


# SUPPORTING GRIEVING CHILDREN

CENTRE FOR GRIEF AND HEALING  
BEREAVED FAMILIES OF ONTARIO - HALTON/PEEL



ALL INFORMATION IN THIS BOOKLET WAS ADAPTED FROM [WWW.KIDSGRIEF.CA](http://WWW.KIDSGRIEF.CA).  
PLEASE VISIT [WWW.KIDSGRIEF.CA](http://WWW.KIDSGRIEF.CA) FOR MORE TIPS ON SUPPORTING CHILDREN.





# TABLE OF CONTENTS

3-4

STRATEGIES FOR  
SUPPORTING  
CHILDREN

5-7

MODELLING  
GRIEF

8-9

FEELINGS &  
BEHAVIOURS

10-11

STAYING  
CONNECTED WITH  
YOUR LOVED ONE

12-14

STRATEGIES FOR  
THE HOLIDAYS

15-17

WHEN MORE HELP  
MAY BE NEEDED



# STRATEGIES FOR SUPPORTING CHILDREN

## TALKING ABOUT GRIEF: EXPLAINING GRIEF

1. Grief is all of the feelings and thoughts we have when something really difficult happens in life. These may include: sad, mad, relief, guilt and exhaustion.
2. Causes of grief can include: illness, death, divorce, being separated from parents or other caregivers, relocating to a new community.
3. It's okay to feel happy and enjoy life even when we're grieving.

## TALKING ABOUT GRIEF: STARTING THE CONVERSATION



1. Offer children the chance to talk about their grief but don't force it. Pushing a conversation they don't want to have can have the opposite effect, leading them to shut down.
2. Create opportunities where conversation happens naturally such as:
  - Playing board games.
  - Spending time in nature.
  - Baking or cooking together.
  - Going for a hike, walk or drive.
3. When there's a death in a book or movie, or the family pet dies, use this as an opportunity to talk about grief.



## HELPING CHILDREN FEEL SAFE & SECURE

Day-to-day life can be seriously disrupted when a family member is dying or has died. Maintaining routines, limits and expectations as much as possible will help your children feel safe and secure.

### ROUTINES

Keep routines as regular as possible. For example:

- a. Continue with school and daycare.
- b. Keep a regular bedtime.

### LIMITS & EXPECTATIONS

Try to be consistent and predictable. It's easier for children to control their behaviour when they know their parent always responds the same way. For example:

- a. When a child receives the same consequence every time they verbally act out, they'll stop this behaviour much quicker than the child who sometimes gets away with it. Verbally acting out, while often seen as a negative response, could actually be an attempt to communicate unresolved emotions.

### OVERINDULGING

Monitor your desire to overindulge your children over a long period of time. For example:

- a. Some people try to ease children's grief by showering them with gifts.
- b. This can create unrealistic expectations which can create additional challenges for parents.

While it may seem caring to indulge grieving children, they benefit most from the time and attention of adults who are emotionally available to them.



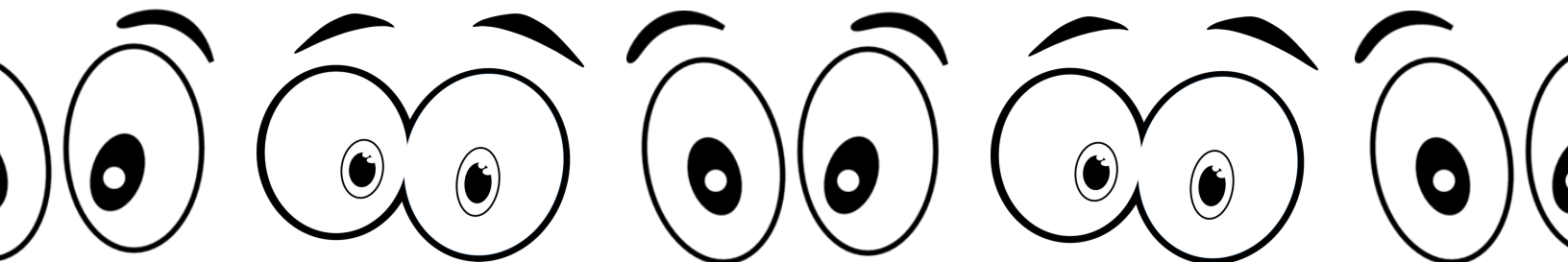
# MODELLING GRIEF

## LEARN BY WATCHING

Healthy grieving is like any other life skill - it needs to be taught and learned. Children learn how to grieve and care for their feelings by watching the adults in their lives. Children benefit when you teach them through words and actions that:

