

CIRCLE OF CARE

AN INTERACTIVE GUIDE OF ACTIVITIES AND INTERVENTIONS
FOR CAREGIVERS AND PROFESSIONALS SUPPORTING
CHILDREN AND FAMILIES GRIEVING A SUBSTANCE USE LOSS
AND DEATH

*Funding for this program is provided in whole or in part through the
Substance Use Prevention, Treatment, and Recovery Block Grant through the
American Rescue Plan Act.*



Thank You



The Illinois **Family Resource Center**

Sometimes change happens an hour at a time



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WHAT IS CIRCLE OF CARE?



The Circle of Care is a statewide initiative in Illinois dedicated to supporting children, teens, and families who have experienced grief and loss related to substance use disorders and substance-related deaths. Our program focuses on training, equipping, and empowering community helpers, professionals, and caregivers with the tools and knowledge they need to compassionately and confidently support grieving youth and teens. Through a trauma-informed and culturally responsive approach, we have created a comprehensive framework of grief support resources tailored to those working directed with these impacted children and families. Our resources include:

- **Grief Support Services Directory** – A statewide listing of current grief support programs and services available for children, teens, and families across Illinois.
- **Online Resource Toolkits** – Practical, user-friendly collections of activities, tools, and resources designed to support natural helpers and professionals in their work with grieving youth.
- **Threads of Hope Training** – A nine-hour training that equips helpers with effective, community-based strategies to address grief, substance use, and mental health, with a strong emphasis on reducing stigma and strengthening support networks.

To access these free and impactful resources, visit www.illinoisfamilyresources.org and select the Circle of Care tab!



WHY IS IT SIGNIFICANT TO TALK ABOUT GRIEF, ESPECIALLY WHEN IT'S CONNECTED TO SUBSTANCE AFFECTED FAMILIES?

Grief is an inevitable part of life, but when grief intersects with substance use and loss, it often becomes more complex—and more silenced. Families and children impacted by substance use-related death often carry not only the pain of the loss itself but also the weight of stigma, isolation, and confusion stemmed from living with substance misuse. In these situations, grief can become disenfranchised—unseen, unsupported, and unspoken.

This guide was created for caregivers, paraprofessionals, and professionals who support children and families navigating the layered grief of substance use loss. Whether sudden or long-term, overdose-related or associated with co-occurring issues like suicide, incarceration, or mental health challenges, these losses are real—and the children who experience them deserve intentional care.

When we create space to talk about grief openly—with honesty, without shame—we validate children's lived experiences and begin to dismantle the stigma that surrounds substance use. We also offer children and families the opportunity to feel seen, to express their emotions safely, and to begin healing in ways that honor the full story of their relationship with the person who was affected by substance misuse and/or died.

For more education on grief and substance affected families, please visit the website and review our FREE training modules: https://illinoisfamilyresources.org/?page=circleofcare_threads_of_hope



ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide is both a resource and a toolkit—a collection of grief-informed, trauma-informed, and recovery-oriented activities designed to support the unique needs of children and families impacted by substance use loss. Each activity includes:

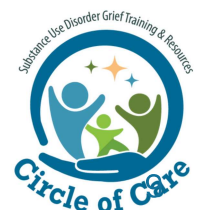
- **The Goal** - What the activity is designed to support (e.g., emotional expression, memory making, self-regulation, storytelling)
- **What it supports**
- **Materials**
- **Instructions to Get You Started**
- **Discussion Prompts** or Reflection Questions
- **Adaptations for Specific Settings** (e.g., home, school, community groups, clinical spaces)

Some activities are original to this guide, while others have been thoughtfully curated from leaders and contributors in the field of grief, trauma, and recovery. Every effort has been made to acknowledge and cite all known contributors. Deep gratitude goes to those who have shared their tools, language, and insights—your commitment to helping children and families heal is reflected in every page of this guide.

REMINDERS

Below are some helpful reminders to empower helpers and youth:

- **Activities are the starting point** - Consider the activities as the launch pad to the process. They are meant to provide various ways and modalities to introduce topics. However, it is the facilitators/persons rapport, communication, empathy, and presence with youth that truly matters.
- **Activities are dynamic** - The table of contents is here to help guide you in finding specific activities, but keep in mind that many of them overlap in the themes and areas they support. Feel free to adapt or modify the activities based on the needs of your group or individual child—there's no one right way to use them. Let the goals guide you, and trust your insight
- **Adjust to fit your setting** - Whether this guide is used with a caregiver, foster parent, or practitioner, each brings a unique setting, culture, and environment that is important to integrate. Adjust the prompts, materials, and questions that best fit the needs of your child & teen. PRO TIP: Have the supplies prepared and ready before you start!
- **Model when you can** - Participate alongside the child. Up to 80% of a child's emotional development is shaped by observational learning (Bandura, 1977).
- **Create your own discussion questions** - The prompts and discussion questions are to support communication, strengthen activity purpose, and foster connection. However, communication isn't a straight-line of questioning. Feel free to incorporate questions that fit your setting and comfort. A helpful suggestion is to use open-ended questions (*i.e. I wonder...., tell me more about, what was it like when...*)
- **Stay child-led** - This means allowing the youth to guide the activity. If their story or experience leads them to a differing need, follow them there.
- **Use what works. Leave the rest** - Each child brings a unique story that is a blend of experiences, predispositions, personality, development, culture, support, traditions, and beliefs. Adjusting activities based on these factors is a natural and important step. Ultimately, if an activity does not fit the needs of your child, simply skip it!



FEELINGS MASK

Goal: The goal of this activity is to help youth explore and express the difference between the feelings they show on the outside and the feelings they hold on the inside. By creating a "Feelings Mask," participants can begin to understand and name their emotional experiences, especially those connected to grief, loss, or other life change.

What it Supports: Develop emotional awareness, validating holding more than one emotion at a time, build connection and similarities in group setting or amongst family members.

Materials:

- Paper Mache Mask with string
- Markers
- Option: Use the paper mask handout attached

Instructions:

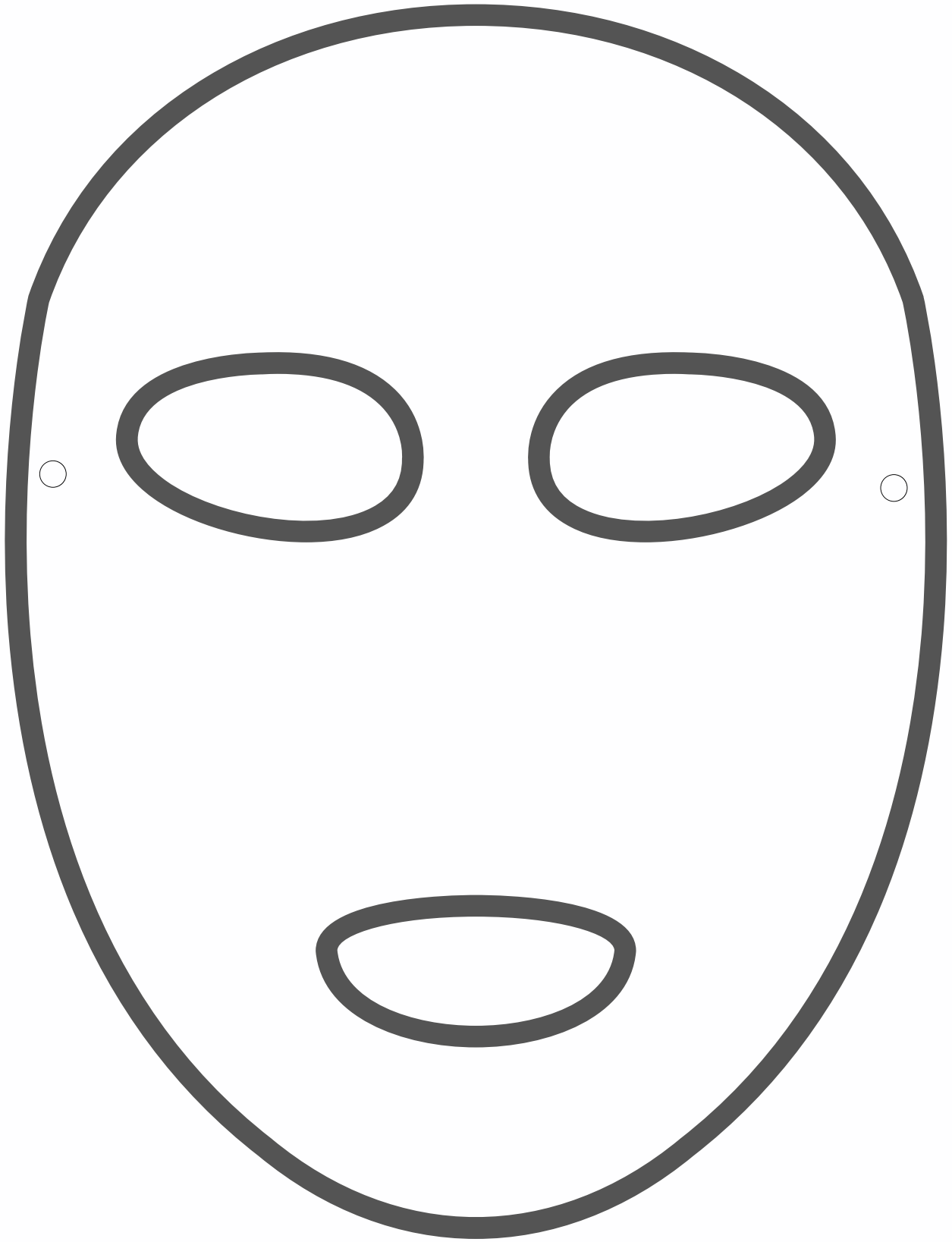
- 1.Explain to the group that sometimes we show or act one way on the outside, when we feel something completely different on the inside. This can be true when going through something difficult or challenging.
- 2.Ask of times they have felt that way. (i.e. first day of school smiling on the outside, but nervous on the inside, feeling left out, moving, or having to go to a party when missing their person).
- 3.Share that activity. On the outside of the mask, you'll draw or write the feelings people usually see. On the inside, you'll draw or write feelings you carry inside, but not always show or talk about.
- 4.Provide time to create.
- 5.Invite youth to share if they want.

Discussion:

- *Was it easy or hard to name your inside feelings?*
- *What did you notice when you saw others' masks?*
- *Why might it be important to share what we're really feeling?*
- *What are some ways you can take off the feelings on the inside?*

Adaptations: If resources and materials are not available, print the paper mask in this guide.

Acknowledgements: This is a commonly used activity that has various adaptations for grief support, social emotional learning, and art therapy.



FEELINGS IN THE WILD

Goal: The goal of the Feelings Scavenger Hunt is to help youth build emotional awareness, expression, and connection through interactive play. As they search for different emotions, youth engage with prompts that invite them to reflect, share, or act out a feeling.

What it Supports: build emotional literacy and awareness, reflect experience and feelings, body movement, normalize all feelings.

Materials:

- Copy of handouts
- Ample space to place handouts
- Pen/pencil

Instructions:

1. Determine if this activity is going to be done outside or inside and the designated space that is safe for the youth or group.
2. Place each hand-out in a different spot that will provide space for the youth to wander and search. Based on age, younger children will benefit from the handouts being more visible, while older children or teens might enjoy more challenging locations.
3. When the group starts share that they are going to search for the feelings in the wild, once they find the feeling, they have to answer one of the prompts (Based on the group you can have them all answer, or just one. Be flexible).
4. Check the feeling off as “found” in the checklist and continue searching until all feelings in the wild are found.

Discussion:

- The prompts lead the discussion. Reflect what you heard and ask the group/family (if any) if they might have a similar story or different one.
- Ask the group (when appropriate) if the feeling found and prompt answered might have another feeling as well. Normalize, that is okay!

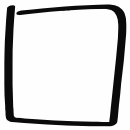
Adaptations:

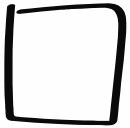
- For younger children who are still learning how to build and feel their learning vocabulary, consider using the basic feelings that can help build literacy (i.e. sad, mad, excited, lonely, confused, etc). Replace the prompts that ask for story telling with basic actions. (example: “What does excited look like in your body? When did you feel it?”).
- Want to expand language for older youth? Create your own to include frustration, guilty, etc.
- Print each one on different color paper to differentiate feelings further.

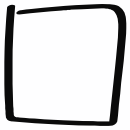
Feelings in the Wild

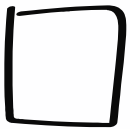
Checklist

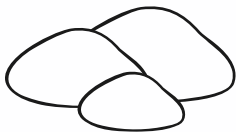
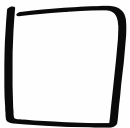
What feeling did you find?

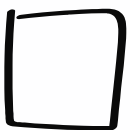


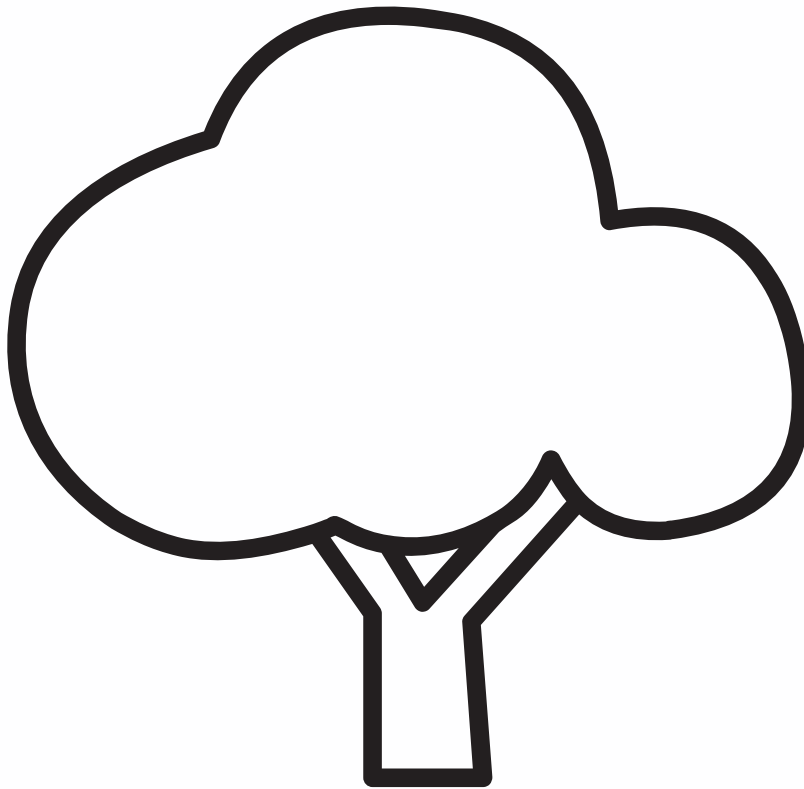










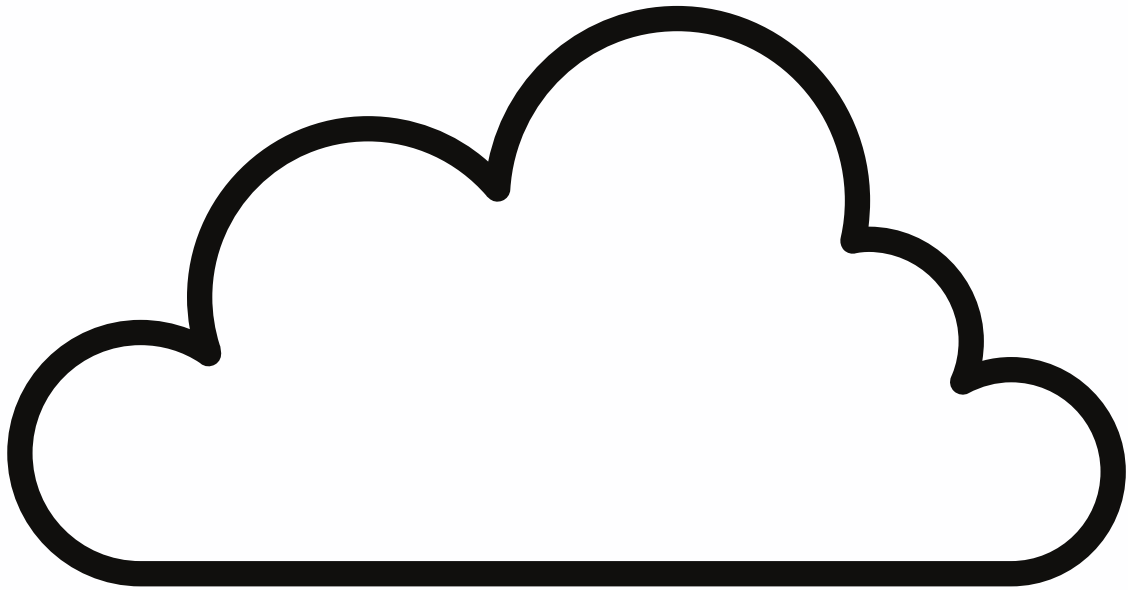


HAPPY

Share a time you felt really happy. What was happening and who were you with?

