feelings and naming them.

05

The Boy Who Built a Wall Around Himself by Ali Redford

Using a simple metaphor, this book helps children who have had painful or traumatic experiences to explore their feelings and communicate with others.

06



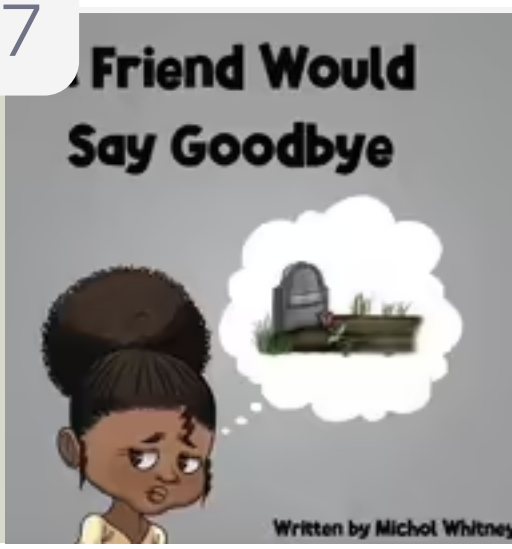
The Invisible Leash by Patrice Karst

Similar to The Invisible String, but through the eyes of pet loss. Appropriate for all ages, it explores questions about the intangible yet unbreakable connections between us, and opens up deeper conversations about love.

07

A Friend Would Say Goodbye by Michol Whitney

This story explores the feelings of anger and confusion that may arise after a death, and encourages expression of emotions rather than keeping them bottled up inside.



REGULATION ACTIVITIES

HAND ON HEART

Hand on heart is a self-care and emotion regulation tool we use to reduce distress.
It has three components that help calm us down in several ways.:

1. Physical touch helps to ground the child and make them more present in their body.
2. Breathing deescalates any physiological arousal caused by the distress.
3. Counting helps them connect with their “thinking mind” rather than their “emotional mind”
while giving them something besides the distress

HOW TO

Place one or both hands on their chest, feeling the warmth of their body. While sitting or standing quietly, breath in for a count of 3 and out for a count of 4, taking a total of 5 breaths.

Check in with how they are feeling and repeat up to 10 times if needed.

REGULATION ACTIVITIES

5 FINGER BREATHING

This is a wonderful way to switch off the stress response. It brings the body back into balance, slowing and deepening the breath and slowing down the heart rate, while harnessing the need to move with an action that requires focus and provides sensory feedback to our brains.

HOW TO

Stretch hand out like a star and using the pointer finger of your other hand, trace your fingers up and down. Slide up each finger slowly, and down the other side.
Breathe in through your nose, as you slide up. Breathe out through your mouth as you slide down.

BEREAVEMENT SPECIFIC ACTIVITIES

MEMORY JAR

Often, physical touch and focusing on something other than speaking can support children in expressing their emotions and thoughts.

A memory jar is a great way to get children talking about their loved ones and their memories whilst keeping their brains busy on the task at hand.

MATERIALS

Butcher Paper/Tray, Coloured Chalk, Salt, Small Jars

HOW TO

1. Pour salt onto paper or in a tray.
2. Ask child to choose a colour chalk that reminds them of their person. For example, their favourite persons colour or yellow to represent the sun as part of a core memory.
3. Rub the salt with the colour chalk, until all the salt has taken it's colour.
4. Pour the salt into the jar to create layers.
5. Repeat each step until the jar is full.

SUITABLE FOR ADULTS

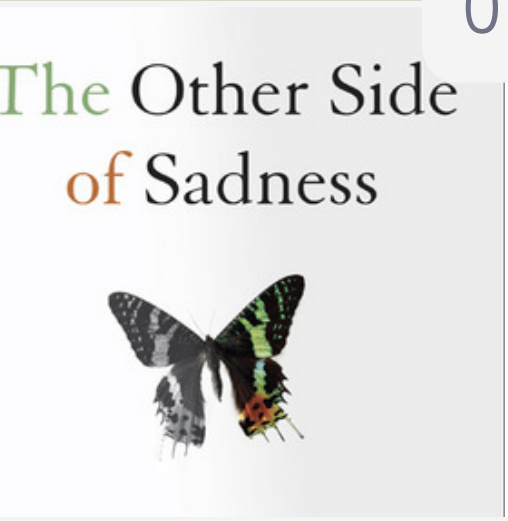
BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

01

It's OK That You're Not OK by Megan Devine

Not only a great book for grievers, but also for those who are supporting them. A book that challenges the myths of grief, whilst outlining skills and suggestions for providing comfort and care.