1. Grief is a healthy and natural response to the illness, dying or death of someone close to them.
2. Grief, like many of life's difficult experiences, isn't something to be fixed or avoided, but something to learn to live with.
3. Being "strong" includes experiencing our feelings and asking for support when we need it.
4. Even when we are grieving we can still find things that make us laugh, bring us joy and to be grateful for.

When children are allowed to witness adults cry, share thoughts and express feelings, this gives them permission to cry, feel and share. It's perfectly healthy for you to cry with your children of any age.



# FIVE IDEAS FOR MODELLING GRIEF

## 1. Be a Role Model

Children learn healthy ways of grieving by watching the adults around them.

1. Share with your child the ways that help you calm and soothe yourself.
  - Since everyone grieves differently, these activities can range from having some quiet time to talking to friends or family to digging in the garden to taking an energetic bike ride.
2. Show your own emotions.
  - It's okay to cry in front of your child.
  - If this upsets them, reassure them you're still able to care for them.

## 2. "Don't Cry"

Many children find it difficult to see parents and other adults express grief, especially through crying. They may ask you not to cry in front of them.

- Let your child know that grief includes many feelings such as sad, mad, worried, relieved and exhausted.
- Reassure them that these feelings are natural and healthy reactions. So is expressing those feelings in various ways such as crying.
- Explain that crying can help to release some of the feelings that are inside, and often people feel calmer afterwards.
- Let them know that while crying comes naturally to some, not everyone cries. This doesn't mean they don't care as much about the person who is dying or has died they just express their feelings differently.

## 3. Counselling & Group Support

Let your children know if you seek out counselling to help you deal with this death. This is another way to model your grief, showing them that:

1. It's okay to ask for professional support.
2. Counselling and group support can be helpful when life is difficult.



## FIVE IDEAS FOR MODELLING GRIEF

### 4. The Tearful Response

Children often don't share their feelings and questions because they worry they'll make you feel sadder.

1. If you find yourself weeping in response to a question or comment, let them know:
  - It's the illness or death that makes you sad, not what they said.
  - They don't need to fix or take away your sad feelings.
  - Sharing thoughts and feelings about what has happened helps you. It also allows you to support each other.
  - It helps you to know how they're feeling too.
2. Reassure your children that even though you're grieving, you're still able to take care of them.
3. Empower children by suggesting ways to be with you when you're upset - such as hug you, bring Kleenex or water, or just be with you.

### 5. The Angry or Impatient Response

If you have an angry outburst, or find yourself becoming impatient easily, talk with your child when you feel calmer.

1. Begin with an apology.
2. Explain that sometimes you're angry or impatient because the person has died (or is ill) - and this anger can come out in other places.
3. Since children do this too, it's a good opportunity to teach them about these responses and to model healthier ways to care for anger and impatience. For example:
  - Screaming into a pillow.
  - Hitting a punching bag or pillow.
  - Taking up an activity such as dancing, yoga or running that helps to release the feelings.



# FEELINGS & BEHAVIOURS

## TEACH THE WORDS

Help your children develop an emotional vocabulary. This is the ability to name different feelings:

I'm angry because...

I'm sad because...

I'm worried because...

When children can learn names and reasoning to their feelings, those emotions generally feel less confusing or overwhelming.

Let them know adults experience these same feelings.

## STATE WHAT YOU'RE WITNESSING

When a child is expressing big feelings, they often find it helps when their parent or another trusted adult:

- Calmly witnesses the behaviour
- Describes what they see the child doing.
- When necessary, suggests safer ways to express grief

"Wow, you're really hitting that pillow hard."