If your happiness could be a shape, sound, or a color, what would it be and why?

What is something small that makes you happy, even if your day starts out a little rough?

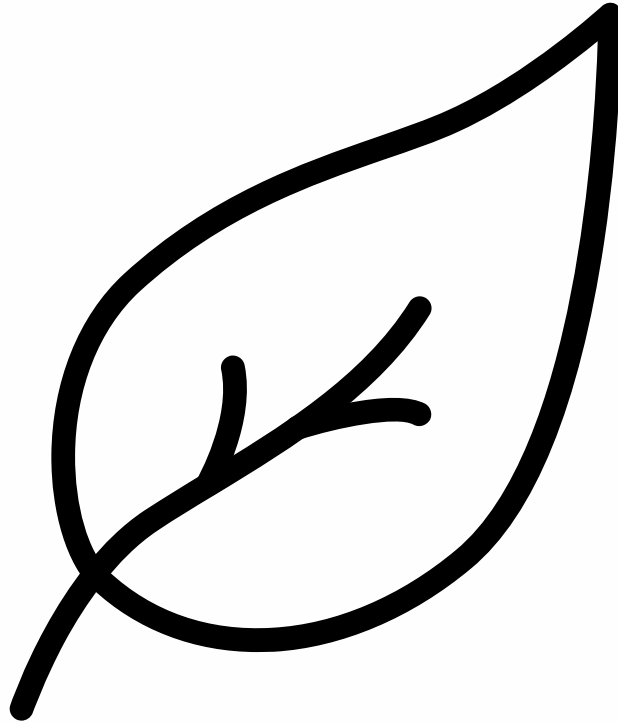


SAD

Can you remember a time you felt sad? What made you feel that way and did anything or anyone help?

Has there ever been a time you felt sad, but could not show or share the feeling? What was that like?

**If sadness had a weather, what would it look like?
What does it sound like?**

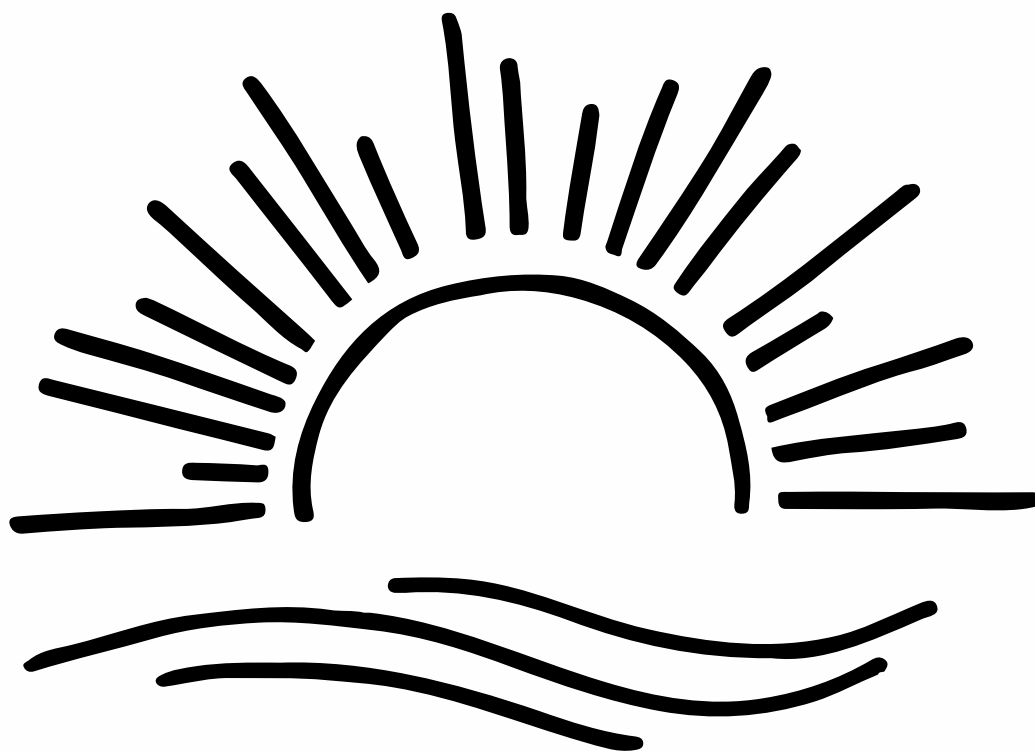


LONELY

Sometimes we feel lonely when someone we love isn't around anymore. Can you think of a time you missed your person and felt kind of lonely?

Who helps you feel less lonely? What do they do that helps?

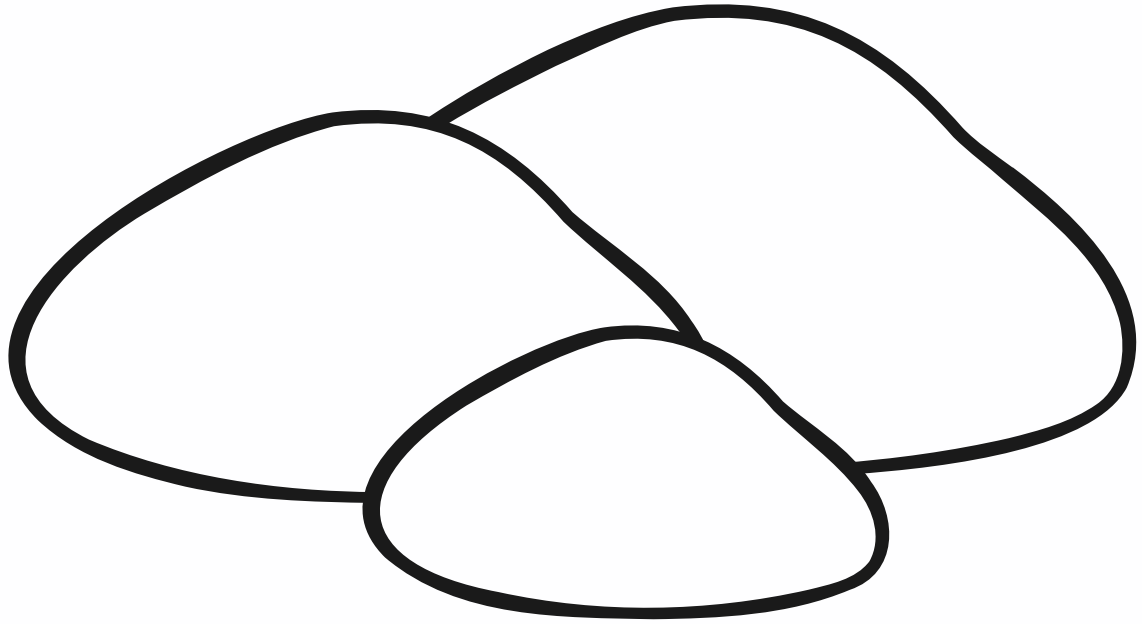
If lonely had a shape or sound, what would it be and where would you feel it in your body?



EXCITED

What is something coming up (big or small) that you are looking forward to? Is there anyone you want or wish you could include in the moment?

Sometimes excited comes with another feeling, like nervous, scared, or happy. Can you share a time where you felt this feeling?



CONFUSION

Sometimes things happen that are really confusing or people might not explain things that have happened.

Can you think of a time you felt confused?

Even adults get confused! Everyone share one question they have.

Sometimes our brains feel like a big question mark.

Can you draw or show me what a 'confused' brain looks like?



MAD

Have you ever felt like your body was a volcano, ready to explode? What happened that made you feel that way?

Can you think of a time you felt mad about something that changed in your life?

Has there been a time when your anger surprised you or felt hard to talk about? What was that like?



LOVED

Can you remember a time when someone made you feel loved? What were they saying or doing?

What is something that helps you remember and feel loved by people who are not around anymore?

What are ways that you show love to others? How about ways that you show love to yourself?

HEART MANDALA

Goal: This activity can support emotional expression and processing through a calming, creative art activity. Children will build a heart-shaped mandala using torn pieces of colored paper, with each color representing different feelings. The heart becomes a visual reflection of their complex grief, challenges, and moments of hope.

What it Supports: Emotional literacy and awareness, creative expression, self regulation, dual awareness (positive and negative experiences), narrative identity.

Materials:

- Heart-shape handout
- Construction paper in variety of colors
- Glue stick
- Markers/crayons
- Optional: Feelings chart

Instructions:

- Start by introducing how our heart and bodies can hold many feelings at once (i.e. happy, sad, angry, hopeful, confused). Normalize that all of these feelings are okay.
- Take a moment to discuss what different colors might represent. Ask the group to share what their color is for some feelings. Let them know there is no wrong answer. Blue might be sad for one child and calm for another.
- Invite child to tear pieces on construction paper to match what they are feeling and how much of it they feel. Have them experiment with tearing the paper slowly (mindfully), and quickly (cathartic release).
- Have them glue the pieces into the heart in any arrangement they like. They can add symbols, drawings, or a legend to elaborate.
- Invite child to share artwork if they choose.

Discussion:

- Before making the heart mandala
 - *Did you know our hearts can feel many things at one? I wonder if there is something you have felt lately that feels big?*
 - *If you could choose a color for a feeling today, what would it be?*
- After making the heart mandala
 - *What colors did you choose? What do they mean to you?*
 - *Were there parts of the heart that were easy to fill? How about hard to fill?*
 - *What is something you want others to know about your feelings or your heart mandala?*
 - *I wonder if there is somewhere you can put this to share with others?*

Adaptations:

- For children who need alternatives to verbal processing, this can be done as a routine check-in with the child. Have multiple hearts printed and ready. If a child wants to share their feelings without needing a facilitated activity, consider leaving construction paper, and hearts in a common area of their room so they can create as needed.
- Do you have a tech-savvy and creative child? Invite them to use a digital program to create their heart!
- Invite older children to write poems words or stories in their heart.
- If resources are available, create a sensory experience by including different textures, fabrics, and materials

Acknowledgements & Citations: This activity has circulated as a grief support intervention and social emotional learning for many years taking on several adaptations based on group needs.

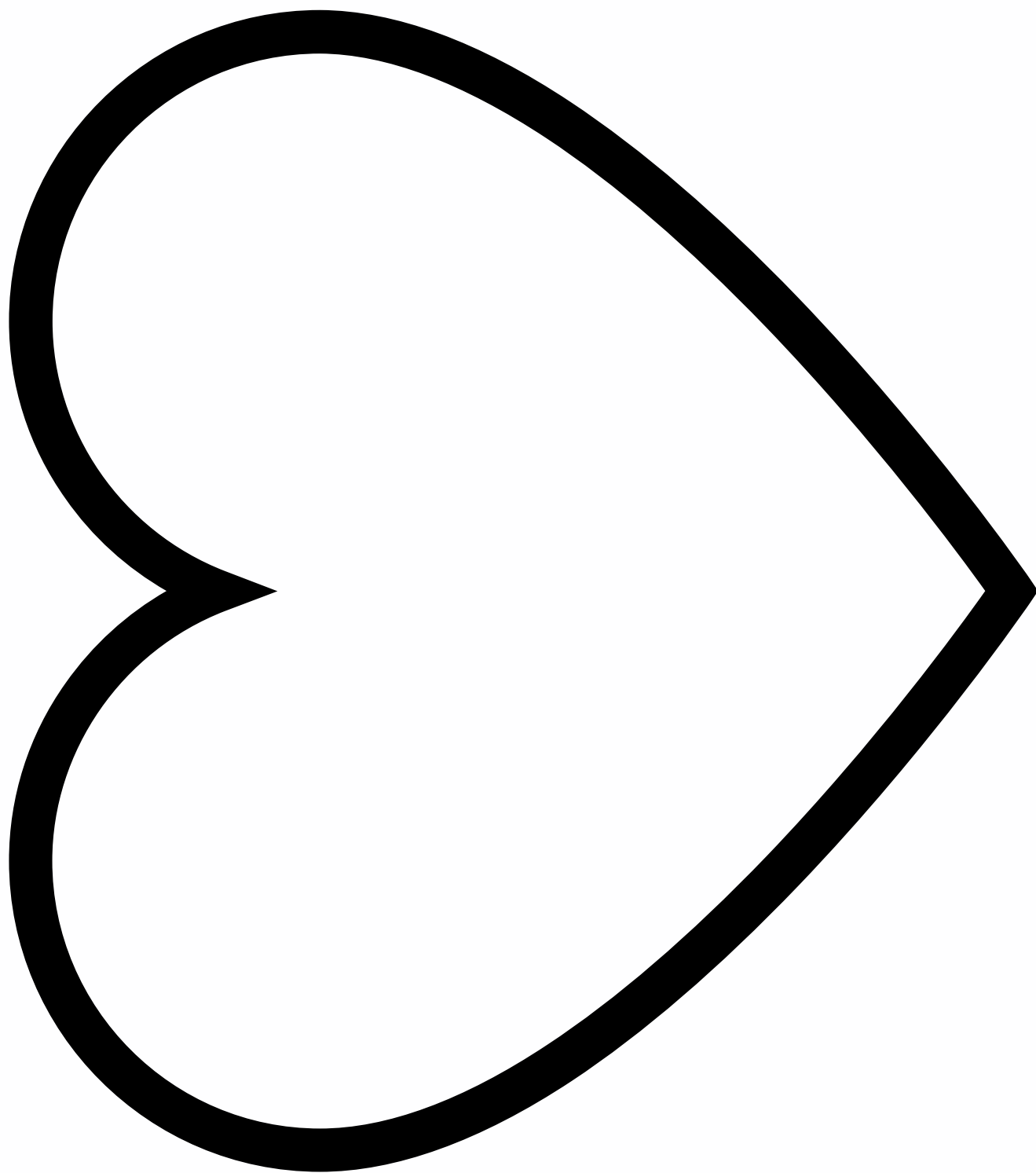


PLATE BREAKING

Goal: To provide a safe, physical, and symbolic release of strong emotions—such as anger, grief, fear, or frustration—through creative expression and controlled destruction. This activity helps individuals externalize internal emotional tension and create space for healing and reflection.

