Growing Through Grief Activities & Ideas

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Welcome!

When someone significant in a child's life dies, we find ourselves wanting to help but often don't know how. The activities I've created here are to help you bridge that gap and help you to help a child.

I've developed these exercises so you can pick and choose. Use whatever feels like a good fit for you and the child and adapt it to work for you. You don't need to use all the ideas and you certainly don't need to use them all at once! They are designed to scaffold and support rather than to act as a strait jacket.

You don't need to be an exper to make a difference, you just need to care and be there and you'll make more difference that you might realise. Please don't let your fear of doing the wrong thing prevent you from doing the right thing.

Good luck!

Pooky x

Grief is a process

Grief is a normal and healthy process when someone dies. The activities in this book are designed not to make grief go away, but rather to support a child to work through their thoughts, feelings and experiences; and to give us the confidence to accompany them on that journey rather than shying away.

There are many models of grief I've shared a couple on the following pages. I hope they help you to recognise that grief is a process with several stages that we need to work through. Whilst some stages may feel scary or unpalatable, they are all helping the child to work towards a place of acceptance and recovery. If we can embrace, rather than hide from, each stage it is likely to be worked through more completely. It can help too, for children to understand a little about this process. Knowing that their anger, their despair and their introversion are quite normal and that there is hope for the future can be deeply reassuring.

The Five Stages

The fives stages of grief developed by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross can help us to understand and support the process.

1 - Denial

A lack of belief that this could possibly have happened. An overwhelming flood of emotions, often including panic and anxiety and hyper-arousal type feelings (fight, flight, meltdown).

2 - Anger

Fury that the loved one has died and left us behind. Anger with the deceased. Anger with the world. Anger with oneself.

3 - Bargaining

Time spent looking back and wondering what could have been done differently. Often a child will see themselves as to blame for the death .

4 - Depression

Feelings turn inwards and we become consumed by sadness and despair. We move more into a hypo-arousal style response accompanied by low mood, and hopelessness .

5 - Acceptance

The pain of the loss doesn't go away, but we learn to live with it. We acknowledge of thoughts, feelings and experiences with curiosity and kindness and we begin to be able to look to the future..

Grief and Attachment

Another helpful model for understanding grief is Colin Murray Parkes grief and attachment model which is inspired by the work of John Bowlby's theory of attachment.

1 - Shock & Numbness

Similar to Kübler-Ross's denial stage. We're overwhelmed by our loss.

2 - Yearning & Searching

Preoccupation with the person we lost, lots of reliving of memories as we look for comfort and to try to fill the void they've left.

3 - Despair & Disorganisation

The realisation that the person who's died is not returning really sinks in and as a result we begin to feel uncertain and aimless about the present and the future. It's common to push others away at this stage.

4 - Reorganisation & Recovery

Similar to Kübler-Ross' acceptance stage. We begin to come to terms with our loss. We still long for them but we begin to heal, to hope and to reconnect with others.

Creating a safe space

These activities are designed to be used by anyone working with or caring for a child so many of you reading this will have no training or background in using therapeutic activities. That's okay! There are a few things you can do to create a space that is safe and where a child feels seen and heard as you work through some of these ideas and perhaps some of your own.

Physical Environment

Try to choose somewhere calm, comforting and away from interruptions

Expectations

Talk about what the child can expect from you and what you'll expect from them in return. Most children need to hear that you will not judge them for what they do or say and that your care for them is unconditional. You might like to create some ground rules together.

These might give the child permission to cry and laugh and say whatever is on their mind. If your relationship with the child is different whilst in this space, or the ground rules are different to what they might expect at other times, be explicit about that. Try to remove any doubt, worry or uncertainty.

Creating a safe space

Confidentiality

Be clear about what you will share with others, if anything. Children understand that sometimes we need to pass information on, and often they are grateful to us for doing that so they don't have to keep re-telling their story. However, they need never to feel uncertain about who knows what or why, so be upfront about this and, where possible, agree together about the sharing for information with others.

Listen to understand

Your main job is to enable the child to feel truly seen and heard. This is a time when they should be your sole focus. Really hear what they have to say and think only about what they are saying, doing or thinking rather than always thinking ahead to your next response. Try to lose your fear of silence and give big feelings time and space to safely play out giving prompts to verbalise, mark make, play or otherwise enable expression as appropriate. Remember that even when a child seems quiet, there is often a lot of processing going on. Do not hurry to the next thing, give space for this thing. Be led by them..

Creating a safe space

Have a plan for distress

The child is likely to become distressed at some points during these sessions. Have a clear plan for how you will respond to this and at what point you might need to involve others.

Ready for learning / life

Try to keep a few minutes at the end of your time together to help the child to re-centre themselves and ready themselves for returning to regular life. Some light hearted activities or relaxation, breathing or grounded exercises can be helpful here. You might do the same thing every time; there is no need to mix it up if you've found something that works and there can be real comfort in familiarity

If you're working with a group, you'll need explicit ground rules ideally developed by the group which address issues of respect, listening and confidentiality..

