



"Five Deep Breaths" Helping Children Learn to Cope with Grief

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Abstract

Over 5 million children in the United States experience the death of a parent or sibling before age 16 (Burns et al, 2020). These losses can result in challenges to the emotional, psychological, social, and academic development of the child (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2020; Berg et al., 2016). As many as 10.4% of children who experience the sudden death of a parent have high and sustained grief reactions lasting nearly three years after the death (Melhem et al, 2011). Programs that teach coping skills have been shown to reduce child distress after a traumatic event (Salloum & Overstreet, 2012).

Thus, a grief group intervention for children (i.e., Good Grief Clubs) was created by a community-based end-of-life and grief support agency to teach coping strategies, enhance awareness about grief, reduce isolation, and provide a place to share feelings. The organization developed a partnership with a large and diverse school district to provide grief groups in schools during the school day. University researchers analyzed data that were collected during the groups regarding two specific coping strategies that each student planned to use during difficult times (N = 155 middle and high school students).

Method

Participants

- 318 students (163 elementary school and 155 middle and high school students)
- 57.4% female; 41% male; 1.6% did not respond
- 28.1% Black, 28.8% Latinx, 4.4% Asian, 28.6% White, 6.7% Multiracial

Procedures

- Students attended 7 one hour grief groups during the school day at no cost
- Groups were facilitated by trained volunteers and school counselors
- Students, facilitators and school counselors completed evaluation surveys consisting of Likert and open-ended items; students were asked to provide two specific coping strategies that they planned to use during difficult times
- The research team conducted directed content analysis

Results

A majority (77.4%) of the group participants identified two coping strategies that they planned to use during difficult times, 9.7% identified one strategy, and 12.9% did not identify any strategies. The Good Grief Clubs were highly effective in providing a coping toolkit that students can use when they experience distress.



SCAN ME

School-based grief groups are an effective way for grieving youth to learn coping skills.

The REST framework can help educators and counselors equip children with a coping toolkit.

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T

Remember Them

Engage in Activities

Seek Support

Take Care of You

Coping Strategies Identified by Middle and High School Students

Coping Strategy	Number of Times Mentioned
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REMEMBER THEM	17
Reminisce and remember loved one	13
Engage in continuing bonds	4

ENGAGE IN ACTIVITIES	124
Listen to music	21
Journal/write	11
Engage in activities from Grief Group	11
Distract myself	10
Do art	9
Spend time alone/take time for oneself/ do something I enjoy by myself	9
Sleep	6
Exercise	5
Take a walk	5
Be in nature	5
Engage in other activities (not listed above)	32

SEEK SUPPORT	61
Talk to someone (unspecified)	43
Talk to an adult	11
Talk to a friend	7

TAKE CARE OF YOU	20
Take deep breaths/do breathing exercises	12
Express my emotions (e.g., cry)	9
Turn to my faith/spirituality & related practices	4
Engage in meditation or mindfulness	4

OTHER STRATEGIES	24
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Takeaways

- Good Grief Clubs were an effective way for grieving children to learn a variety of coping strategies.
- Future research is needed to evaluate how knowledge of coping strategies is related to use of coping strategies and improved grief outcomes for children.
- The REST framework may serve as a useful tool for educators, counselors, and grieving youth. The Good Grief Club could be revised to integrate the REST model into group sessions and activities.
- In addition, short-term one-time interventions could be developed to educate grieving students about healthy coping strategies using the REST model. Given that all students will experience grief at some point in their lives, REST could be taught in health classes in elementary, middle and high schools.