What it Supports: emotional regulation, somatic processing, symbolic expression, agency, grief release.

Materials:

- Ceramic plates
- Colored permanent markers
- Safety goggles
- Gloves
- A tarp or sheet to catch debris
- Safe and clear wall or ground for breaking plates

Instructions:

- In preparation, create a safe space. Lay out the tarp and safety materials. Ensure there is a physical boundary around the breaking area. Review ground rules for safety.
- Begin group by setting the intention. Ask youth to reflect on feelings or experiences they want to release (e.g., anger, loss, fear, shame, guilt, sadness).
- Using Sharpies, invite them to write words, names, phrases, or draw symbols that represent those feelings or experiences on their ceramic plate.
- Acknowledge and encourage them to take a moment to hold the plate, notice the weight, and consider what it means to let this go. Before you break the plates, share that feeling, excited, angry, or crying is a normal reaction.
- One at a time, allow youth to throw their plate against the designated wall or ground with the intention of releasing what's written.
- Pause and Reflect: After each person breaks their plate, offer a moment of silence or slow breathing before continuing.

Discussion:

- Before plate breaking.
 - *What are some feelings or experiences you wish you could let go of or express out loud?*
 - *What might it feel like to release something without having to explain or fix it?*
 - *I wonder if there is anything on your plate that feels challenging to release? What about something that feels easy?*
- After plate breaking.
 - *What did you notice in your body before and after breaking your plate? Where did you feel it in your body?*
 - *What are some feelings that came up after?*
 - *I wonder if anything felt surprising as you released?*
 - *I wonder if there is anything you want to carry still and what can stay broken on the plate?*

Adaptations:

- For options that do not include breaking something, consider writing how they feel on a piece of paper or a paper plate. Afterwards, allow youth to tear it up, crumble, or cut up the paper. Alternatively, you can have children mold out of clay what they want to release and smash the clay with their hands.
- Additional sensory needs might consider ear protection.

Facilitator Tip: Due to the release, this activity can bring up unexpected emotions. Be present, attuned and allow for quiet or emotional moments without needing to fix.

HOLDING BOTH FEELINGS

Goal: Children and families that have been impacted by stigmatized loss can experience a range of emotions. For example, a child might share that they are not sure if they can grieve their person and still be allowed to feel happy; or that they miss their person and feel safe with them not in the home. This activity is to help children and families normalize experiencing two thoughts or feelings that don't feel like they go together.

What it Supports: Dialectal thinking, promotes flexible mindset.

Materials:

- Copy of handout
- Or...If available: My Colors, My Circle – Kid's Coloring Book
- Markers/crayons/colored pencils

Instructions:

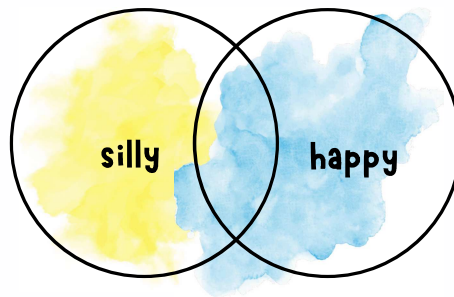
- Start off by having kids name different feelings. For elementary they might enjoy saying each one in a way that shares the feeling (i.e. excited and they start jumping, angry and their brows furl... let them choose).
- Take a moment to acknowledge that all feelings are okay even the ones that feel heavy.
- Share if anyone has ever had more than one feeling. Start with easy examples, like silly and happy, or mad and sad.
- Share how sometimes we can even hold two feelings that feel like they don't go together, like worried and safe (i.e. I am worried about my person getting sick and hurt, but I feel safe with my grandparents).
- Create some discussion around other feelings that feel difficult to have at the same time. Take 3-5 minutes to hold discussion and assess understanding. Normalize that this is okay to hold two feelings that feel opposite.
- Using the handout have them color in two feelings and connect to a time they might have experienced that. Allow time to create their feelings.
- Invite the child to share if they are comfortable.

Discussion:

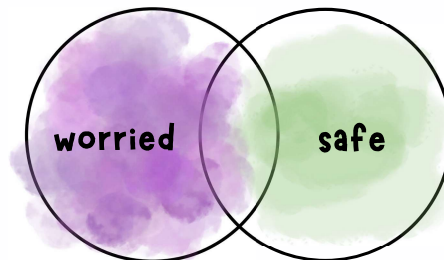
- *I wonder if anyone has felt more than one feeling at once? What did that look like? If in a group setting, take time to draw connections and validate differences.*
- *What feelings go together really well? When are times we might feel those feelings?*
- *When was a time you felt two feelings didn't feel like they go together?*
- *Feeling two feelings that don't go together is actually normal, even when they feel hard. What are some things that help you when you experience that?*

Adaptations:

- Try taking chalk to a sidewalk and create the circles from the handout. Have the child stand in one circle and act the feeling out. Have them stand in the other circle and share the feeling again. Invite them to stand in the middle where the circles overlap and show what that looks or feels like.
- Don't forget to model and share if appropriate.

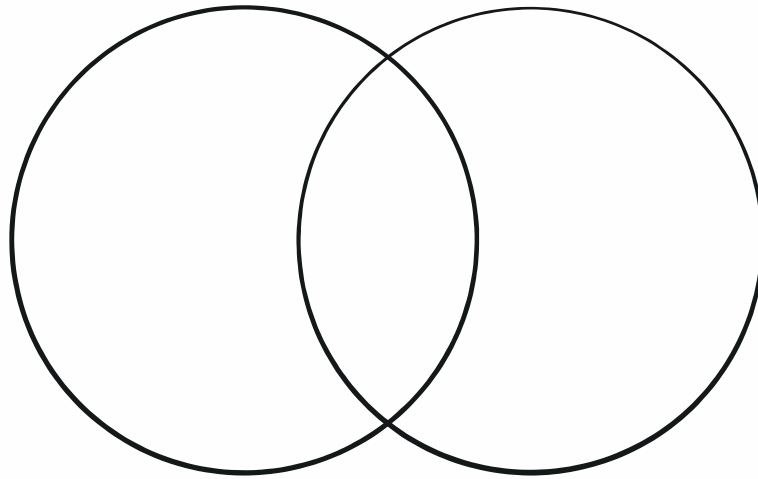


I feel silly and happy
when my cousins come play and we make up dances

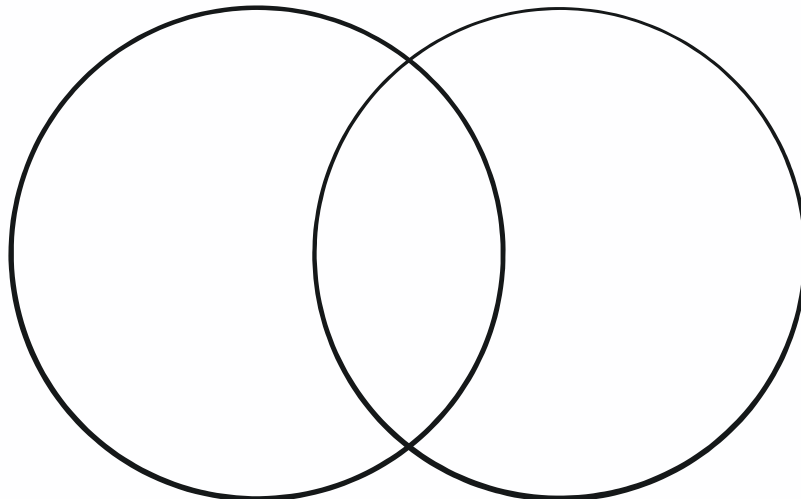


I feel worried and safe
when my mom leaves on a trip and I am at home.

Use the circles to show two feelings you've had about your person
or other things that are happening right now.



I feel _____ and _____
when _____



I feel _____ and _____
when _____

GRIEF IN MY BODY

Goal: This activity brings awareness to the different ways grief impacts the whole self, including our body. This provides education and self-awareness to the body's response to grief. This also helps normalize the responses and dismantles the perception that grief is only attached to feelings.

What it Supports: Somatic responses to grief, normalize body reactions, develops opportunities for healthy coping as it relates to the body.

Materials:

- Copy of Handout
- Markers/pens/crayons/colored pencils/stickers

Instructions:

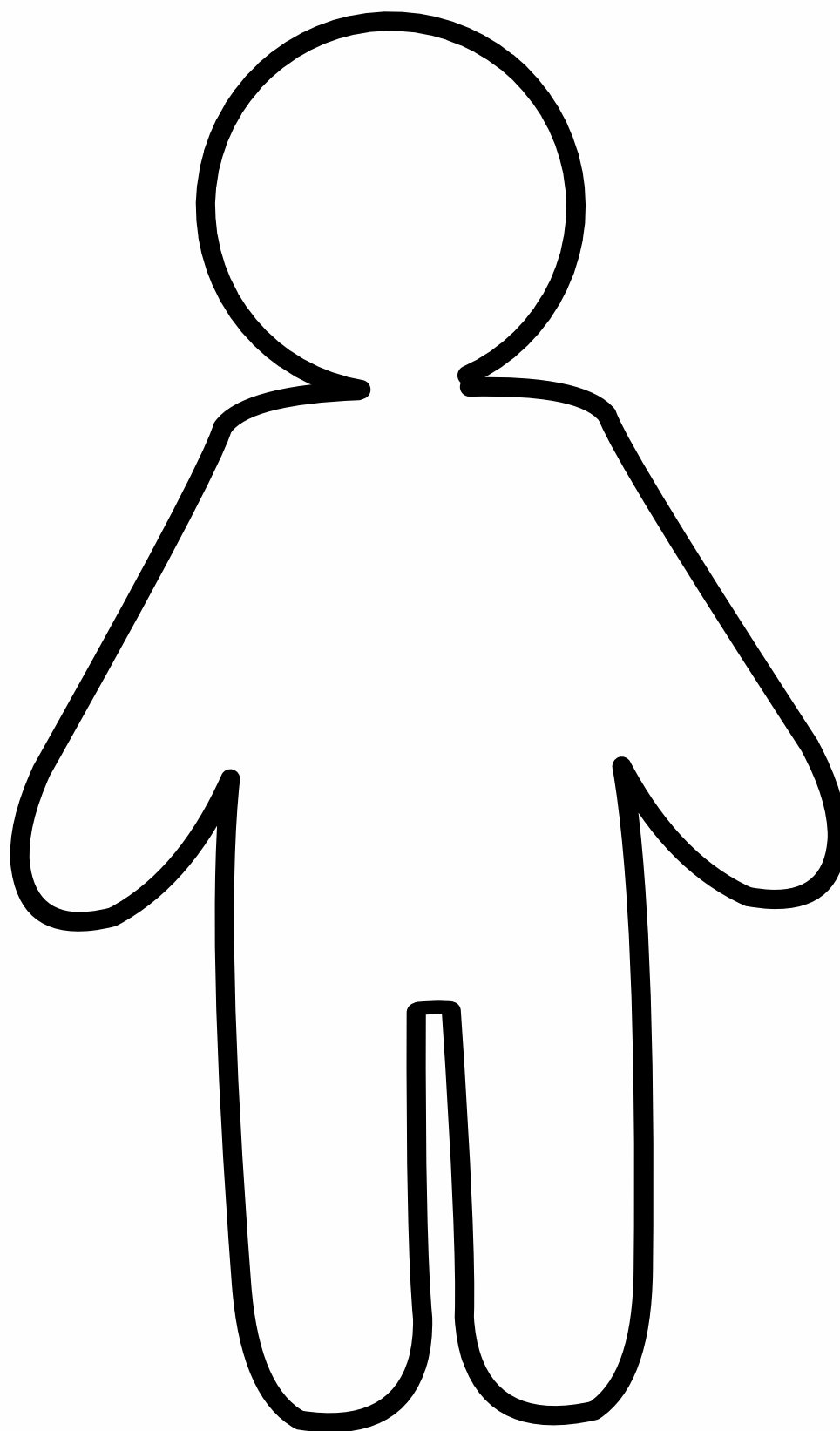
1. Talk about how grief and our feelings can also show up in our body. Use the example of how sometimes our stomach hurts when we are nervous, or we've had a headache when we've been worrying.
2. Share that grief can show up in our bodies.
3. On the handout allow kids to draw where they feel their grief in their body when it shows up.
4. Have a discussion to share all the different ways it can appear.

Discussion:

- *Can you think of a time when you were really sad, mad, or worried—and felt it somewhere in your body?*
- *Grief is more than just feelings—it can show up physically too. What are some ways your body might feel grief?*
- *(Examples to offer if needed: tight chest, tired body, headaches, upset stomach, racing heart, not wanting to eat)*
- *If your body could talk when you're feeling grief, what do you think it would say?*
- *Why do you think it's important to notice where we feel things in our body?*
- *Is there anything that helps when grief shows up in your body?*

Adaptations: Feeling creative? Find some butcher paper and have children outline their actual body. Use paint and art supplies to create their picture.

Acknowledgements & Citations: This activity was created by Dr. Melissa Lunardini, Radical Grief.



MEMORY BOX

Goal: This activity is something that can be done together or youth can create their own special memory box. This memory box is a way to honor their person who died. Youth decorate the outside and inside of the box with symbols, colors, and anything that reminds them of their person. Afterwards, they can fill the box with keepsake items, letters, pictures, and other special items.

What it Supports: Enduring meaningful connection with deceased, preserving memories, grief does not have a timeline, and meaning making

Materials:

- Prep: This creative activity can make a creative mess. Cover tables with disposable sheets or opt to do this activity outside.
- A box of any kind. Wooden boxes, cardboard, or even a shoebox. The materials you want to decorate with will determine the sturdiness needed for the box.
- Paint and paint brushes
- Markers/Pen/Pencils
- Any special items, glitter, stickers, that youth feel inclined to use

Instructions:

1. Share that sometimes when we miss our person, we might look for special items, songs, or our person's favorite items to feel connected to them. Have youth share what some of those items might be.
2. Sometimes it can be as small as their favorite color, a favorite sports team, or something they use to say all the time.
3. Share that they can decorate their box in a way that honors their person and/or their grief.
4. Allow time for them to create.
5. Allow time for youth to share their memory box.
6. Share that they can continue to create their box as their feelings and thoughts are ongoing as well.

Discussion:

- *I wonder if there are any items that you would like to put in the box?*
- *Where do you think you might put this memory box?*
- *Are there special times you think this box will support you?*
- *Is this a box that will be for you or are there people you would want to share it with?*

Adaptations:

- This activity can be done over time to add special items as desired. It creates moments to acknowledge and normalize how youth's grief and stories can change over time while staying connected to their person.
- Loss related to substance use can create lots of questions, lack of positive memories, and other uncertainty. This box can be used as a form of communication. Place the box in a common place. Have pieces of paper and something to write with nearby. If the youth have questions about their person or needs extra support, they can write it on the piece of paper and put it in the box. Agree on a time to check daily or weekly the box to see if there are new notes and take time to sit together and share.
- If the person is still alive, this still can be adapted as a memory box dedicated to someone who is alive, but is not present.

Acknowledgements & Citations: This activity has been a favorite amongst youth. It has been used in grief organizations and camps across the globe.



Examples of various boxes to turn into a memory box. A shoe box, photo boxes, or cardboard boxes.

MY GRIEF MAP

Goal: Grief is not a linear process, meaning there is not a timeline. The belief that there is an ending can make children and families question when they will be “over it” or when grief ends. This activity is a creative way to show how grief, like a map, can look at lot of different ways, high points, and low points. Children can create their own map to show the landscape of their experience.