When someone says...
...I feel

Sometimes people say the right thing, sometimes they get it wrong.

The challenging thing is that what's right for one person might be wrong for the next. This activity can help you and the child/children you're supporting to understand what's helpful for them.

The activity can also be a great way into beginning to discuss the feelings that accompany grief and loss and the challenges of carrying on with day to day life.

Cut out the prompts & get talking! There are some blank ones at the end so you can add your own.

HOW ARE YOU?

IT'S HARD FOR YOU RIGHT NOW

THEY'RE IN A BETTER PLACE

I KNOW
HOW YOU
FEEL

YOU MUST
REALLY
MISS THEM

THEY
WOULD BE
PROUD OF
YOU

YOU'RE SO BRAVE

(SOMETIMES PEOPLE SAY NOTHING...)

REMEMBER WHEN...

THEY'RE NOT IN PAIN ANYMORE

HOW CAN I HELP?

TELL ME ABOUT YOUR LOVED ONE...

Different ways of doing this activity

Take it in turns to read each card and comment on how these words or action make you feel

Rank the cards in order of 'most helpful' to 'least helpful' things people can say. Discuss.

Try to understand why someone is saying this. What do they want you to feel?

If there are things people say or do that feel unhelpful explore what would feel more helpful

Role play or demonstrate through play, people saying the different statements, then continue the story with what happens next / what feelings it evokes

All about my loved one

It’s important that we create a safe space where it’s possible to explore memories and talk about the person who’s died openly.

This activity can break down the taboos and also gives us a chance to learn a little bit about the person who’s died.

Listen and explore without judgement, allowing the child to share their memories and opinions before you share your own.

Different ways of doing this activity

The child completes the worksheet using words, pictures of a combination of the two

Use the questions as the basis for a verbal question and answer session

Flip it: explore what their loved one would write about them if posed the same questions

Consider these questions from the point of view of important others, what would a parent or sibling write?

In a group, have children complete the sheet then use it as the basis for introducing their loved one to the group

All about my loved one

Their name, our relationship, when and how they died

A funny memory

They loved

They disliked

I miss

I can remember them in this place / with these people

Grief Brainstorm

This activity aims to explore what grief looks like and feels like to each individual. There is no right and wrong way to grieve and starting with a blank sheet of paper gives a child the freedom to explore what grief looks like and feels like to them.

Try not to guide this activity too much as it's really about what the child's experience, not our own, but if they need prompting, you could use the suggestions on the following page

Brainstorm Prompts

What words do you associate with grief?

What colour is grief?

If you could draw grief, would it be big or small? How much paper would it take up?

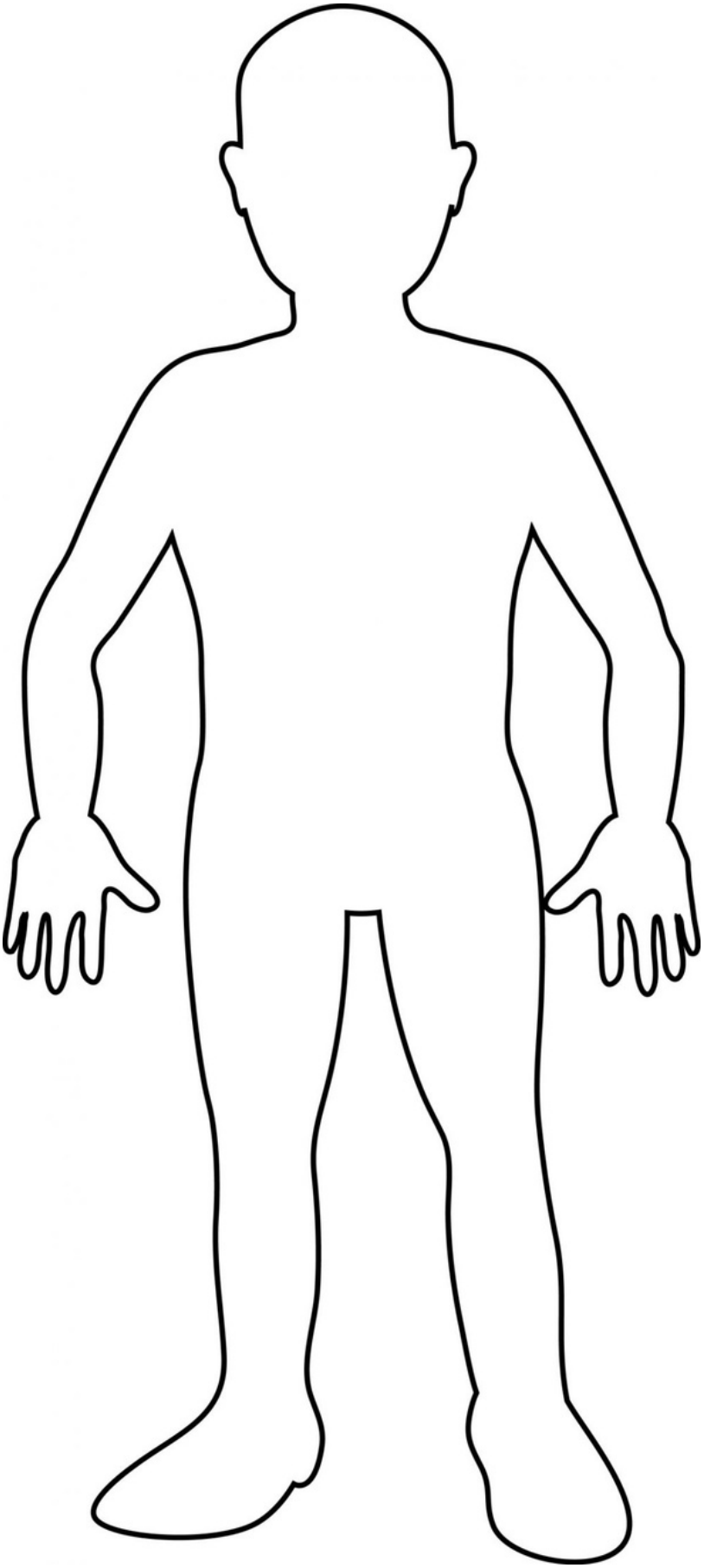
What's the opposite of grief?