"I see you're making the face you make when you're really angry. Let's think about what we can do to help keep you safe and make your body feel more calm."

"I see you're spending a lot of time alone in your bedroom these days. Do you feel you need a lot of sleep since your mom died?"





## TEACH THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN FEELINGS & BEHAVIOURS

Explain that all their feelings are important and need care, but certain behaviour is not acceptable.

For example, it's acceptable to feel anger but it's not acceptable to physically express that anger in way that is unsafe for others or yourself.

### SORT OUT NEEDS

Try to identify the feelings and the need behind the behaviour, then find ways to meet those needs.

For example, if your child clings to you when you drop them off at school, they might be frightened you'll die too. Try asking:

"I've noticed that you are more clingy with me when I drop you off at school, what are you feeling when we do this?"

### EXPLORE ACCEPTABLE RESPONSES

Brainstorm together how to care for difficult feelings like anger, fear or sadness.

Talk about safely expressing their feelings without hurting themselves, another person or a pet, or an object such as a favourite toy. Some children find it helps to:

- Talk with someone they trust.
- Write or draw about what's upsetting them.
- Cry (alone or with someone).
- Look at photos or a memory box of the person they're missing.
- Cuddle something that belonged to the person or a blanket made of their clothing.

Write a My Feeling Very Sad List and My Feeling Very Mad List of things your child can do when they're upset:

1. Involve your child in writing the lists.
2. Have them sign it.

3. Place it somewhere they'll see it often, such as the fridge or their bedroom door.

4. Do one yourself - its a great way to model grief!



# STAYING CONNECTED WITH YOUR LOVED ONE

## RITUALS & ACTIVITIES

Rituals can be part of cultural, religious or spiritual heritage. They may be time honoured practices a family has followed for generations or they can be new activities that become part of the family fabric.

## FAMILY RITUALS

Here are some examples of rituals some families have adopted:

1. Light a candle.
2. Set a place for the person at the dinner table.
3. Reserve a place in the home for photos and mementos.
4. Remember the person at family birthdays and other holidays.
5. Continue to mark their birthday.
  - For example: Cook their favourite meal, go to a playground they loved or hike their favourite trail.
6. Tell stories about them.
7. At bedtime, talk about the best and hardest parts of the day that the child would like to share with the person who died.

## ARTS & CRAFTS

1. Decorate a frame to hold their photo.
2. Sew a pillow case, quilt or blanket from their clothing.
3. Draw pictures of favourite memories.
4. Create a playlist of music that reminds your child of this person.
5. Make a memory necklace or bracelet with beads to represent different memories.
6. Decorate a memory box for photos, letters and other mementos.



## INDIVIDUAL PRACTICES

1. Talk or journal to the person who died.
2. Continue activities they once enjoyed together (such as baking, nature walks, going to the hockey game or theatre).
3. Take up one of their hobbies.
4. Such as gardening or photography.
5. Wear or carry a special item they once wore.
6. Such as a watch, scarf or jewellery.
7. Reflect on what they taught your child and hoped for them.
8. Remember how they liked to spend time together.

## THE POWER OF RITUALS & TRADITIONS

Rituals can be a powerful way to maintain a connection with someone who has died. They can be based on ancient traditions, or they can be brand new ones created as a family. Finding ways to remember and continue to care about the person is a significant part of supporting grieving children. It teaches them that the person who died remains an important part of their life, and that death doesn't end a relationship.



# STRATEGIES FOR THE HOLIDAYS

Cultural and religious holidays that are typically times of celebration can be very difficult for a grieving family. The empty space left by someone who has died may feel bigger and deeper. Common greetings such as “Happy Holidays!” can feel almost cruel. Many families find the first year or two after the death to be particularly difficult.

It’s not uncommon for adults to wonder if they’ll ever enjoy this time of year again. Some discover that their fearful anticipation of the season is worse than the actual holiday. Others just try to “get through” it all and “survive.” Some find unexpected comfort, connection, and even meaning in traditions and rituals.