What it Supports: Grief is an ongoing process, validation of range of emotions and expression, nonlinear, dual process model of bereavement

Materials:

- Large piece of paper
- Various art supplies: markers/pens/watercolors/colored pencils
- Optional: Stickers and glitter

Instructions:

1. Start by asking what maps are used for. Take 3-5 minutes to create a discussion around the different features and elements you can find on a map.
2. Share how grief can look a lot of different ways. It has highs and lows and everyone’s map (much like around the globe) looks different.
3. Share that they will get to create their own “Grief Map” they can use all the different terrains and areas to describe different feelings and areas in their grief. Some places might be emotions, thoughts, changes in friendships, or the things that support them (like people, special items, or places).
4. Allow for time to create their activity
5. Invite the child to share and if done in a group setting create connections to other peers

Discussion:

- *What are some areas on a map that could represent a different feeling or part of your story?*
- *Are there places on your map that you spend a lot of time in?*
- *I wonder if there are areas on your map that you wish you didn’t have? Areas you want to have?*
- *What helps you when you are in certain parts of your Grief Map?*

Adaptations: for teens this can be a simple discussion

SPECIAL DATES

Goal: Grief is ongoing. Throughout the year there might be dates where grief can come in waves. Many people think about the holidays due to the heavy gatherings and rituals. It can also look like birthdays, the day the person died, anniversaries, or even Father's/Mother's Day. This activity is to help create activities that acknowledge those dates, opportunities to create or reinforce rituals, and honor needs in those times.

What it Supports: rituals, traditions, enduring connection to deceased, storytelling

Materials:

- Copy of Handout
- Pen/Pencil

Instructions:

1. Open the activity with talking about special dates that people might celebrate (birthdays, holidays, new years, etc). Reflect with the group if their grief feels heavier or more present around these holidays or others.
2. Have a small discussion around what those days might be.
3. On their handout, have them write all the dates that are special to them, where they think of their person, or special events. Use the prompt to create space to validate feelings.
4. As a family or individually, talk about ways you can honor the grief of the person who died. Some of these can be done individually or as a group. Find space to honor all of the unique needs.

Discussion:

- *Are there any traditions, routines, or things you do that remind you of them or make you feel connected to them?*
- *Have you ever done something special on their birthday or another meaningful date? What was that like for you?*
- *If you could create a new tradition or ritual to remember them, what would it be? Who would you want to be part of it?*
- *What do you think is important (or not important) to keep remembering someone who has died?*

Adaptations:

- Buy a family planner - create a place where the dates can be shared and days can be planned. It can even include days where people might know they need a "Grief Day", that might look like meaningful time alone or extra support.
- Add it to your phone calendar - create annual reminders to help check-in with youth

Special days

What are some special days that remind you of your person?

DATE

FEELINGS

THINGS YOU CAN DO...

JAN

FEB

MAR

APRIL

MAY

JUNE

JULY

AUG

SEPT

OCT

NOV

DEC



SHOULD'VE COULD'VE WOULD'VE

Goal: To provide a reflective and expressive space for individuals to name the "shoulds," "coulds," and "woulds" they may be holding after a loss. This activity helps externalize internal guilt, shame, or regret and invites a compassionate reframe, supporting emotional release and opportunities for self-compassion.

What it Supports: Self-compassion, cognitive processing, grief integration, emotional awareness, agency

Materials:

- Copy of handout
- Pen/pencils/markers

Instructions:

- 1.Explain that grief comes with thoughts that sound like, "I should've called more" or "I could've stopped it from happening." These thoughts, even when challenging, are normal and they are not alone in feeling them.
- 2.Invite youth to write down one or more words in each area that completes the sentences around what they should, could, and would have done or wanted.
- 3.Take a moment to notice the room and assess for needs.
- 4.Invite youth to share if they want and draw connections if possible.
- 5.If appropriate, have youth tear up the paper in a safe place if it is something they are still processing. Allow them to choose. Remember, there is nothing to fix or rescue.

Discussion:

- *I wonder if anyone has ever felt the "should've, could've, would've's"?*
What did that look like?
- *Do you think others feel that way when someone they love dies?*
- *Are there things you know that cannot be your fault or could have changed, but you still wish you could?*

Should've

Could've

Would've

MY GRIEF IN 7 WORDS

POEM

Goal: To support youth in expressing a part of their grief story, feeling, or experience using only seven words. This creative constraint encourages clarity, emotional reflection, and meaning-making while using metaphor, memory, and personal voice. Youth and family find opportunities to sort through language to identify words that are salient to their experience.

What it Supports: Narrative expression, meaning-making in grief, agency in creative expression and coping

Materials:

- Magnet words
- Metal tray (if available)

Instructions:

1. Spread the magnet tiles all over a table. If it helps spread them where youth might walk around in order to choose.
2. Explain that it is an activity to help them tell their story or talk about their grief out of the magnet word tiles on the table.
3. Share that there is no right or wrong way to do this and they can make phrases, sentences, or have words that represent their grief - past, present, or even hope for the future.
4. After giving youth time to search and create their 7-word poem, invite them to share if they feel comfortable and provide insight.
5. Offer a moment for them to write their story or expand on it in their own journal and time.

Discussion:

- *If you could say one thing about your person/grief using a few words, what might it be?*
- *How do words help us tell a story?*
- *I wonder if there was anything hard or easy about the words you chose?*
- *Did you notice anything new about your grief by sharing this way?*

Adaptations: This activity can be adapted to support substance affected families. The prompt can be tailored to “7-words for/about addiction,” or “7-words about my family/me.” Also consider changing the number of words based on development and abilities of the youth/group.

Acknowledgements: This can be seen in literature history as a form of expression through Hemingway and the Sis-word Story. There is a website entitled griefinsixwords.com inspired by What’s Your Grief.



LETTER TO MY PERSON



Goal: To help children and teens express thoughts, feelings, questions, or memories they carry about someone who is no longer consistently present—whether due to death, addiction, separation, incarceration, or emotional distance. Writing a letter provides a safe and personal way to express what might feel unfinished, unspoken, or ongoing.

What it Supports: Addresses many forms of loss and grief (primary and secondary), validated disenfranchised grief, ambiguous loss, and continuing bonds

Materials:

- Paper or stationery of choice
- Pen/pencils/markers
- Stickers or other optional stationery decorations

Instructions:

- Explain that this is a chance to write to someone important to them—someone they miss, think about, are confused by, or have something they still wish they could say. Let them know this person can be alive or deceased, present or distant.
- Provide dynamic and inclusive sentence starters (see below in discussion). Let youth pick the ones that match their feelings and story.
- Invite youth to start with “Dear...” and fill in the name or role of their person. They may use real names, nicknames, or titles like “Mom,” “Brother,” “My Person,” or “The You I Miss.”
- Give plenty of time and space. Allow for silence, music, or one-on-one support. Let them write, draw, or dictate.
- Once finished, offer choices: fold it, seal it in an envelope, put it in a keepsake box, read it out loud, keep it private, or destroy it.

Discussion:

- Letter Prompts
 - *I miss the way you...*
 - *Sometimes I feel mad because...*
 - *I don't understand why you...*
 - *If you could hear me, I'd want you to know...*
 - *I wonder if you still...*
 - *Even though you're not here, I...*
 - *It hurts that...*
 - *I'm proud of myself because...*
 - *I wish I could tell you...*
 - *Sometimes I pretend you're...*
 - *I felt confused when...*
 - *I've changed in these ways...*
 - *Here's what I need now...*

Adaptations:

- To be inclusive of all abilities allow drawing, collaging, or using picture as symbols to create a letter.
- For younger children or that benefit from more guidance, consider the above sentence starters written already for them.
- Some youth prefer digital recordings. Have them record a voice memo or a podcast-like platform where they can share their thoughts.
- If the youth experienced a challenging relationship with ambivalent feelings, normalize letters that are not about "love" or "nice".

THE 7 C'S

The 7 C's was inspired by Alanon, support groups for adults affected by a loved ones substance misuse, to provide a reframe around addiction. *I didn't cause it. I can't control it. I can't cure it.*

As the world realized the necessity in bringing the language and communication to youth, Jerry Moe, a pioneer in children's programming in recovery, saw an opportunity to fill a gap. Substance Use Disorders can leave youth feeling powerless to the disease. This is where Jerry Moe introduced four C's that would empower youth with what they CAN do and control around the various challenges and struggles. This shift has been foundational with working with youth to build agency and real practical ways to navigate their experience. It has been utilized with National Alliance for Children of Alcoholics, SAMHSA, and Sesame Street Communities - Parental Addiction.

Activities on pages 65-89 are activities focusing on strengthening these areas.

I DIDN'T CAUSE IT

I CAN'T CONTROL IT

I CAN'T CURE IT

BUT...

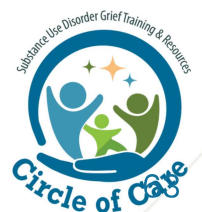
I CAN TAKE CARE MYSELF

I CAN COMMUNICATE MY FEELINGS

I CAN MAKE HEALTHY CHOICES

I CAN CELEBRATE ME

© Jerry Moe, MA



WHAT IS ADDICTION?

Goal: This activity is to help youth understand a Substance Use Disorder as a bio-psycho-social disease utilizing age-appropriate language. By understanding it as a disease it decreases stigma surrounding their person as a “bad person”.

What it Supports: Psychoeducation of Substance Use Disorder as a disease, decrease stigma

Materials:

- Copy of Handout
- Crayons, markers, pen, or pencils

Instructions:

1. Introduce the word addiction. Ask if they have heard of it before and ask what they think that word means. This will help assess understanding from the child’s perspective and understanding.
2. Share the definition that was curated by Jerry Moe, in partnership with Sesame Street in Communities:
 - a. *It is a sickness in the brain, that makes someone want more and more drugs and/or alcohol and they can’t stop. That sickness changes the way someone acts.*
3. Share that like all sickness it needs treatment and help. Explain it is not a kid’s job to cure it. It is also a disease that can never be a kid’s fault.
4. Break the definition into two spaces to help them understand the language. Use the discussion question’s below and the handout if they want to draw or write what that looked like for them.

Discussion:

- *What does it look like when someone wants more and more and they can’t stop?*
- *Can you share about a time you noticed someone was acting different because they were trapped by addiction?*
- *Who can help with addiction if it’s a disease? (I.e. doctors, other professionals, the person making healthy choices... just like other diseases)*

Acknowledgements & Citations: Definition curated from Sesame Street Communities and Jerry Moe.

**It is a sickness in the brain, that
makes someone want more and
more drugs and/or alcohol and
they can't  .**

**That sickness changes the way
someone acts.**

ADDICTION THE VILLAIN

Goal: When a loved one struggles with substance use, children and families may face stigma—judgment or shame from others—which can make their grief feel invisible or less valid. This kind of unrecognized grief can lead children to believe their person, or their feelings, don't matter. This activity helps children understand that addiction is a disease, separate from who their person is. By providing education and reducing stigma, children can begin to release shame and better understand their grief. This is best accompanied with the Superhero Community Activity to show what defeats the villain.

What it Supports: decreases stigma, psychoeducation

Materials:

- Costumes or any old clothing used for dress up
- Alternatively, piece of paper and markers/pens/pencils

Instructions:

1. Explain to the group or youth that "Diseases can damage the body." It's like a villain. Sometimes, when someone uses drugs or alcohol a lot, it's not because they are bad—it's because something called addiction is like a villain that tricks their brain. This villain is sneaky and tries to trap people, making them believe they need the drugs or alcohol to feel okay."
2. Have the children draw what they think Addiction the Villain might look like. It can be anything they want (i.e. a monster, shadow, robot - anything they imagine. Think about how it tries to trick or trap people."
3. After they are done drawing, invite youth to share (if they want).
4. Now, have them draw or list 3–5 things that remind them of who their person really is underneath the addiction—like kind, funny, caring, or brave. If they cannot remember or cannot identify traits, that is okay.
5. Gently reinforce that addiction as the Villain Disease and can be very tricky since it hurts the brain changes the way a person acts. (See page 67 for definition).
6. Share that no matter how tricky a Villain is, there are things more powerful than it. The person trapped asking for help from experts and caring professionals is part of it.

Discussion:

- *Have you ever read or seen a story with a villain who tries to take over someone's mind or tricks them?*
- *How did the hero fight back?*
- *What kinds of things does this villain say or do to trick people into using drugs or alcohol?*
- *How might it make their person act differently than they normally would?*
- *Who in the Superhero community can beat addiction? What do you think needs to happen first? (Person trapped needs to ask or want help)*

Adaptations: Due to the abstract concept and cognitive development, this activity in particular is recommended for children seven years or older. The definition provided on page 67 is helpful.

- Assess what your child or group needs. Do they prefer to move their body and play the superhero? Do they need to crumble up the piece of paper and throw their villain in the trash? Consider movements that can provide a ritual release or expressive coping.
- Circle of Care's Children's Workbook has a Superhero page that incorporates these elements, which is a alternative accompaniment to this activity.

Acknowledgements from author: This is an adaptation from an activity I learned at Hazelden Betty Ford through Jerry Moe. This was a powerful way for youth to depersonalize addiction from their person and the power of asking for help.

QUESTIONS MARKS IN MY HEAD AND HEART

Goal: This activity can give children and teens a safe, creative space to name the unanswered or confusing questions they carry in grief. Whether their person has died, is using substances, or is emotionally unavailable, this activity supports emotional expression, validation, and the reduction of shame and uncertainty.

What it Supports: Ambiguous loss, grief expression, meaning-making, decrease stigma, psychoeducation, and emotional awareness

Materials:

- A big piece of poster paper. One side labeled “heart”, and one side labeled “mind”
- Sticky notes/paper strips
- pens/markers/crayons
- 3 envelopes labeled: “Still Wondering”, “What I know”

Instructions:

- 1.Explain that when someone dies (or replace language with “struggles with drugs or alcohol” based on child’s focus), we can be left with a lot of questions.
 - a.Some questions are in our heart - emotional questions, like *did they love me?*
 - b.Some are in our mind - thinking questions, like *Will they come back?*
- 2.Have the youth write the questions on sticky notes and place them on the piece of paper where they think they belong. Some might be in the middle.
- 3.Invite youth to share and see if they can answer their own question. Based on their responses they can place that question into the “still wondering”, “what I know”, or “what I wish I knew envelope”. This can be a powerful tool to understand where children may need additional support, education, or resources.
- 4.Find a spot to keep the envelopes and continue to normalize questions.

Discussion:

- *I wonder if it is okay to have questions that don't have answers?*
- *Were there any questions that felt difficult to write?*
- *Are there questions you'd like someone to help you understand more?*
- *What feelings or thoughts come up when you think about these questions?*

Adaptations:

- Consider drawing over writing for youth that are limited in language.
- Have the facilitator act as the scribe and write the question for youth, so they may focus on processing instead of writing.
- Consider turning them into journal prompts for older youth.
- For questions that are related to stigma - consider intentional pauses that challenge irrational guilt (i.e. *Can it ever be a kid's fault for an adult using drugs or alcohol?*).

CIRCLE OF CONTROL & CONCERNS

Goal: This is an activity that can support youth in building agency around their environment while also validating their worries and concerns for the people and things around them.

What it Supports: Agency, autonomy, validation of experience and feelings, Substance Use Disorder as a disease, Supports “I can’t control it” of the 7 C’s (Page 63).