What are things you think, feel or do differently now than before X died?

In the difficult moments, where in your body do you feel it? How does it feel?

GRIEF

How Grief Feels



Feelings I feel

All feelings are valid, but when someone dies, it’s easy to fall into a trap of believing we should only feel certain feelings.

This activity aims to explore a wide range of different feelings and validate them as well as exploring if there are any feelings we wish we could feel a bit more right now, or feelings that are taking up too much space in our lives.

I've included emjois and words - you can use either to prompt your discussions, or you can use other prompts like the 'feelings bears' or the Relax Kids feelings cards.

I like emojis because they are so open to interpretation but you should use whatever works best for you and the child.

Different ways of doing this activity

Work through each feeling in turn and explore when the child last felt this feeling and what prompted it

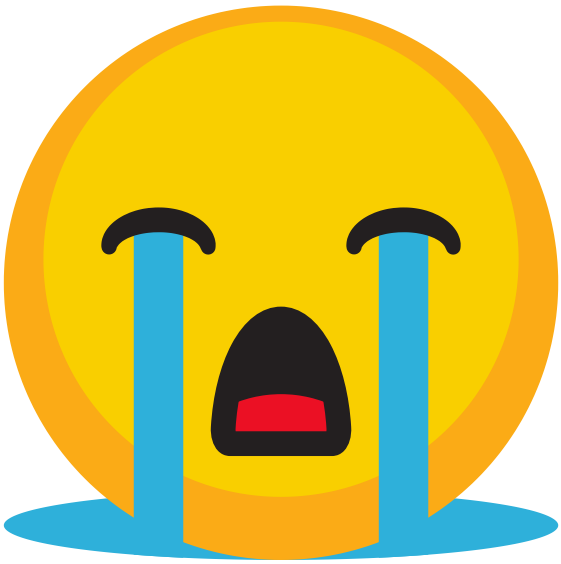
Pick a feeling and talk about different activities, situations and people who prompt that feeling

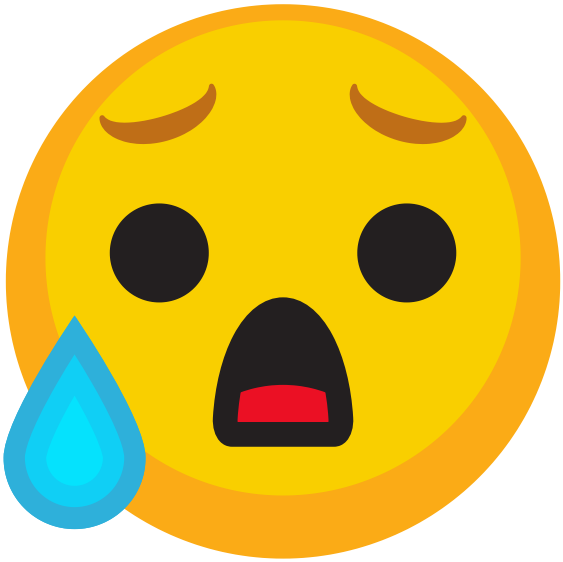
For difficult feelings, explore steps we can take when that feeling visits us.