## FEEL THE FEELINGS

Children grieve differently than adults. This is also true during holidays. Many parents are surprised by their children’s ability to find joy and excitement in the season even when a death is recent. Let your children know that its okay to enjoy the holidays and have a good time while there are grieving.

While grief may surface from time to time during the holidays, the excitement often serves as a welcome break for children who are grieving. Some children find the time after the holidays to be the hardest as the difficult thoughts that were pushed aside during the celebration crowd back again.

When these holidays fall during the cold and dark months of the year in the northern hemisphere, grief can intensify for children and adults mourning a loss.

Encourage your children to express whatever they’re feeling when those emotions arise. Listen to them and don’t try to distract them from what they’re feeling. If you’re finding this time of year particularly difficult, let them know. Reassure them you’re happy they’re experiencing the joy of the season.



## HOLIDAY TRADITIONS

When a death is recent, many adults wonder if they should continue with holiday traditions, change them entirely, or take a break from them for a year. It may help to remember that there's no right or wrong way to spend the holidays.

Ask your children how they would like to spend this time. Are there traditions they'd like to keep? Should new ones be created to fit the change in your lives?

Do what's right for you and your family.

### IT'S OKAY TO SAY NO

These are often times of many events and invitations. Include your children in deciding which events to attend. Don't hesitate to decline invitations with

*"We're just not up to it this year."*

Know that it's okay to make plans then change them closer to the time.

## TRADITIONS OF REMEMBERING

Creating traditions to remember the person who died helps families with their grief. Choose some holiday activities that help your children express their grief and connect to the person who died in creative ways. These will be different for each family.

1. Make ornaments or decorations with photos of the person.
2. Put together a memory or photo book.
3. Create a recipe book of the person's favourite meals.
4. Participate in activities they enjoyed such as walks in nature and playing board games.
5. Buy a gift they would have liked and donate it.

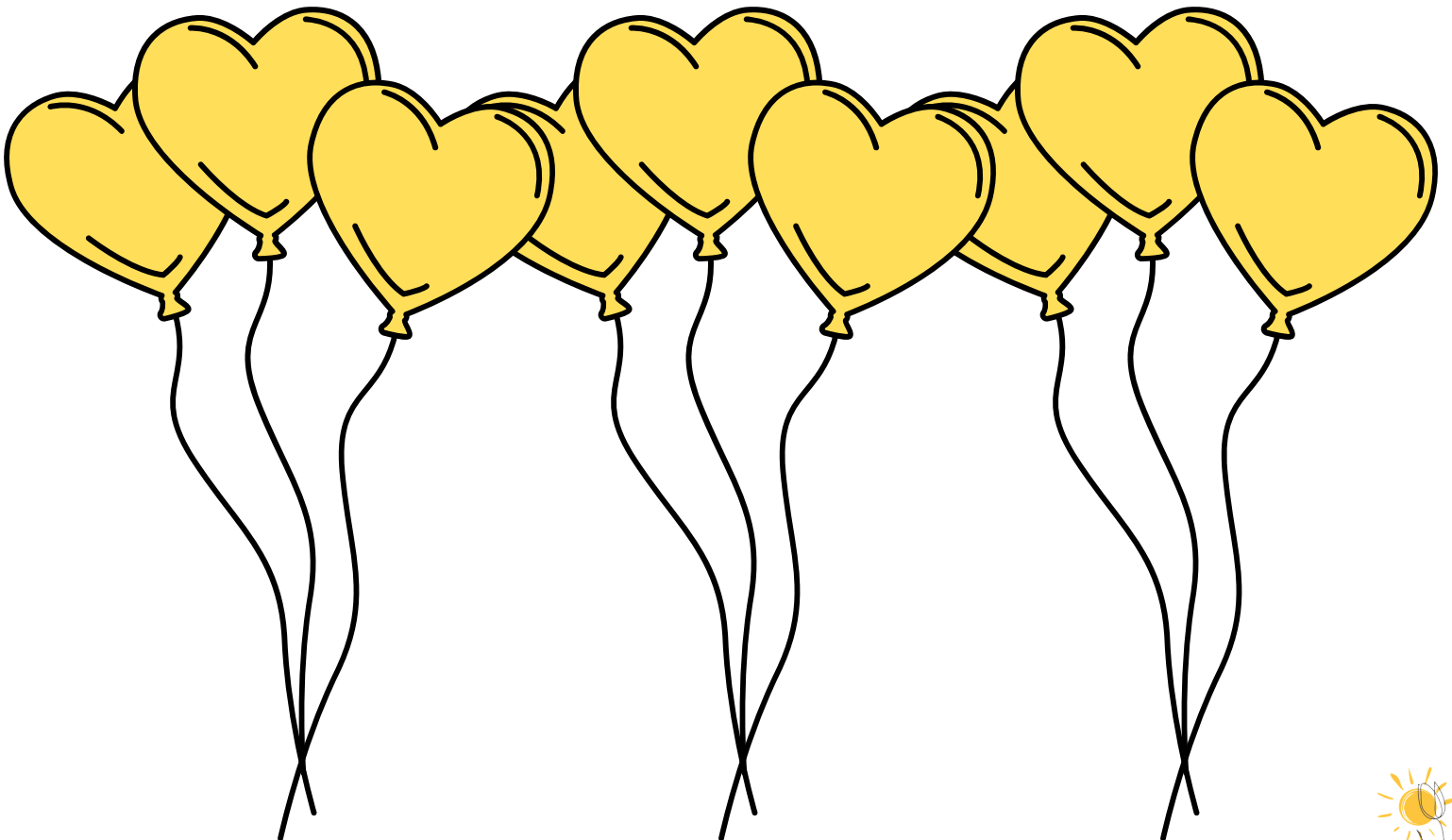
In many traditions, the holidays are also a time of quiet contemplation and remembering. Invite children to share holiday memories of the person, even if this brings up feelings of sadness and longing.