Materials:

- Copy of handout
- Markers, colored pencils, crayons or other supplies

Instructions:

1. Have materials and handout printed and ready.
2. Start by validating that there are things that we worry about or have concerns. Start with a light example, a worry or concern might be the weather. People cannot control what the weather will be like, but they can put a jacket on. Highlight the control they have around themselves.
3. Tie the example to other things they might worry about like people who are sick, people dying, or someone using drugs or alcohol.
4. Have them write or draw their worries in the larger circle that is outside of their responsibility and write or draw the things on the Concern Circle that they can control (i.e. take breaks, ask for help, etc). As the facilitator, help differentiate the two areas with examples and definitions.
5. Talk about how as they find more ways to care for themselves, their sense of worry can feel smaller.

Discussion:

- *What are things that are out of one person's (or our) control?*
- *Share a time where you had a concern that you couldn't fix. What were some things you could or can do in those situations? If helpful, provide an example as it relates to someone using drugs or alcohol or someone dying.*

Adaptations: This can also be done as a discussion with older children or with chalk on the street. Have a child stand in each circle and discuss



MY CONCERNS

MY CONTROL



MY CONTROL PANEL

Goal: Children who have experienced significant change, toxic stress, or challenges may feel a sense of unpredictability and lack of control in their environment. This activity is a creative way to promote agency and empower youth of decision making and discern what is within their control.

What it Supports: Promotes autonomy, increases sense of safety, emotional awareness, and decision-making. Supports “I can’t control it” of the 7 C’s (page 63).

Materials:

- Copy of handout
- Markers, colored pencils, crayons, or other art supplies

Instructions:

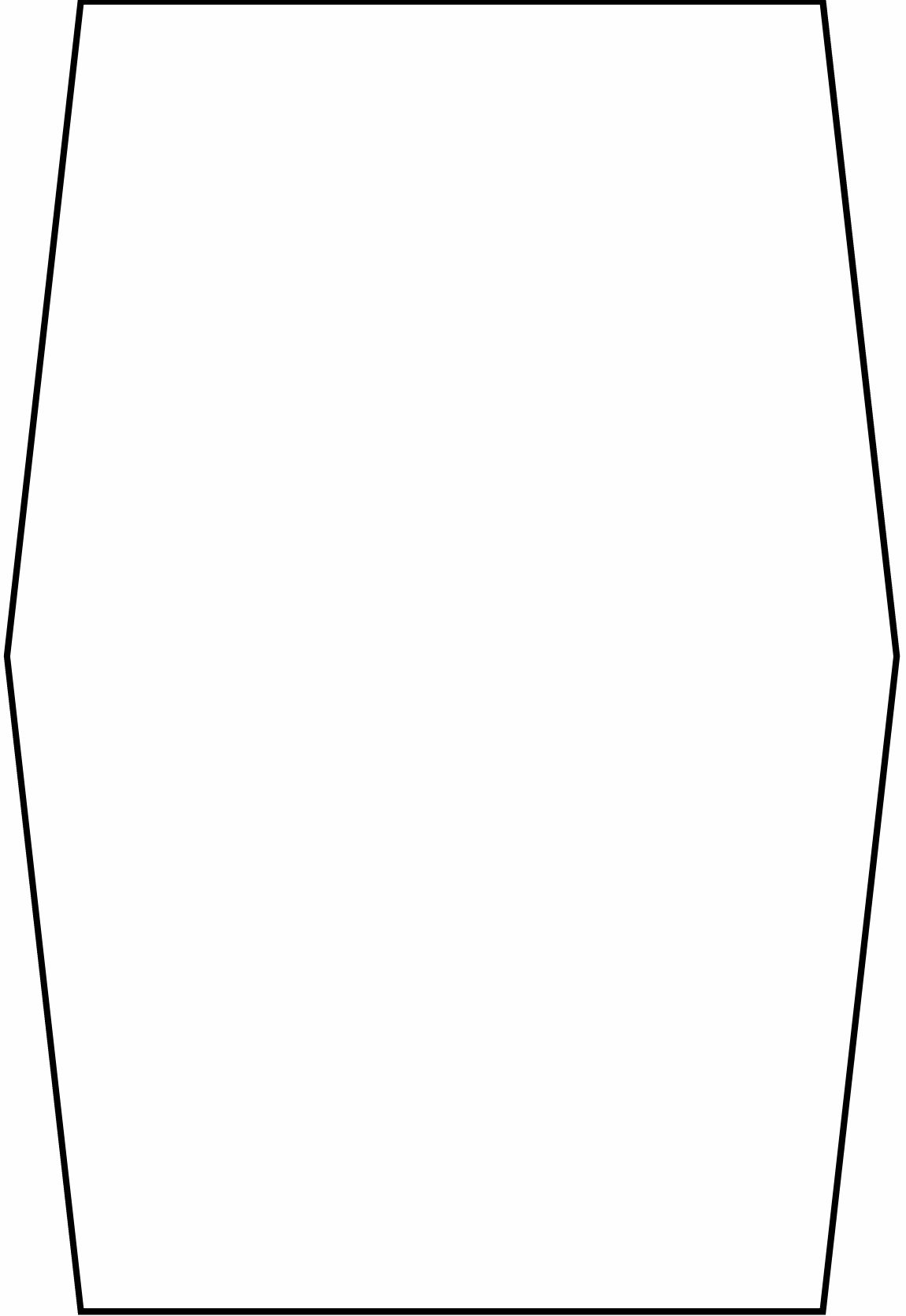
1. Have materials out and ready for youth.
2. Have a brief conversation of what they think “control” means, and what are things they feel like are part of their control and what is outside of their control. (Examples: Youth can control their words, but not someone else’s).
3. Ask them what they might typically see on a control panel (i.e. buttons, levers, lights, etc). Have them use the handout to create their own control station and draw or write what they can control.
4. Ask the child or group if they would like to share their Control Panel.

Discussion:

- *Somethings we cannot control, looks like someone else’s words or what someone else chooses to do. I wonder what things in our mind, body, and actions can we control?*
- *What are somethings that are on your control panel?*
- *Is there anything that you wish you could put on your control panel, but can’t? Is there something on your panel that can support you? (Or that you can add like “share or write my thoughts”).*
- *What is something you like about your control panel?*
- *How might you use some your control panel at home? school?*

Adaptations: Based on development consider turning this into an imagination game if they do not want to use paper. Use items around you to create a control panel and have them roleplay or share how they would use their control panel.

CONTROL PANEL





BIG ELEPHANT LITTLE ELEPHANTS

Goal: Grief is a natural response to loss. After someone has died – children can also grieve secondary losses, that include relationships, identity changes, dreams, financial changes, or even moving homes. This can also be experienced if there is no death. This activity supports children in identifying how family, friends and life has changed and their significance.

What it Supports: Addresses many forms of loss and grief (primary and secondary), validated disenfranchised grief and ambiguous loss

Materials:

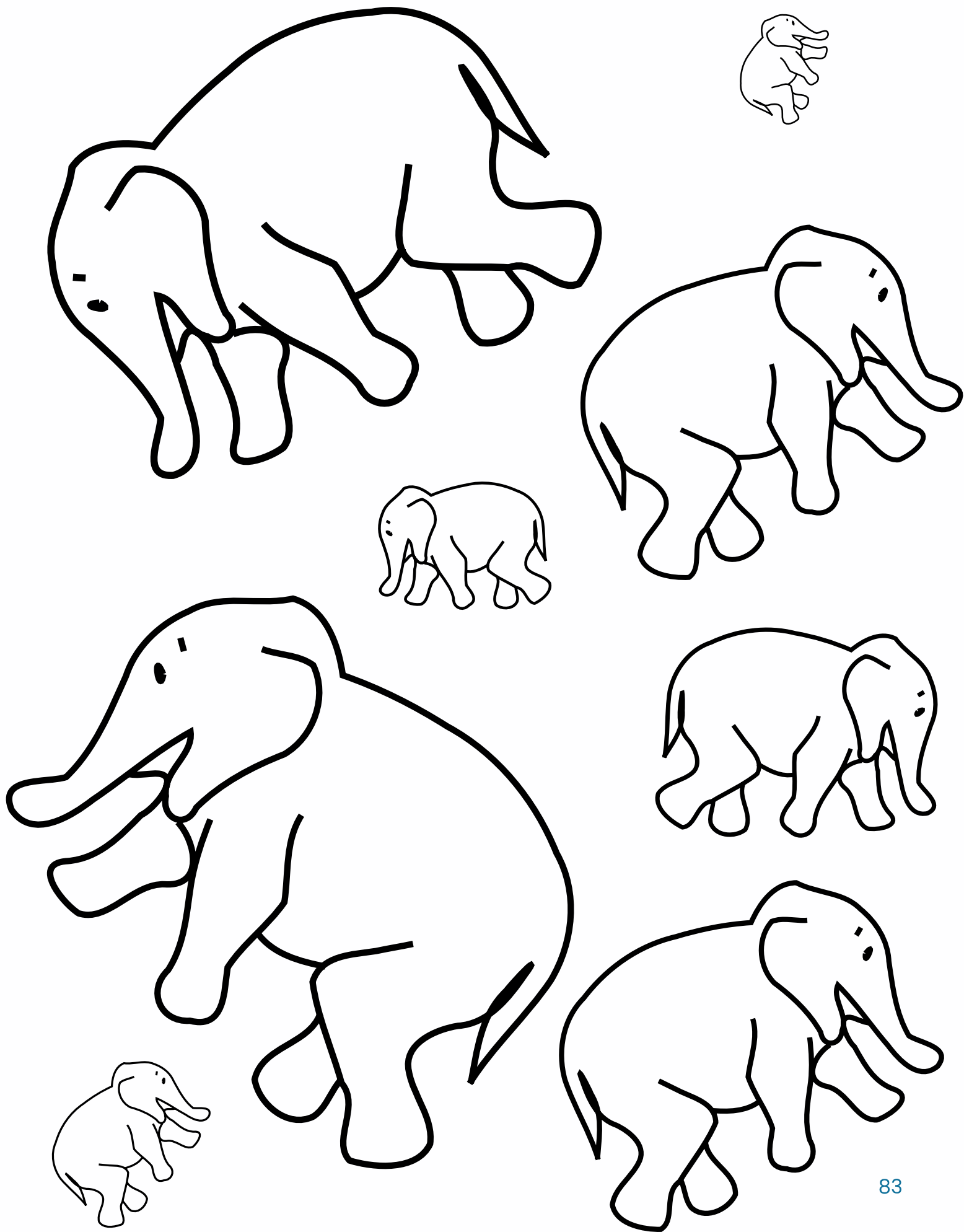
- Copy of handout
- Markers/color pencils/crayons/pens

Instructions:

1. Ask if they have ever heard of the metaphor that refers to “No one acknowledges the elephant in the room” - Allow for discussion.
2. Explain how youth and adults share that their grief can feel like an elephant where people know about it, but don’t say anything or bring it up.
3. Talk about how sometimes those elephants can be a lot of different changes or losses (i.e. moving in with grandparents, changing schools, or losing friendships).
4. Ask them to draw the things they are missing or have lost in all the different elephants. Bigger elephants mean it’s been harder and the smaller elephants, are smaller adjustments.
5. Invite youth to share if they want to.

Discussion:

- *Why do you think people sometimes don't talk about something really big that everyone is feeling or thinking about?*
- *Grief can feel like that too—like something big that's there, but no one says anything about it. Have you ever felt like that? What did it look like?*
- *What are some examples of "elephants" that people your age might carry that others don't always notice or talk about? (Offer examples if needed: losing someone, moving homes, missing a parent, changing schools, losing a pet, losing a friendship).*
- *Think about the elephants in your life—big or small. What do they represent for you?*
- *What would it feel like if someone noticed your elephant and gently asked about it?*



OPTION JUNCTION

Goal: This is a collaborative game that can be played with the family or one-on-one. Each color is a differing category in which youth can role play making a healthy choice and practice decision-making. It is not about who finishes first, but the journey towards healthy choices!

What it Supports: Decision-making, problem solving, empowerment, and promotes self-care through healthy choices

Materials:

- Color copy of gameboard
- Color-coded candy
- One dice

Instructions:

1. Print the gameboard in color. If you can print on bigger paper, even better!
2. Use the color-coded candy to represent each game piece item. Have each person pick their game piece. Do not have two of the same color to prevent confusion. Adult, be in charge of reading the Color Choice Chart.
3. The order of who goes first is youngest to oldest.
4. Have the players roll the dice. Move the candy-game-piece to the spot. Using the Color Choice Chart, read a roleplay scenario to the person who rolled the dice. Each scenario will end with a question that will prompt the player on creating and choosing a healthy choice.
5. After the Choice Chart question is read, the player will share their answer. Adults and other players can help if the player asks for help.

Discussion:

- *Use the Choice Chart to guide questions.*
- *Use open ended questions to help encourage problem-solving.*
- *If youth is struggling, create a code word that signals a trusted helper. Let the child create the word (i.e. "Marshmallow!" or "Eeee Gats and Gummy Bears!")*

Adaptations: For older children, use the dice to select a number and match it to the scenario on the Choice Chart using the color-coded numbers. If a player rolls a 6, it's a wild turn—they get to reverse the game and create a roleplay scenario for someone else to act out or respond to. For children who need movement, encourage them to act out their response instead of just talking through it. Don't forget to join in—your participation helps build connection and models choice-making in action.



1

FRIENDS

- You are playing with your friends after school and one of them asks you to come over. Your adult at home asked you to come home right after school. What do you do?
- You are playing with your friends. Slowly, they start teasing one of your friends and you notice they are crying. What would you do?
- You just finished a test and your friend shares they got an A! You got a C. How do you react to your friend? What do you do for yourself?
- Your friend is having a bad day and said they don't want to talk. What can you do in the moment to be a good friend? What choice could help them feel supported?
- A friend dares you to try a sip of alcohol. What do you do?
- Your friend start yelling, because they are upset. What do you do to stay calm? What does support look like without yelling back?

2

BODY

- You're feeling really tired, but your friends want to keep playing? What does your body need? What choice would be helpful?
- You are really hungry and you are not sure what to eat. You head to the pantry and there is lots of food, including fruit, candy, and lots of snacks. What do you pick?
- You are about to play an activity with all your friends, but you notice your stomach hurts and it's getting stronger. What do you decide to do?
- Someone tells you a secret that makes your body feel nervous and uncomfortable. What does your body's feelings mean? What healthy choice can you make to get help?
- You are out riding your bike and you fall off your bike and scrape your knee. It hurts. What would help you after hurting your knee?
- You and your friend/sibling are arguing. You feel really mad and your body wants to scream and hit something. What do you decide to do? What choices could help your body calm down?

3

COPING

- You feel really sad and want to be alone. What's a healthy way to share with others you need alone time. What could you do that would feel comforting in your alone time?
- You had a really hard day at school and feel like crying. What do you do to allow yourself to let out the feelings? What are people can help you feel supported?
- You miss someone who died and feel waves of grief/feelings. What are some ways to remember them? Who or what else might be helpful in this moment?
- You are feeling worried about someone and not sure if you can talk about it. What are some healthy ways to talk about feelings that are hard? Is there a way to express without words?

4

M
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N
D

- You make a mistake and you start to think you can't do anything. What's a more helpful or kind thought you can try? What can you do to remind yourself something you are good at?
- You are trying to focus on your homework, but your mind keeps wandering to other things, like playing outside or going out later with friends. What might you try to bring your mind back to where you are at?
- You keep thinking about something scary that happened (or a scary movie). What can you do to feel safe and calm? What are some ways to let your mind take a break?
- You are trying to do something for the first time and your brain starts to say, "I can't do it!" What's a different way to talk to yourself? What is one small thing you can do in the moment to help?
- You're feeling scattered and forgetful. What could help your brain feel more rested?
- It's been a hard week, and you start to think that things will never get better. What can you do to support your thoughts? How can you remember the things that went right this week?