Sort the feelings using prompts such as:

How I feel today
How I felt when..
I should feel
I wish I felt less
I wish I felt more
I'm not sure
I should feel

Explore happier feelings and any ambiguity associated with these. Consider ways to give the child permission to feel happy, excited and hopeful





happy

sad

upset

disgusted

embarrassed

shy

shocked

tired

smug

engraged

worried

surprised

ashamed

cautious

hopeful

scared

anxious

angry

ecstatic

bored

nervous

overwhelmed

silly

exhausted

frightened

cautious

jealous

surprised

depressed

mischievous

afraid

confused

hysterical

suspicious

guilty

afraid

relieved

confused

hysterical

suspicious

confident

disappointed

selfish

lonely

joyful

excited

Exploring through Poetry

Writing, reading and exploring poetry can be a powerful tool for talking and healing. Use the poem on the worksheet, or another of your choosing to explore the feelings associated with death and grief.

(Poem and activities taken from 'Using Poetry to Promote Talking and Healing'; Knightsmith, Jessica Kingsley Publishing, 2016)

Helping Hand

She was hurting
And broken,
Her life in a mess
When a hand
From the darkness
Reached out.

It took her hand gently
And held her a while
And gave her
A reason
To hope.

The hand soon retreated,
But its warmth still remained,
And gaver her
The strength
To try harder.

And so then each day,
She gave way to the strain
Then found strength
In this hand
And got up.

Questions + Extensions

What first came to mind when you read or heard this poem?

What is the poem about?

What or who do you think the hand represents?

Do we need to learn to manage without a helping hand?

Why does the hand come from darkness?