02



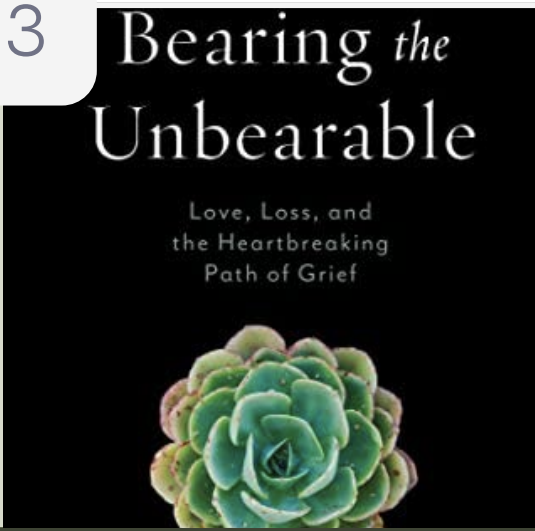
The Other Side of Sadness by George Bonanno

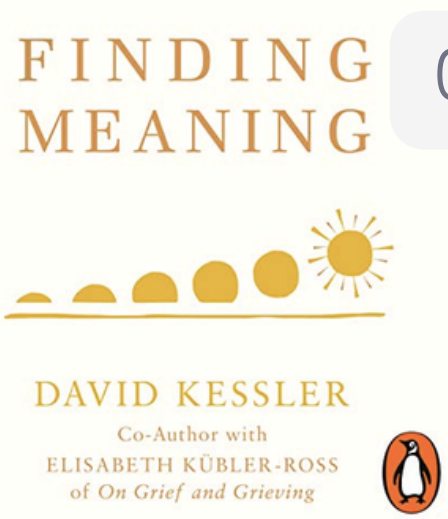
A scientific look to at bereavement, exploring what our culture does and doesn't get right. Combining real-life stories, interviews and scientific research.

03

Bearing the Unbearable by Joanne Cacciatore

For anyone who is dealing with the traumatic loss of a loved one, however it is general enough to apply to most relationships. A validating book that gives grievers permission to grieve in their own way, whilst learning to re-define and navigate their new landscape.





04

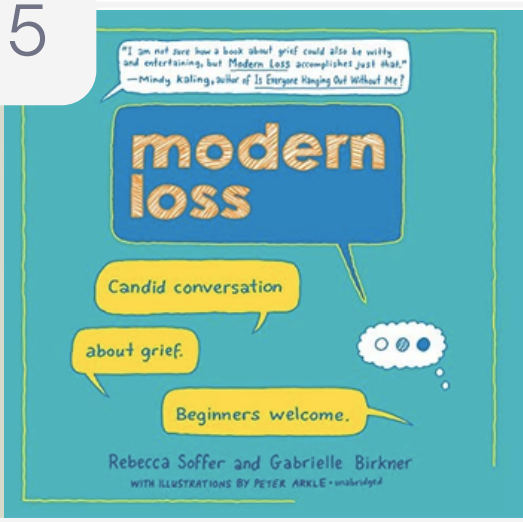
Finding Meaning by David Kessler

Through sharing his own experience with loss, David Kessler shares a poignant response the societies insensitivity towards loss. He explores how grief can be transformed into a more peaceful, hopeful experience.

05

Modern Loss by Rebecca Soffer and Gabrielle Berkner

Aimed at teenagers and young adults, a book that provides candid conversations and real stories of grief and loss, allowing young people to feel connected to a community.



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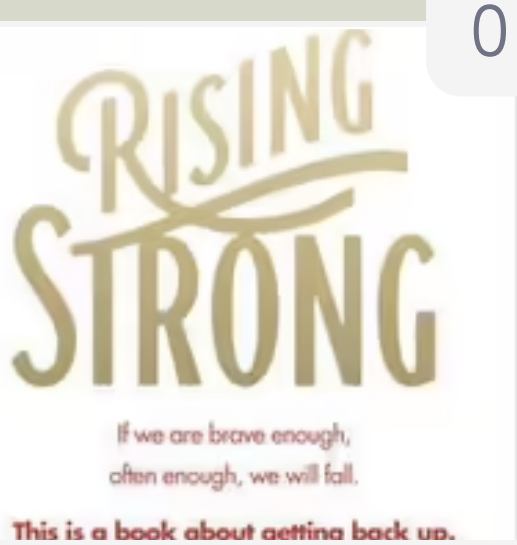


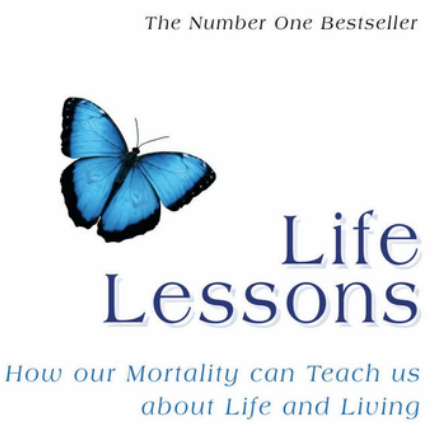
Rising Strong by Brene Brown

Whilst not technically a grief book, this a wonderful read that explores the power of vulnerability and rising strong after we fall.
Brene's other books are also highly recommended reads.

07

Life Lessons by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and David Kessler

Exploring real-life stories of those who have survived and those who have died, encouraging the reader to consider life as meaningful and profound. Each story allows the reader to reflect on ways to live that moves them towards a deeper happiness.



FURTHER RESOURCES

www.growwithgrief.com.au

hello@growwithgrief.com.au

+61450 805909