5

S
C
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L

- You didn't finish your homework. What is a healthy way to handle it? What can you do next time to be more prepared?
- A classmate is being distracting, and it is hard to focus. What are some choices you can make to stay on task? How can you handle it without getting in trouble or being unkind?
- You forgot something important for school, like your lunch or permission slip. How can you stay calm? What are some choices that can help? Are there people that can help?
- You got an answer wrong at class and felt embarrassed. What can you say to yourself to feel better?
- You and your friend are talking during a test. What are some choices you can do to respect the test taking rules?
- You see someone being left out at school. What is a healthy choice in this moment? Is there anything you can do or offer to that person being left out?

HELP MYSELF HELP ME

Goal: This activity can be used as a game or conversation starter to help youth recognize situations, thoughts, and feelings where they have a sense of control. It also supports them in practicing how to ask for help when needed. Adults are encouraged to participate alongside, to show adults need help too.

What it Supports: Explore interdependence and self-sufficiency, problem solving, and promote healthy choices of the 7 C's (page 63).

Materials:

- Help Handout
- Scissors

Instructions:

1. Print a copy of the handout for each child and adult.
2. Take a moment to explain how sometimes there are things that happen where we can take care of ourselves, and other times where we might need help. These can look all different ways. Provide examples based on age.
3. Have everyone cut their handout into strips. Take turns reading scenarios off of the Help Handout. Have the group or child hold up which one they would need. Allow space to share, observe themes, and validate.

Discussion:

- *What would it look like to be by yourself? How does it feel to try things on your own?*
- *I wonder what part you would want help on and what part could be done by yourself?*
- *What helps you decide if you need help?*
- *Who are the people you trust to help you?*

Adaptations: Make your own questions! This is a starting point to explore how situations require different support, including adults. If this is done within a family, allow child to use these strips during the day when they need to ask for help. For children with neurodiverse needs or hesitation on verbalizing support, this may be a helpful alternative.

Help Handout

Tying my shoe

Someone is using drugs or alcohol

Comforting a friend who is crying

Struggling with understanding a project

Having trouble falling asleep

Someone needs help to stay safe

Friends are arguing

You're missing your person

Someone is being hurt

Telling a friend I need space

Carrying a heavy backpack

Making a doctor's appointment

Telling someone "No"

Planning a dinner or meal

I can do this myself



I might need help



I definitely need help



SUPERHERO COMMUNITY

Goal: Building the understanding of addiction as a disease is helpful, however addiction can still leave children feeling powerless and hopelessness when stigma increases isolation. This activity can show how help can come from all different places in a recovery community.

What it Supports: education on recovery, resource building

Materials:

- Using the items around you in the room
- Adaptation: can be done with a sand tray
- Adaptation: Sheet of paper

Instructions:

1. Introduce addiction as a disease. Provide the definition (Page 67).
2. Explain to the group that it can make us feel like it is too big to get help, but that help comes in a lot of ways for the adults and kids.
3. Introduce the idea of places where people learn how to get better and stop using drugs and/or alcohol. These places are treatment and recovery places, and it can look like a lot of different ways. It's helpful people like doctors, teachers, nice counselors, and teachers. It can even be for kids. It is like a community of superheroes to keep addiction away.

Depending on the setting they can use additional modalities including, sand tray, or on a blank sheet of paper.

Discussion:

- *What part of the community are for the adults?*
- *What parts are for kids?*
- *What parts might they share?*
- *Tell me about how you might call on some of these superheroes?*
- *I wonder if there are any superheroes missing?*

MY SOLAR SUPPORT SYSTEM

Goal: Determine and recognize who is in closer proximity and farther proximity of help and support within a solar system framework.

What it Supports: Identifying and assessing support system. Increase confidence to ask for support

Materials:

- Solar Support System Sheet
- Colored pencils, pen, crayons, or markers

Instructions:

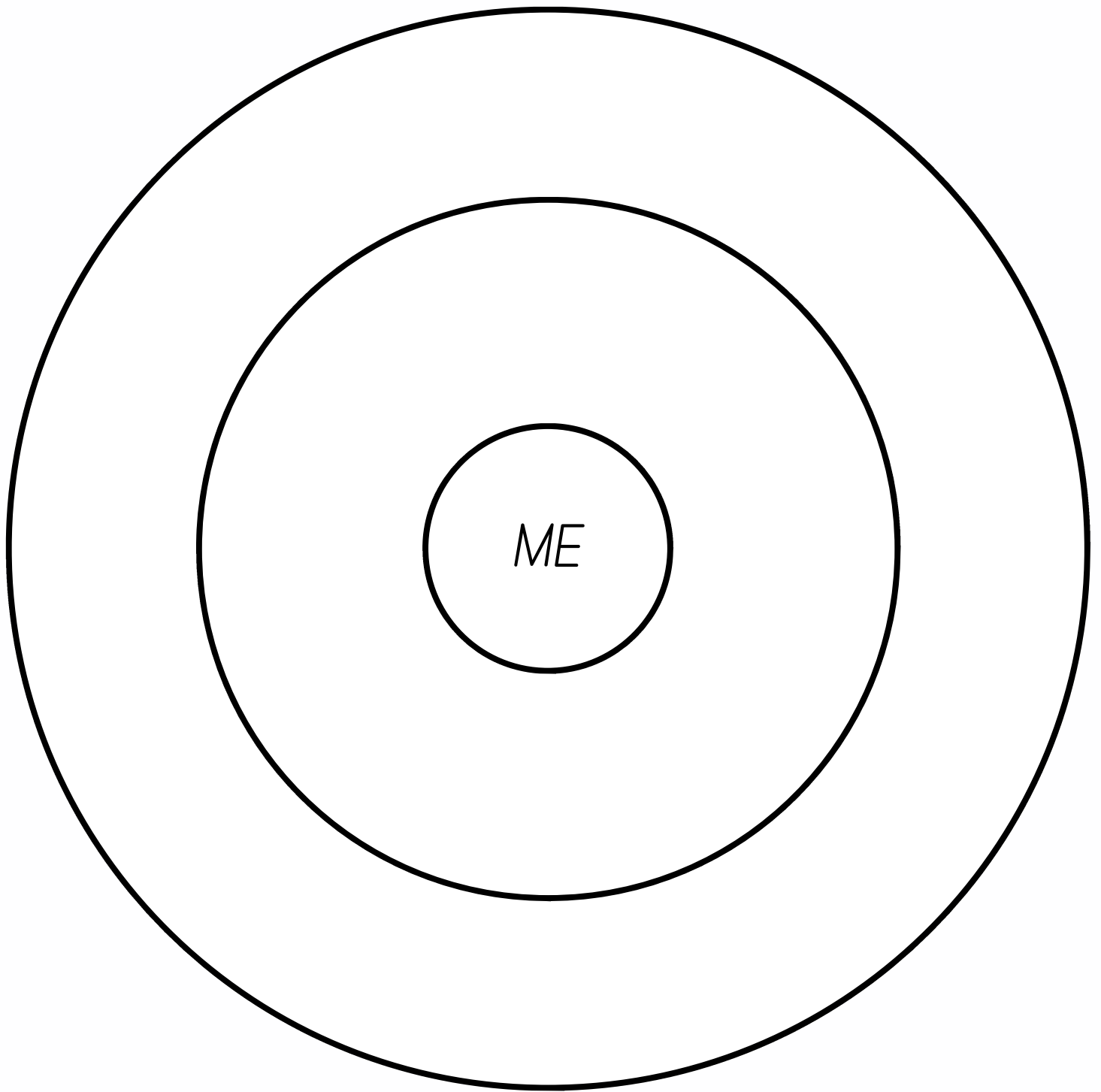
1. Using the Support Solar System hand out, have children write the names of people that they think are part of people they can talk to about their person or when things feel hard. These can be people in their family, school, sports, or their community.
2. Explain those closest to the center are the people that are the most supportive and can talk to. As they go further out they might have people they talk to “sometimes” or not at all.
3. There may be people on the system that are either no longer around, died, or relational connections have changed. Make room and hold space for that person and sharing.
4. Provide opportunity to share their Support Solar Systems. Talk through what it feels like to have someone close by or far away.
5. Remind children that the system can change and some people can move closer or farther away in the rings on the paper, but a support system is there.

Discussion:

- *What makes the people who are closest to you supportive?*
- *Are there any people that move in between different spaces or areas? What is that like?*
- *Is there anyone that you wish was close to the middle, but is not?*

Adaptations: This paper can be set out as a visual reference, but youth might feel comfortable just sharing through conversation. This can also be adjusted to include anything that supports them like coping skills, and safe places.

Acknowledgements: Developed by Dr. Melissa Lunardini with Radical Grief



SHARING JOURNAL

Goal: The Sharing Journal is a simple, thoughtful way to help kids and teens open up. It gives them a safe space to write or draw about things that might be hard to say out loud—like big feelings, grief, or everyday challenges. Whether you're a parent, teacher, or support person, this journal can help you connect in a deeper way. It creates another way to “talk” without always having to talk. Over time, it can build trust, strengthen your relationship, and give young people the confidence to share more of what's on their mind and heart.

What it Supports: grief styles, open communication, and fostering trust

Materials:

- A bounded notebook or journal
- Pen or pencil

Instructions:

1. Start with a Talk:
 - a. Ask how it feels to share something fun—and how it feels when it's hard. Let them know all feelings are welcome here.
2. Explain the Journal:
 - a. This is a special space to write or draw thoughts, questions, or feelings. It's just for them and a trusted adult to use together.
3. Pick a Spot:
 - a. Choose a place for the journal to “live” (like a nightstand). Agree on a signal that there's something new to read.
4. Set Some Simple Rules:
 - a. Decide together:
 - b. Who can read it?
 - c. Do they want a note back or time to talk?
 - d. How will you show kindness and respect in the journal?

Ways to Use

- After an argument or misunderstanding.
- If the child has a hard day and needs to share.
- If they have questions or concerns about the person they are grieving, things they've seen or about addiction.
- If they want to share something, but are unable to talk to that person in the moment.

Adaptations: Adults, make it an adventure and pick out or make the journal together. Write the agreed guidelines inside and a message to one another!

STICKY NOTES OF CARE

Goal: This is meant to be a free flowing activity that validates all forms of coping. This also helps youth and families self-assess what forms of coping might be healthy or unhealthy. This is an easy way to create dialogue around coping, increase utilization of healthy coping, and replace unhealthy ones.

What it Supports: Coping mechanism, decision-making

Materials:

- Sticky Notes
- Pen, pencil, or markers

Instructions:

1. Introduce the conversation around coping skills. Share that the word coping skills can feel like a word grown ups use to talk about what people can do to take care of themselves.
2. For kids: they are the things kids do to have fun or the things they do after a heavy day. When kids think about it like that, they usually think of lots of things they can do.
3. Using the sticky notes, write one coping skill on each sticky note. It can be ones that you know are helpful and even ones that are not as helpful, but you do anyway (i.e. Avoid people). Write as many as you can.
4. On a nearby wall have one side with a sticky note that says "healthy" and another side that says "unhealthy."
5. Have each person share their sticky note and place it where they think it belongs. If it's a little of both, they might stick it in the middle.

Discussion:

- *What are the ones that you use the most?*
- *Is there an unhealthy one you would want to replace? If so, when do you use that coping skill and what would you try replacing it with?*
- *Is there something up there that someone else uses, that you would want to try?*
- *What makes the ones in the middle? When can they be healthy and when can they be unhealthy*

Acknowledgements & Citations: This activity was created by Dr. Melissa Lunardini, Radical Grief.

CIRCUIT OF CARE KIT

Goal: Grief can show up in the body as tiredness, irritability, restlessness, or anxiety. These waves of emotion can feel overwhelming, especially for children. Grounding is the practice of bringing attention back to the present moment using the senses, which can help calm the body and mind when emotions run high. Teaching regulation and co-regulation—practicing calming or grounding techniques with a trusted adult—helps youth feel supported and safe. Co-regulation is a key step in developing self-regulation, as children learn to manage big emotions through attuned relationships and shared experiences (Porges, 2011; Siegel & Bryson, 2011). Practicing these tools together increases the chance children will use them independently when grief is triggered.

What it Supports: Breathing, grounding techniques, mindfulness, regulation, building coping strategies

Materials:

- Bubbles
- Latex Balloons
- Pinwheels
- Smooth stones, rough stones, bumpy stones
- Putty or slime
- Soft pieces of fabric
- Warm or cold packs

Instructions:

1. Place stations around the room.
 - a. Bubbles, Balloons, and Pinwheels in one area
 - b. All Stones
 - c. Putty and Slime
 - d. Warm and Cold Pack, and soft fabric
2. Share that they will get to create their very own Care Kit. The care kit contains items that help us with feeling grounded and regulated when our grief or feelings feel really big. Practicing grounding techniques can help us in the moment, remind us we are safe, and take care of our bodies and minds.
3. Share that they will visit several stations where they will find toys that can help them practice deep breaths and tactile coping.
4. Go around the tables and practice each one and see which one helps the best. Once they decide, have them put it in their bag.

Discussion:

- *What does it feel like to breathe into a balloon? In order to breathe into a balloon it requires a deep inhale and deep exhale. How is that different than the bubbles (slow long exhale), or the pinwheel?*
- *How does it change your breath, and which one feels helpful?*
- *How do the different stones feel? If you close your eyes what else do you notice?*
- *What about soft fabric or temperature packs? Do any of the sensations make you feel calm or focused?*
- *When might you use something like this?*

Adaptations:

- This can be done multiple times to introduce other forms of grounding. Consider doing this again with visual grounding, including visual (snow globes, lava lamps, mandalas), auditory (creating a playlist, sound bowls, etc), or smells (essential oils, smells markers, or flowers).

Acknowledgements: First Developed at Camp Spero, bereavement camp in San Diego in 2019



BUILD WHAT IS IN YOUR HEART

Scavenger Hunt

Goal: This can be a fun creative outlet that also incorporates movement. This can be helpful to share values, people, and things that are important to each family member. This is best done in the home or perhaps in a nature environment.

What it Supports: Body regulation, identifying comfort and coping items, fosters connection, building agency and identity

Materials:

- The materials in your home that are built through the process

Instructions:

1. Start with sharing the expression of what it means when someone says they “hold things close to their heart”? Listen to the variety of answers.
2. Share that you will be making your own heart made up of the things that are important to you. Choose a spot on the floor to create your heart.
3. Below are a list of things to find. Share one prompt and allow everyone to go get that item and bring it back to build their heart. Have each person share what that item is and any special meaning they’d like to include. Remember, sharing is optional.
4. Do as many or as few questions as you’d like. (Suggestion: a minimum of five to build a full heart.)

Prompts:

Find something...

- ... *that is your favorite snack*
- ... *that makes you happy*
- ... *brings you comfort*
- ... *that you miss*
- ... *remind you of someone special*
- ... *reminds you of your favorite place*
- ... *you wish was still here*
- ... *that makes you laugh*
- ... *is important to you*

Adaptations:

- If they are not in their home or environment, then you can use a piece of paper and art materials.
- Adapt this activity to build language around emotions and feelings. Prompts can shift to gathering items that reflect different feelings they are having in the moment, or as it relates to grief.
- If doing this with caregivers or a family, have each person participate and build their own heart and share the items that make up their heart.

Acknowledgements from author: While this activity has been adapted many different ways, I used this heavily during 2020 when groups went virtual. Since children were at home, it was a playful way to get to know one another as well as build alternative ways of sharing with words. Since then, its been a fun activity that also build rapport and fosters connection.