## HONOURING THE PERSON WHO DIED

There are many ways to maintain bonds to the person who died and keep their memory alive for your children.

1. Write down the traditions they enjoyed. In this way, they're captured and can be continued by future generations. For example:
  - a. Making gingerbread houses.
  - b. Decorating the house in a particular way.
  - c. Playing certain music.
2. Light a candle in their honour.
3. Set a place for them at the holiday table.
4. Make their favourite holiday foods.
5. Share stories about them.
6. Make a donation to an organization or cause that was significant to them.
7. Volunteer for an organization or cause that was important to them.
8. Make a toast to them at a meal or event.



## WHEN MORE HELP MAY BE NEEDED

As is the case with adults, grief can affect a child's body, emotions, thoughts and behaviour. Most reactions are normal and will gradually disappear.

Many children will experience some of the signs of grief below. However, if your child's symptoms become severe, or you're worried they're continuing for too long, it may be time to talk with your family doctor or other medical professional.

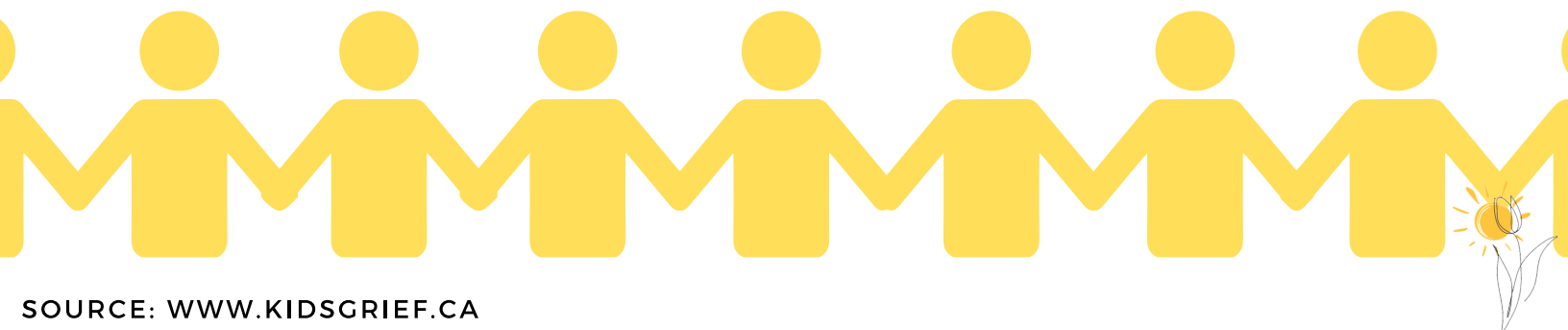
Get professional help if your child is harming themselves by hitting, cutting or has suicidal thoughts. If they're at immediate risk of suicide, call 911 or take them to your nearest emergency department.