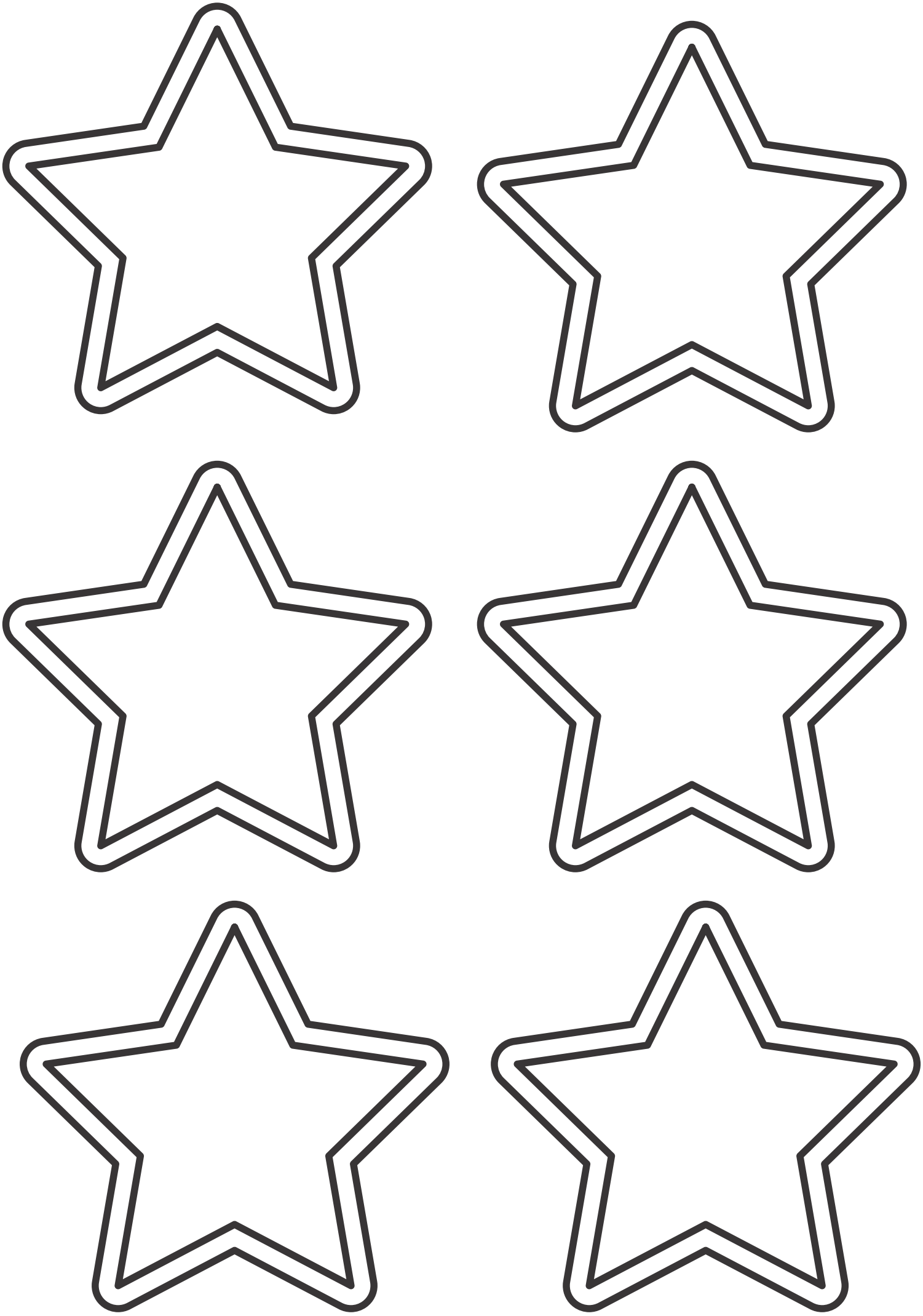
Memory Mobile

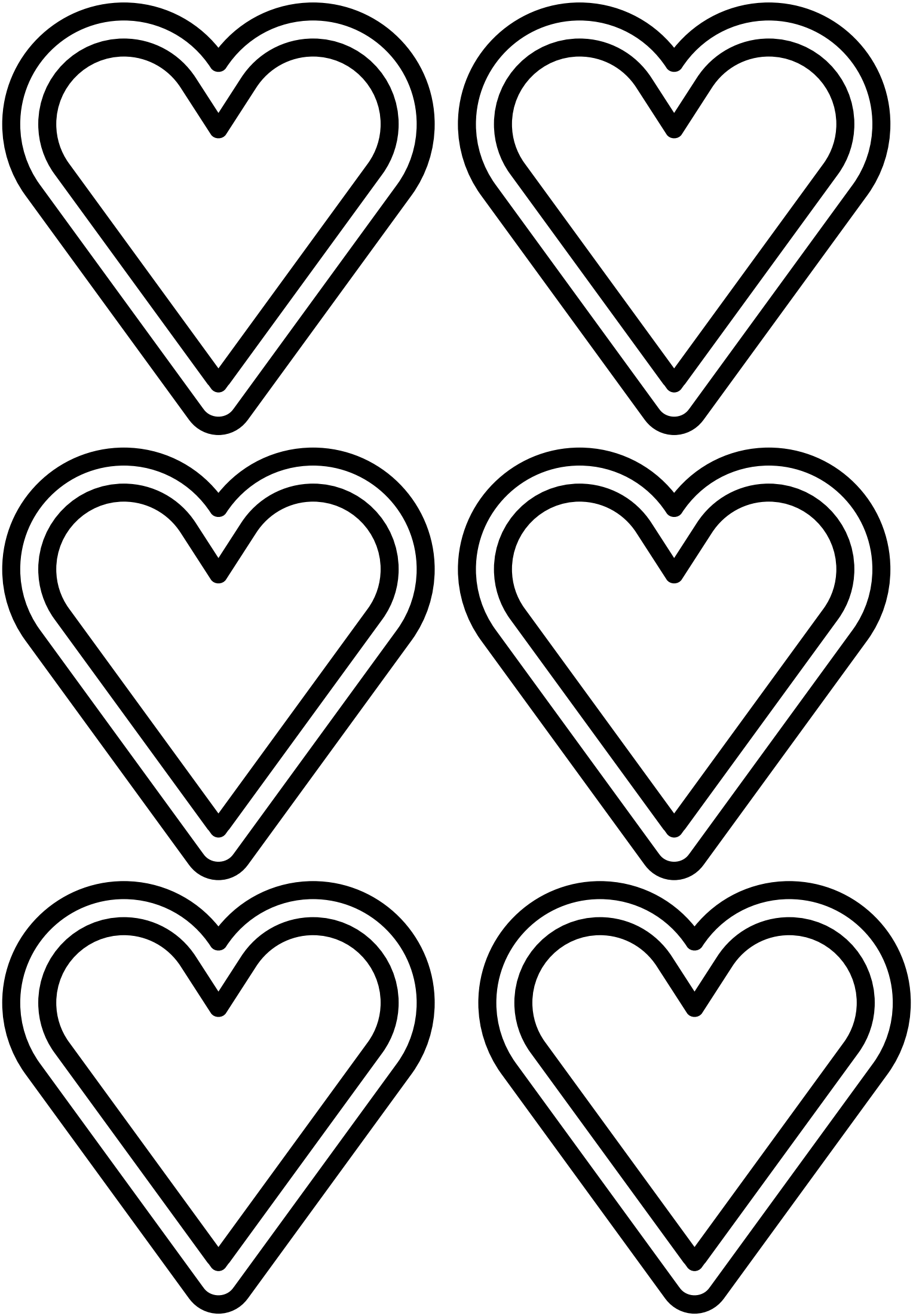
Exploring memories can evoke many different feelings and be the beginning of a wide range of different conversations.

At its simplest this activity is a listing and talking activity, but you can take it further by turning the memories into a mobile or keeping them in a memory jar or other special place.

This provides the child with something tangible they can use to revisit memories of the person who died.

For younger children it can be especially important to help them capture memories whilst they are still fresh because they will fade over time and this can





You can help me by...

This activity has the double benefit of helping us and the child get to grips with what is and isn't helpful for them and also providing us with something tangible we can pass onto teachers and other important adults in the child's life to give them a bit of a guide about how best to help.