MY ROOTS MY BRANCHES

Goal: Grief—especially after a death or from someone’s substance use—can make kids feel powerless, confused, or stuck. They didn’t choose what happened, and they can’t change it. Agency means having the ability to make choices, express yourself, and take actions that affect your own life. When someone has agency, they feel like their voice matters and they have some control, even during hard times. This activity can help recognize the components that build agency in youth and families.

What it Supports: building agency, 7 C’s (Choices)(page 63), identifying values and support system

Materials:

- Copy of Handout
- Pen/pencil/markers

Instructions:

1. Talk about the anatomy of a tree. Ask what is under the ground for trees (roots) and what the purpose of roots are. (i.e. keep the tree in the earth, how they get nutrients, and grow)
2. Now talk about the purpose of the branches (i.e. create shelter for others, create shade, people can see that part of the tree).
3. Talk about how kids and families need roots and branches too.
4. What makes strong roots:
 - a. Recognizing our gifts: What might be some skills or gifts you have? (i.e. good at sports, or a really great listener)
 - b. Set goals: What are things you want to achieve? Think of big and little goals (i.e. I want to save my allowance to go out this weekend or I want to be a doctor).
 - c. Identifying values: What are things that are important to me and help me make good decisions? (i.e. honesty, kindness, etc)
5. Have them write what some of those might be. Help guide youth as this might be their first time building language around these areas.

Instructions (continued):

6. Go over what strong branches in kids might look like:

- Mentors: Who do I look up to that helps me reach my goals?
- Support System: Who supports me when I want to celebrate, need to talk, my grief comes up, or things are challenging?
- Access to my support system: How often do I actually call on them and how can I use them more intentionally?

7. Have them take time to write in this area as well.

Discussion:

- For roots:
 - *What do you think roots do for a tree? Why are they important?*
 - *What are some things that give you strength, even if other people can't always see them?*
 - *What's something you're naturally good at, or something you're proud of about yourself?*
 - *What's a small goal you have for this week? What's a big goal you have for the future?*
 - *What are some values (things that are really important to you) that help guide how you treat others or make decisions?*
- For branches:
 - *What do you notice about the branches of a tree? What do they do for the tree and for others?*
 - *Who is someone in your life you look up to? How do they help you grow or learn?*
 - *When you're having a tough day, who do you talk to? Who shows up for you when things are hard—or when you're celebrating?*
 - *How often do you reach out to those people? What helps you remember to ask for support?*
 - *What would it look like to use your support system more intentionally?*

Adaptations:

- This is fairly big activity that is good for the development tweens and teens. You might find that having a discussion around these topics might be the introduction. Perhaps talking about roots only or one component of the roots. Break this down based on the needs of the child.
- Allow children or teens to work on this over time if needed.

BRANCHES



MY GIFTS

MENTORS



MY GOALS

SUPPORTIVE PEOPLE

MY VALUES

WHEN I NEED THEM



GUIDING STARS

Goal: This activity can help children identify their personal values and strengths, which can act as "guiding stars" in navigating their grief or the effects of addiction.

What it Supports: Build agency, strengthen posttraumatic growth, meaning-making in grief, goal setting and values

Materials:

- Cut out paper stars on cardstock
- Markers/pens/pencils
- Tape
- String or yarn
- Large sheet of paper (Or a clear wall to be the "sky")
- Values Sheet

Instructions:

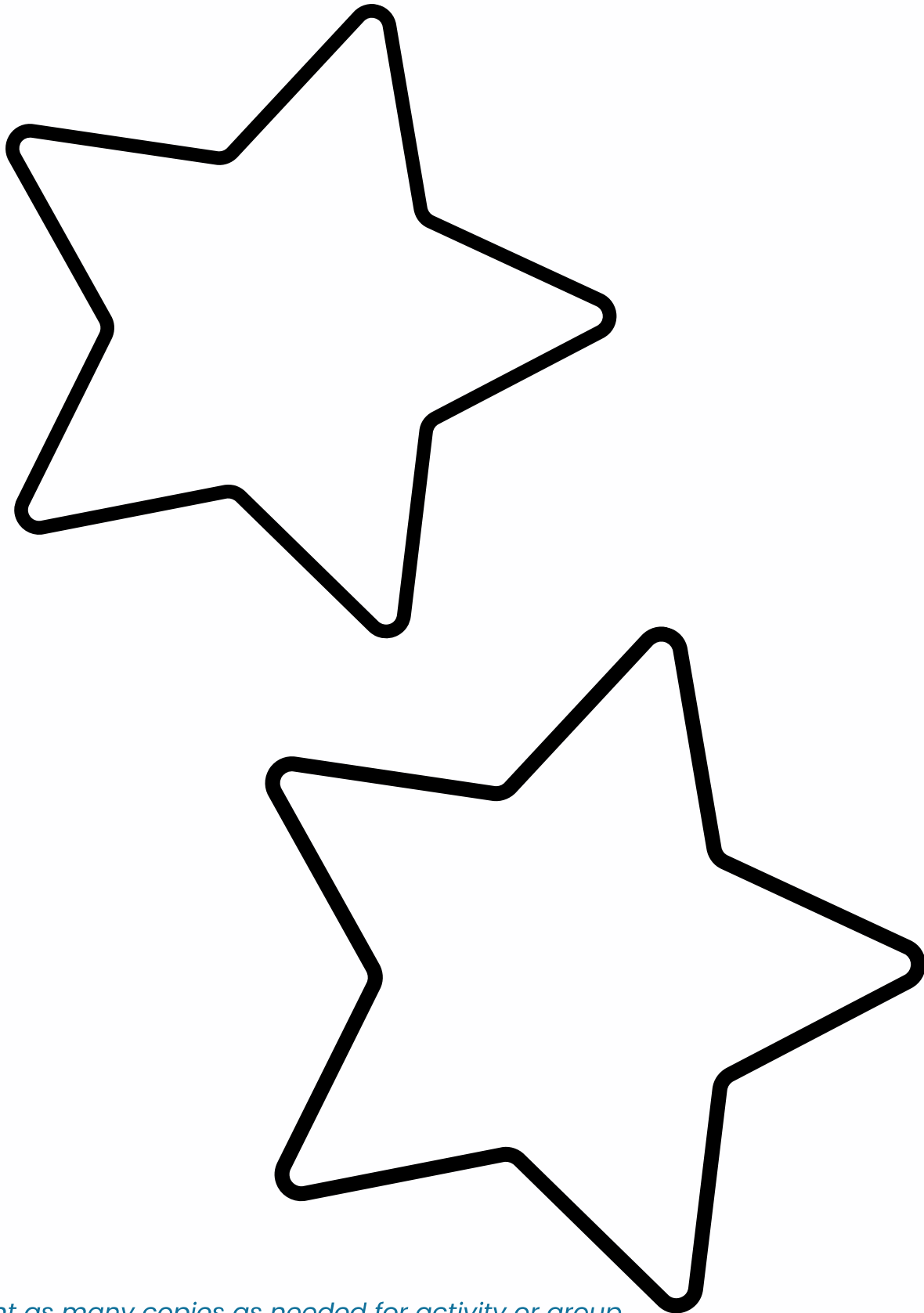
1. Start by explaining that everyone has unique qualities and values that guide them, like stars in the sky. Share that this activity will help them discover the things that are important to them and what makes them special.
2. Ask the group, "What are some things that are really important to you or things you care about?" Offer examples like kindness, family, courage, honesty, or creativity. Encourage them to think about strengths they've shown, like being a good friend, helping someone, or being brave when facing something hard.
3. Give each child 4-5 paper stars to start. On each star, have them write or draw one value or strength that is important to them. They can decorate their stars with colors and stickers to make them personal and meaningful.
4. On the large sheet of paper (the "sky"), invite each child to place their stars wherever they like, attaching them with glue or tape. If they wish, they can connect their stars with lines to form a constellation, representing how their values work together to guide them.
5. Once everyone's stars are on the "sky," gather the group to admire the shared creation. Ask if anyone wants to share one of their stars and why it's important to them. Reinforce that their values and strengths can help them make choices and feel more confident during tough times.

Discussion:

- *Values are like guiding stars. They help us make decisions and act in a way that matters to us. Our values can come from our home and traditions. Sometimes our values come from really hard moments where we learn something was important to us. I wonder if anyone has values they want to share?*
- *What does it look like to act a value?*
- *What does it look like to treat others according to our guiding stars?*
- *How do your guiding stars (or values) share about how you would like to be treated?*

Adaptations:

- For older youth (13-17) use prompts like: "What's one thing that helps you feel proud of yourself?" "What's something you wish others knew about you?" Allow them to write more complex reflections on their stars, such as short affirmations or quotes that inspire them.



Print as many copies as needed for activity or group

COLLAGE THE CLIMB

Goal: An intersection of grief and traumatic loss, is to help build meaning and hope in life. Sometimes dreams and goals can feel large particularly after challenging times. This activity is meant to help youth and families confidently set goals and break them down into things they CAN do.

What it Supports: Promote agency, goal setting, decision making, supports tolerance to uncertainty (ambiguity).

Materials:

- Old magazines, clippings or a collage book
- Stickers and other decorative items picked up by youth
- Posterboard
- Glue
- Scissors
- Markers/gel pens/ pens

Instructions:

1. Start out by talking about what dreams and hopes are and what some of the dreams and hopes kids have. Allow time to share.
2. Ask the group if they have plans on how to make their dreams come true. Depending on answers, it will help you assess how to guide the activity.
3. Share that they are going to make their own vision board focused on their goals for their future. They can pick any goal and any way they want it represented on their paper.
4. Ask them to include these elements to make the goal complete:
 - a. A big dream or goal
 - b. At least three things they can do to help them get to their goal
 - c. One person or place that can support them
5. Give ample time to create and allow youth to share if they want to

Discussion:

- *What are some dreams or goals you have for yourself?*
- *If you could close your eyes, what would you want your life to look like one year, five, 10, or more?*
- *Are there things you can do right now or plan to do to make that goal feel closer or real?*
- *I wonder if there is anyone that can support you and how can you let them know?*

Adaptation:

- For younger children, making the goals fit a shorter timeline, is helpful. (e.g. Goal: getting a good grade, Step: Study)
- Depending on abilities, coloring, drawing, writing, or sharing works as well.

MIMBLEBALL AND ICEBREAKERS

Comfort Bag Resource - Mimbleball

Goal: The objective is to achieve immediate ice-breaking, soothing regulation, and baseline calm that supports grounded emotional expression. This process fosters enhanced, deeper discussions when one or more youth can effectively regulate their emotions, often without consciously realizing they are re-regulating. Among the most challenging interpersonal tasks are establishing human contact with strangers and knowing how to approach someone who is angry or upset, yet these connections are essential for wellness practitioners and compassionate humans. Through recognizing another person's humanity in these difficult moments, we discover our own humanity. This approach transforms some of our most important but difficult human interactions into opportunities for genuine connection and healing. By recognizing another person's humanity, we discover our own. (Harvard graduation speech, 2025).

What it Supports: bonding exercises, openness to vulnerability, establishes initial interactions, emotional relief through spontaneous human interaction, increased sense of safety

Materials:

- Mimbleball (A Comfort Bag Item) 2 or more works as well

Instructions:

1. The "directions" for this exercise are to be as kind and imaginative as possible, mimicking hairstyles to signify personalities or emotions, or even just while playing catch or a rolling game with a Mimbleball.
2. Exchange words about how youth are feeling today, which hopefully will get more and more real as the interaction continues. Making it a game with the Mimbleball adds a dramatic element of play and humanity.
3. As you create human connection, mutual understanding will follow. The easy amusement, effortless regulation, and kindness inspired by Mimbleballs can be a key element in any discussion.
4. Find opportunities for Mimbleballs to open up silliness in people of any age allows for sparks of joy to enter the interactions, which breaks down defensive walls.
5. Those moments of joy also allow people to forget, for a moment, the heaviness of the grief they carry, and establish partnerships with people that can help them carry their grief.

Discussion:

- *Have at it! :-) The only limit is your imagination, which is infinite.*
- *Be ready to follow the spontaneous impulses and interactions that are inspired by this simple, empathy and vulnerability-inspiring, fluffy ball.*
- *Sometimes, even on someone's worst day, a ridiculous distraction can shift the energy of their mood or willingness to trust and interact*

Adaptations:

- Include any adaptations you would make if it were a parent, group work, or age development (if any).
- Not everyone has a Mibleball, and that is okay. Using a stuff animal or child-friendly sensory item can be incorporated in its place. Try having a diverse selection if possible (i.e. stuffed bear, puddy, talking stick, or fidgets).

Contribution made by: Julia Chambers, Founder of the Mibleball

MIMBLEBALL AND FEELINGS

Comfort Bag Resource - Mimbaleball

Goal: Mimbaleballs are designed to foster kinship between people and encourage open communication about the death of someone important to them. This essential human bonding creates opportunities for people to connect and share their experiences on a fundamental, elemental level. Through this process, participants can help regulate their bodies back to a calm baseline state, where emotional expression and meaningful communication become much more accessible and natural.

The Mimbaleball serves as a tool to create a safe space for grief processing, allowing children and their companions to move through difficult emotions together while maintaining a sense of connection and shared humanity during a challenging time.

What it Supports: bonding exercises, openness to vulnerability, establishes initial interactions, emotional relief through spontaneous human interaction, increased sense of safety

Materials:

- Mimbaleball (A Comfort Bag Item)

Instructions:

1. Mimbaleballs are uniquely equipped to mimic emotions and/or appearances.
2. "Bop" the Mimbaleball (hold the Mimbaleball in one hand around the back, smooth the hair back, and bring the Mimbaleball down and forward onto the other hand or a surface), and make the hair stand straight up while asking another person: "Do you ever feel like THIS?" (i.e. suggesting anger, surprise, or frustration.)
3. Pushing the moldable hair forward to hide the eyes, suggesting blocking out the world. Or twisting the hair into a tight spike at the top of the Mimbaleball, indicating a highly strung feeling. The hair will stay in place until pushed in a different direction or shaken.)
4. Pass or toss the Mimbaleball to the other person while asking them: "Can you show me how you feel right now?" The possibilities are endless to show how they feel with the Mimbaleball. They might shake it, fidget the hair into spikes, or squish it as small as possible, etc. It will always re-emerge with the same loving, earnest gaze.
5. Anyone can hold and unconsciously stroke the Mimbaleball's hair to inherently calm themselves while expressing how they are feeling.

Discussion:

- *Use the Mimbaleball to develop conversation about feelings and how everyone can relate to each other's feelings*
- *Notice how participants regulate and calm as they pet or run their fingers through the Mimbaleball's hair*
- *Character impressions can range from the participants to family members or characters from favorite TV shows or movies.*
- *Turning the Mimbaleball upside down, mimicking a beard, is often surprising and amusing*

Adaptations:

- Include any adaptations you would make if it were a parent, group work, or age development (if any).
- Not everyone has a Mimbaleball, and that is okay. Using a stuff animal or child-friendly sensory item can be incorporated in its place. Try having a diverse selection if possible (i.e. stuffed bear, puddy, talking stick, or fidgets).

