

Grief and Bereavement Support

For Parents of Children with Childhood-onset Heart Disease

Every family's experience of grief is unique. HeartKids is here to support children, parents and families and to offer guidance to support networks.

You can access support through the **HeartKids Helpline on 1800 432 785**, where you'll be connected with our compassionate support team. Our team understand the challenges of navigating grief from the loss of a child with a heart condition, and can help you access practical, emotional and mental health support.

Understanding Grief

Grief is a natural response to loss, encompassing a range of emotions, thoughts, and physical sensations. For parents, grief may involve profound sadness, anger, guilt, or even relief that their child is no longer in pain. All feelings are valid, and there is no "right" way to grieve.

Grief is not linear. It may ebb and flow over time, often resurfacing around anniversaries, milestones, or unexpected moments. Recognising and allowing space for these feelings can help in processing loss.

Tools for Navigating Grief

Grieving is a deeply personal journey, and there are practical steps you can take to help process your loss and care for yourself during this difficult time. Consider these strategies:

Connect:

Grief can feel isolating, but you do not have to navigate it alone. Sharing your feelings with trusted family members, friends, a counsellor, or a bereavement support group can provide comfort, understanding and connection during difficult times.

Engage in rituals:

Creating meaningful ways to honour your child's life, such as planting a tree, writing a letter, or participating in remembrance activities, can provide a sense of connection and healing. Cultural, spiritual or community practices may play a significant role in the grieving process.

Allow time: Grief takes time, and the process is different for everyone. Be patient and gentle with yourself and others in your family.

Care for your health: Eating well, staying hydrated, and seeking medical advice when needed are essential for your wellbeing.

Self care: Small daily routines, like short walks, gentle exercise or journaling, can help you feel grounded.

Helping Siblings Cope

Children grieve differently from adults, and their understanding of loss varies by age. Supporting siblings through grief can be particularly challenging while you, as a parent, are navigating your own emotions. It's important to acknowledge that you may not always have all the answers, and that's okay. Seeking support, for both yourself and your children, can help lighten this burden and ensure everyone in the family feels cared for.

Siblings may need:

Open communication: Provide honest, age-appropriate explanations about what happened. Use simple language and avoid euphemisms that can confuse younger children.

Reassurance: Children may worry about their own safety or the wellbeing of their parents. Offer consistent reassurance and maintain routines where possible.

Opportunities to express emotions: Encourage siblings to share their feelings through talking, drawing, or play. Let them know it is okay to feel sad, angry, or confused.

Involvement in remembrance: Including siblings in memorial activities can help them feel connected and valued as part of the grieving process.

HeartKids offers family counselling and can provide additional resources and help siblings navigate their grief.

Advice for Family and Friends

Supporting grieving parents and their families can feel daunting, but small gestures of care and understanding make a significant difference. Consider the following:

Offer practical help: Assist with day-to-day tasks like cooking, cleaning, or childcare to ease the burden on grieving parents.

Be present: Sometimes, just being there to listen without offering advice is the best support you can give.

Respect their grieving process: Everyone grieves differently. Avoid setting expectations about how they should feel or act.

Acknowledge the child's life: Share memories, use the child's name, and let parents know their child is remembered.

Avoid clichés: Well-meaning phrases like "They're in a better place" can feel dismissive. Instead, acknowledge their pain and loss.

Stay connected: Grief can be isolating. Check in regularly, even months or years later, to show your ongoing care and support.

Extended family members may also benefit from accessing grief resources or support groups to process their own emotions and understand how best to help.

Seeking Professional Help

If you find it difficult to cope or your grief feels overwhelming for an extended period, seeking professional support can be beneficial.

Signs that additional support may be needed include:

- Persistent feelings of hopelessness
- Difficulty carrying out daily tasks
- Withdrawal from relationships or activities
- Increased use of alcohol or substances

Bereavement counsellors, psychologists, or social workers experienced in grief can provide specialised care and guidance.

If you feel like you're in need of professional support, please contact your GP, your hospital social work team, HeartKids or Grief Australia on 1800 642 066 or visit grief.org.au.

How HeartKids Can Help

The HeartKids support team can offer both emotional and practical support, including referrals to mental health and wellbeing services.

HeartKids Helpline
Available 9am-5pm AEST, Mon-Fri
Call: 1800 432 785
Webchat: heartkids.org.au

Mental Health Counselling Service
HeartKids offers a confidential mental health counselling service - call the HeartKids Helpline on 1800 432 785 to obtain a referral.

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