This is tremendously useful as more often than not, people really want to help but are terrified of doing or saying the wrong thing.

How you can help _____

3 things you need to know about me

I might need your help sometimes because:

Please do:

Please don't:

Warning signs that I'm struggling

Things, people and places that help

Journalling

Journalling can be a really powerful tool for children and young people working through the process of grief. Some children are happy to just be given the freedom to write or draw whilst others will desire more structure. The journal prompts on the following pages may act as a springboard for a young person getting started with journaling.

If possible, it is nice for a young person to have a special place to journal. A really nice notepad and pen can go a long way here. Encourage them to be free in their journaling and to get their coloured pens out too. Journalling doesn't have to just be about the words. It can be about the colour you write them in or about the scribbles, doodles or works of art you create alongside them. Some children may want to go a step further still and scrapbook, keeping hold of small items that mean something to them and sticking them in their journal.

For some people, journaling is entirely private. If this is the case for a child you're supporting, please respect that, but if a child ever does choose to share their journal or a specific entry with you, take time to really hear them; it's a real privilege.

If you ever have a child who has a lot to say but who finds it hard to talk aloud, you may find they are more able to convey their thoughts, feelings and experiences by writing or drawing them in their journal either whilst in your company or outside of your meetings. In this case, you might set 'homework' to ask them to explore something specific in their journaling which can act as a springboard for your discussion the next time.

Journal Prompt

What does the phrase 'forever in our hearts' meant to you?

Forever in our hearts

Journal Prompt

Talk about something that looks worthless or meaningless to most people but which is very special to you

special?

It means nothing

Share a happy memory of time you spent with the loved one you've lost

Journal Prompt

Happy memory

Journal Prompt

Write about a time you laughed together

Ha Ha Ha!