Contribution made by: Julia Chambers, Founder of the Mimbaleball

CREATING CONNECTION

Comfort Bag Resource - Mimbaleball

Goal: The objective is to break through the grief haze during initial outreach and open up communication with a person or group who have recently suffered a loss but have not yet been able to discuss it. In a new interaction following a recent loss, a Mimbaleball can distract and surprise the grieving person with its silly hair, creating an unexpected moment of lightness. The vulnerability demonstrated by using the Mimbaleball is crucial because it signals that the person reaching out is also vulnerable and open to genuine communication. Even if the grieving person shows no obvious reaction, they have witnessed this gesture of outreach and connection. These simple activities can become the foundation for building trust, creating moments of gentle amusement, and establishing rapport during a difficult time.

What it Supports: openness to vulnerability, establishes initial interactions, emotional relief through spontaneous human interaction, increased sense of safety

Materials:

- Mimbaleball (A Comfort Bag Item)

Instructions:

1. Mimbaleballs are “ridiculous enough to work.” (Disclaimer: any of these exercises should be used based on the determination of appropriateness in the interaction.)
2. A Mimbaleball can distract and surprise with a “bop”— hold the Mimbaleball in one hand around the back, smooth the hair back, and bring the Mimbaleball down and forward onto the other hand or a surface, surprising the grieving person with the zany hair that will stand straight up and stay there.
3. Using a Mimbaleball as an ice-breaker includes the benefit of its shape — everyone is familiar with a ball, which is universally the friendliest, safest, and most familiar shape.
4. A Mimbaleball can be tossed (or “accidentally” dropped with the simple request “would you hold this for a moment?”). An extended moment is often all it takes to begin regulation and a simple discussion with easy and natural comfort and amusement.
5. Use a Mimbaleball as a talking stick, or as a ball to toss back and forth is often the beginning of a bond that can foster a conversation

Discussion:

- *Sometimes the simplest interventions are the most effective.*
- *Allow simple tactile interactions and observations time to take effect.*
- *Go with silly impulses of play and encouragement, allowing imaginative instincts to come into play.*
- *Shaking the Mimbaleball's hair can be a code for "I have something important to say" or "I need to take a break", etc.*

Adaptations:

- Include any adaptations you would make if it were a parent, group work, or age development (if any).
- Not everyone has a Mimbaleball, and that is okay. Using a stuff animal or child-friendly sensory item can be incorporated in its place. Try having a diverse selection if possible (i.e. stuffed bear, puddy, talking stick, or fidgets).

Contribution made by: Julia Chambers, Founder of the Mimbaleball

RAINBOW OF HOPE

Comfort Bag Resource - “My Book of Stuff” expressive arts activity by Rooster and Hen Resources

Goal: This activity is a visual way to show the various layers of hope children/adults may have, especially after a significant life event. The rainbow image of the sticker used can be seen as a symbol for hope.

What it Supports: Social emotional learning, coping skills, goal-setting, understanding that like hope, grief can also come in layers

Materials:

- My Book of Stuff journal and “I often hope for...” sticker
- Highlighters/markers/ pens

Instructions:

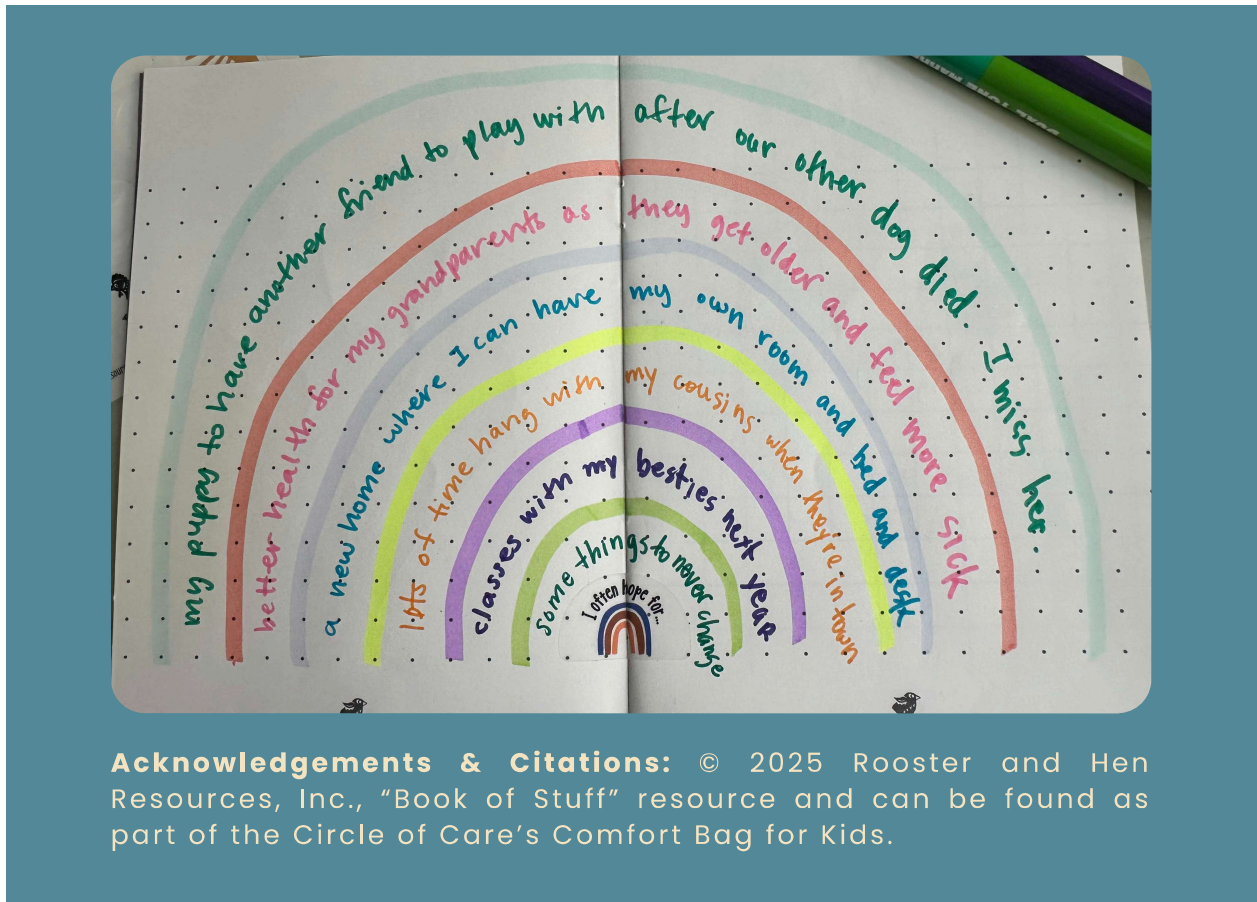
1. Choose a layout in the journal (dot pages are used in the example to be able to line up the arcs of the rainbow).
2. Stick the “I often hope for” sticker at the bottom of the page, centered. This acts as the midpoint gauge for drawing a rainbow.
3. Using a highlighter or marker, draw arcs of a rainbow, leaving ample room between arcs to write a phrase/sentence. Use the colors of the rainbow (ROYGBIV) or use any preferred color combination. Start with small arcs closest to the sticker and then expand.
4. Along the space left between arcs, take a coordinating color pen/marker to write in a hope/wish/goal. Using the same color pen for all writing is also fine.
5. Continue writing along every arc. Notice the various layers of hope/wishes/goals.
6. Optional: Color in the arcs with a highlighter of a coordinating color over the words, if desired. Highlighters help keep the words visible after coloring.

Discussion:

- *Are the phrases or sentences written in any specific order?*
- *Which of the hopes/wishes/goals written seem like something you’d consider sharing with a trusted friend/grownup? Why?*
- *If you could have a bigger sheet of paper, how many more arcs would you draw? What would you write along those arcs?*
- *Of all the hopes/wishes/goals written, which ones might have some steps you could take to help make them come true? Which ones seem more challenging to make happen?*

Adaptations:

- Instead of doing this activity in one sitting, it can be done over time.
- This activity can remain as a personal, individual activity or a shared activity with family/group members, where each person can take on a certain color arc.
- For pre-writers or those with visual impairment, grownups or other children can help write down hopes/wishes/goals on their behalf while they dictate.
- For those with emerging fine motor skills, this activity can be extended to a larger rainbow poster or image if writing/drawing on a smaller paper is less accessible.
- For a greater tactile experience, arcs can be drawn with puffy paint for a textured experience, especially for those with visual impairment. Ensure puffy paint dries before writing in the space.



Acknowledgements & Citations: © 2025 Rooster and Hen Resources, Inc., "Book of Stuff" resource and can be found as part of the Circle of Care's Comfort Bag for Kids.

SHAPES OF OUR FEELINGS MIND MAP

Comfort Bag Resource - "My Book of Stuff" expressive arts activity by Rooster and Hen Resources

Goal: This activity is an expressive way to show/share feelings in a creative, visual way by using the sticker shapes that come with the My Book of Stuff Journal, allowing children to see that everyone can feel/see feelings differently. Various members of the family/group can join in (as seen in the example).

What it Supports: Social emotional learning, identifying feelings, emotional expression, intergenerational communication, visualizing feelings that can sometimes feel abstract

Materials:

- My Book of Stuff journal and "shape" sticker sheet + "I FEEL..." sticker
- Permanent markers and/or ball point pens

Instructions:

1. Choose a layout in the journal (blank pages are used in the example). If desired, designate a specific journal as a "family/group journal" so individual journals can remain private.
2. Take out the "shapes" sticker sheet to use as inspiration for a "feelings" mind map. Stick the "I FEEL" sticker in the center to be used as the nucleus of the mind map.
3. Gather family/group members who would like to add to the mind map.
4. Take turns to choose a shape from the "shapes" sticker sheet. Using permanent markers/ballpoint pens, add details to the shape sticker to depict a feeling. Drawings and lines can extend outside the sticker. Embellish or keep it simple.
5. Write the feeling word next to the shape drawing.
6. Example depicts the following feelings: joyful, mad + angry, confused, excited, mid, in love, relaxed, meh, broken-hearted, perturbed, invisible, happy/sad, frustrated, high/med/low
7. Draw lines to connect the feeling shape to the "I FEEL" sticker.
8. Determine as a family/group when everyone might gather together to review the feelings or if the journal is "open" to all to read through.

Discussion:

- Share how the shape sticker chosen inspired a specific feeling (e.g., color, rounded edges, symbolism, etc.)
- Which shape stickers lend themselves to an easier association to certain feelings?
- Take a look at someone else's feeling drawing/shape. If you had to depict the same feeling, how might yours be similar or different?

Adaptations:

- Instead of doing this activity in one sitting, it can be done over time.
- This activity can remain as a personal, individual activity without having to share with others.
- Without using stickers, "draw" the emotions via facial expressions or other icons.
- In addition to the feeling word the artist chose, add in synonyms or another feeling word that can be associated with the shape/drawing.
- Use the feeling words and shape drawing to play a short game of charades where others guess which feeling on the page is being reenacted.
- Incorporate mirrors to observe facial expressions in order to draw them.
- Build on the mind map by adding other images, collage materials, and photographs as desired.



“DEAR ME”

Comfort Bag Resource - “My Book of Stuff” sharing activity by Rooster and Hen Resources

Goal: This activity is an interactive way to use the “Dear Me” sticker in the My Book of Stuff Journal sticker sheet that helps children see how their grownups encourage themselves without having to share verbally. Children can also add to the letter to self.

What it Supports: Coping skills, intergenerational story sharing, extending grace to ourselves, sharing perspective

Materials:

- My Book of Stuff journal and “Dear Me” sticker
- Markers/pens

Instructions:

1. Choose a layout in the journal (lined pages are used in the example). If desired, designate a specific journal as a “family/group journal” so individual journals can remain private.
2. Take out the “Dear Me” sticker and stick onto paper.
3. Gather grownups and whomever else who would like to add to the journal.
4. Take turns to write letters to self. Use different colored markers/pens for each person to color code, if preferred.
5. Continue the letters across as many pages as desired. Date the letters if desired.
6. Determine as a family/group when everyone might gather together to review the letters or if the journal is “open” to all to read through.

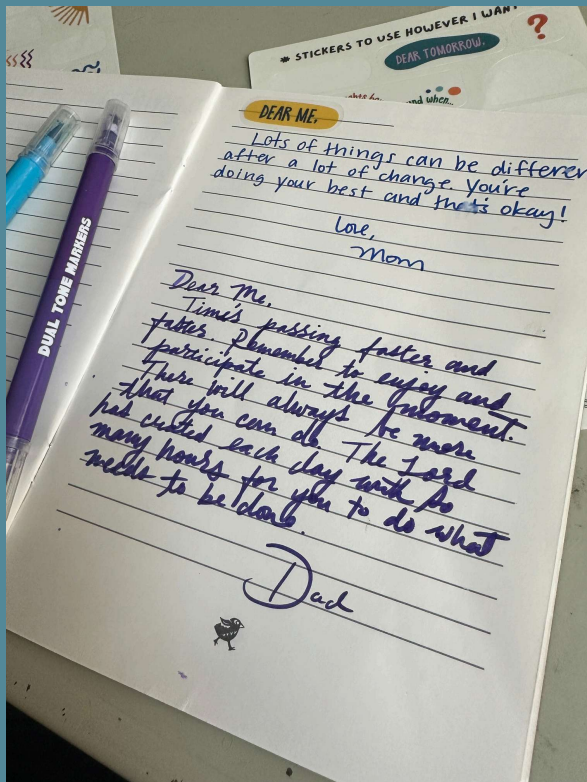
Discussion:

- *What are some common themes across the letters to self? Across grownups? Across children?*
- *What are some things you notice about your own letters to self over time?*
- *What might a letter to self contain if it were a letter written to ourselves when a specific event happened? (e.g. death of a pet, visitation from a relative, last day of school, etc.)*

Adaptations:

- Instead of doing this activity in one sitting, it can be done over time.
- "Write" letters with drawings or images, especially for pre-writers or family/group members who might write in different languages. Incorporating other My Book of Stuff stickers could be another outlet to write in a visual way.
- Read out loud letters during a family/group meeting for those who would like to share in that way. Others can read on behalf of someone or each person can choose to pass. This can help include family members who might have visual impairments and would like to be a part of the sharing.
- Practice various handwriting and font styles depending on the letter to show more expression.
- This activity can be extended to be a shared journal that continues over a longer period of time designated exclusively to "letters to self".
- The content can be expanded to not only letters to self but can be letters to each other in the family/group.

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A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

I was 26 years old when I first realized I was a child who had experienced profound grief—grief tied not only to death, but to the many complex challenges that shaped my family, including substance use disorder. That realization came unexpectedly, while volunteering at a bereavement camp for youth. It was in witnessing those children speak their truths—words that many adults, myself included, still struggle to say—that something shifted in me. Their honesty gave language to my own unspoken grief.

That moment became a turning point, a quiet call to action. I began to understand the power of naming hard things, and the healing that can begin when we are given space to speak and be heard. Since then, creating pathways for connection—between people, within communities, and through the act of telling our stories—has become my life’s work.

Over the past 14 years, I’ve had the immense honor of walking alongside children, teens, and families from all walks of life. They’ve taught me what bravery and vulnerability really look like. I am deeply grateful to Jerry Moe, Dr. Melissa Lunardini, Pamela Gabbay, the National Alliance for Children’s Grief, and the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation—for the ways they’ve shaped me and for the chance to serve and grow in community with so many compassionate leaders. And most of all, I thank the youth, who continue to show us the way.

As you use this guide, I hope you are reminded that language matters. That creating opportunities to talk about the hard things—grief, trauma, addiction, loss—is an act of love. And that no one is ever too young, too old, or too far gone to deserve understanding and support. You don’t have to do this alone. There are people and resources in your community ready to bridge the gaps.

With gratitude,

Jessica Porté

Jessica Porté
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Founder of Wayfinder Family Co.





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