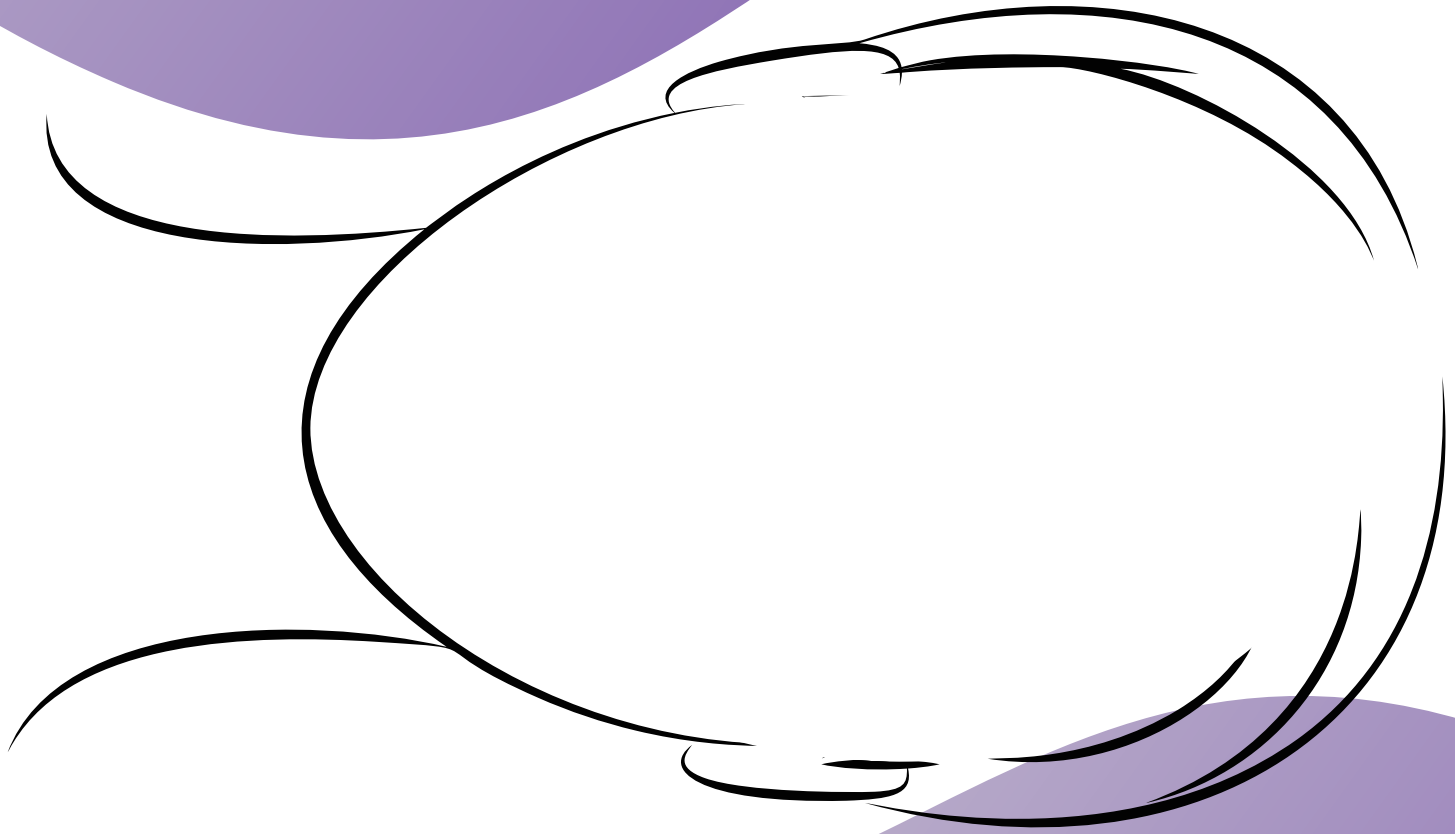
Journal Prompt

The day they died

Recall the day they died. Where were you?

Who were you with? How did you feel?

Journal Prompt

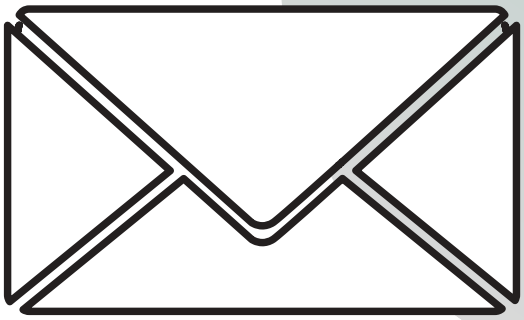


I feel...

Journal Prompt

Write a letter to your loved one. What are the things you wish you could have said?

Dear....

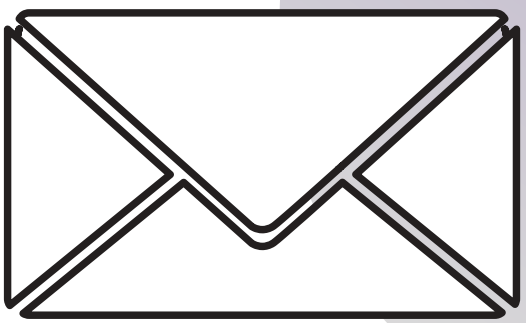


Journal Prompt

Writing to reach you

Write a letter to yourself from loved one.

What do you wish you could hear them say?



Journal Prompt

Today I'm really missing

Maybe it's a big thing, maybe it's a little thing. It matters, write or draw about it.

Missing You

Journal Prompt

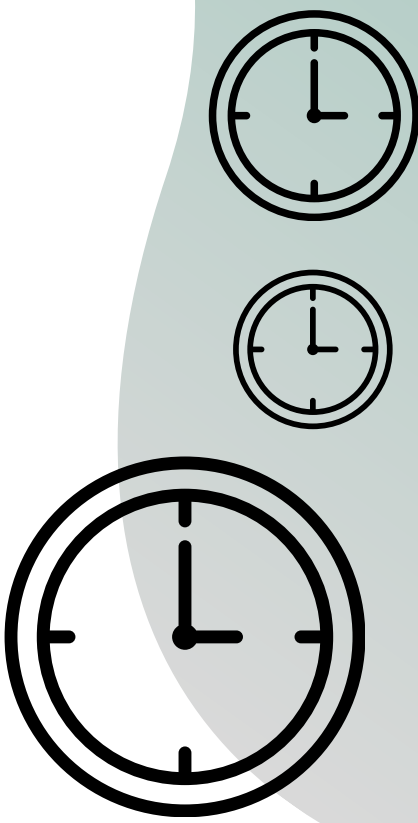
It's hard

I'm having a hard time with...

Journal Prompt

Hard times

The hardest time of day is...



Journal Prompt

Changing feelings

I'm ready to feel...

Journal Prompt

5 Things that help

1.

2.

3.

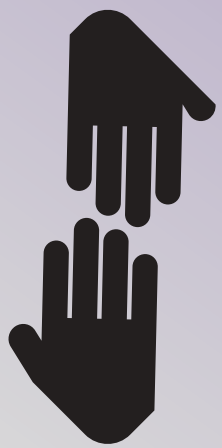
4.

5.

Journal Prompt

I feel most connected to my loved one when...

Connection



Colourful feelings

Journal Prompt

What colour do you think different feelings are?

Why?

happy

sad

excited

angry

jealous

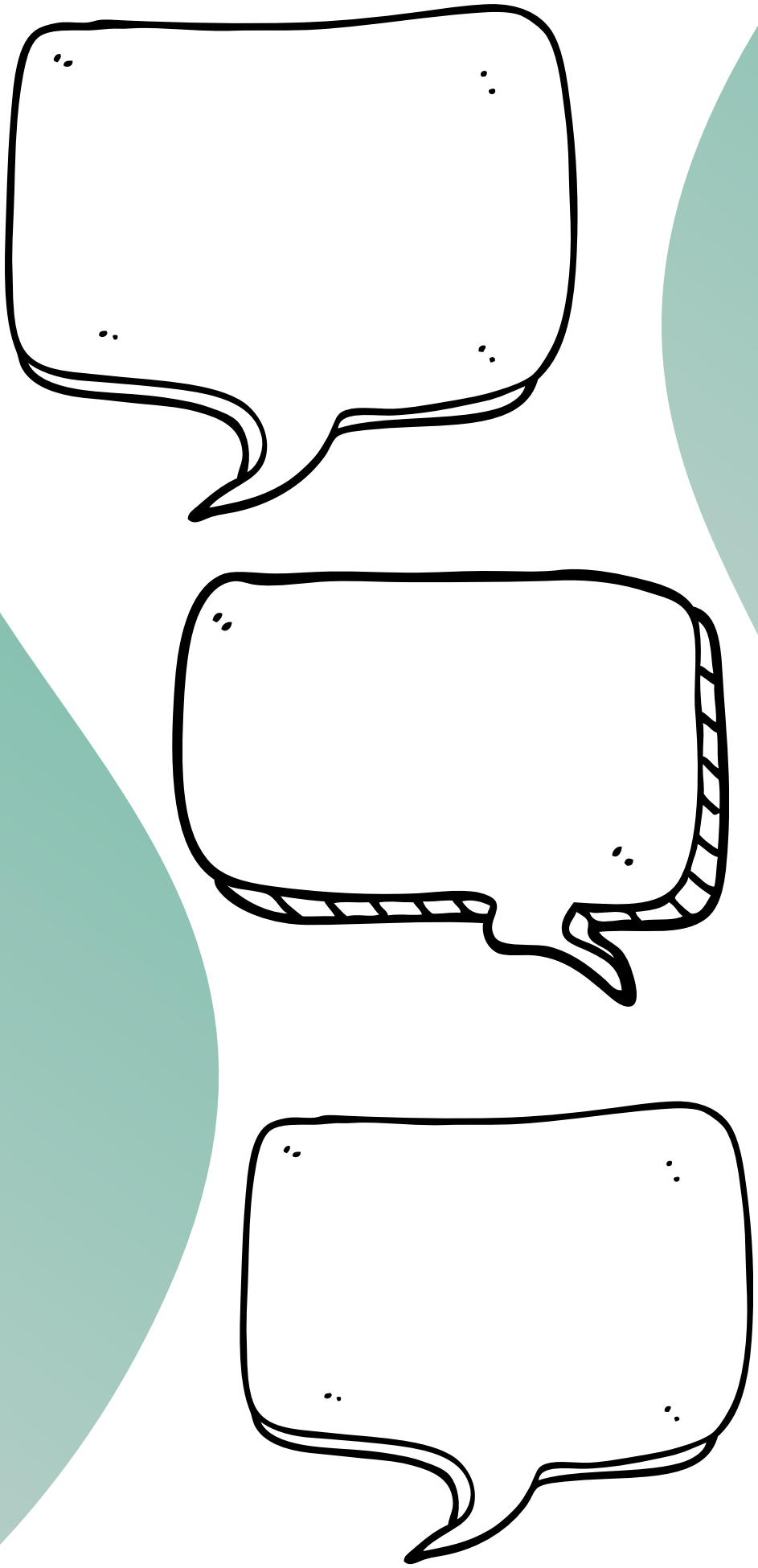
I always think of you when...

Little reminders

Journal Prompt

Time machine

If I could go back in time I'd tell you..



Journal Prompt

10 things I won't forget

Journal Prompt

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.
7.
8.
9.
10.

Journal Prompt

Looking ahead

I'm looking forward to...

Journal Prompt

5 ways I'll make you proud

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Journal Prompt

Things I loved about you

Journal Prompt

Looking ahead

Write a diary entry for exactly five year's time.

Happy Birthday?

As we come to terms with grief, it can become a little bit easier to manage each day, but some days will always be harder than others.

It can help to identify dates that will evoke stronger emotions, these might include birthdays, annviersaries and other important milestones.

Recognise that these days will be hard and plan together how the child can exercise self-care, feel the support of others and remember their loved one.

As with many things, these hard days will be far easier to manage with even a little forward planning.

Harder Days

Days that might be hard:

Things, people and places that might help on the hard days:

Hard Day Plan

Morning

Afternoon

Evening

People who need to know & how they can help:

Thank You!

Thank you for taking the time to engage with these ideas and for supporting a child through the process of grief. Please forgive yourself if you don't feel like you always know the perfect thing to say or do. Be inquisitive, kind and flexible in your approach and you will make a difference.

I'd love to hear how you found these activities and how you end up using them, changing them or adding to them. You can email me at pooky@creativeeducation.co.uk with your feedback, or tweet me @PookyH.

Finally, remember to look after yourself too. What you're doing to support a child really matters, but you matter too.

Thank you

Pooky x