### PHYSICAL

1. Experiencing chronic headaches and stomach aches with no obvious cause.
2. Sleeping too much or too little, waking frequently, having nightmares.
3. Eating too much or not enough.

### EMOTIONAL

1. Experiencing anxiety or depression.
2. Feeling numb or showing no sign of grief.
3. Refusing to think or talk about the person or the cause of their death.
4. Denying the death.

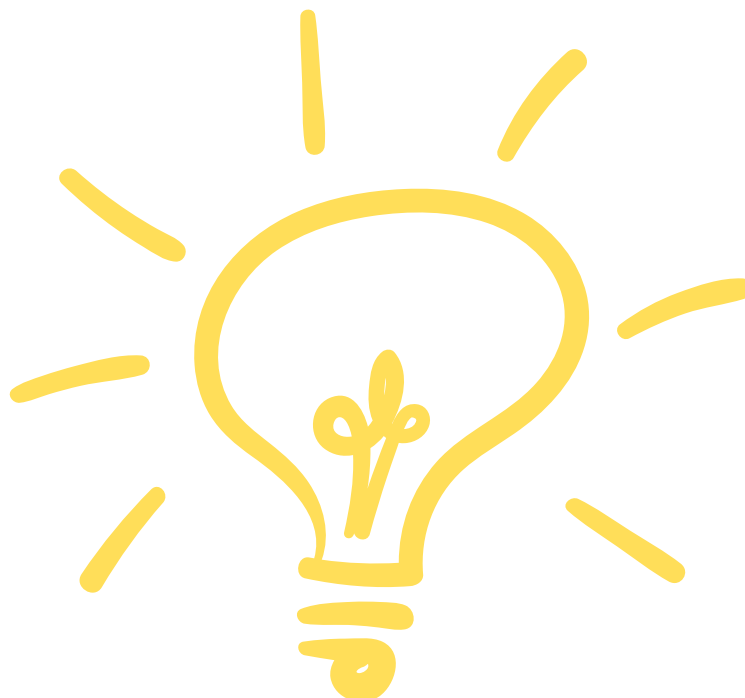


## BEHAVIOURAL

1. Overusing technology such as cell phones, video games and social media.
2. Struggling with daily activities such as attending day care or school.
3. Finding it difficult to concentrate.
4. Becoming reluctant to leave home or be apart from their parents.
5. Losing interest in activities and relationships they used to enjoy.
6. Avoiding places, things, people or activities they associate with the person or their death.

## THOUGHTS

1. Seeing repeated or unwelcome images of the person or the way they died.
2. This can happen during waking hours or as nightmares.
3. Worrying about the 4 Cs.
  - a. Did I CAUSE it?
  - b. Can I CATCH it?
  - c. Can I CURE it?
  - d. Who will take CARE of me?
4. Developing negative beliefs and poor self-esteem.
  - a. For example, feeling they're a "bad person" or "not good at anything."





## SEEKING PROFESSIONAL HELP: CHILDREN NEED ADDITIONAL HELP IF THEY'RE

1. Behaving in dangerous ways such as running into the road or away from home.
2. Having anxiety attacks or panic attacks.
3. Harming themselves by hitting, pulling out their hair, or scratching excessively.
4. Any behaviour that causes concern beyond healthy grief expression.

## SEEKING PROFESSIONAL HELP: OLDER CHILDREN NEED ADDITIONAL HELP IF THEY'RE:

1. Engaging in excessive drug or alcohol use.
2. Having many casual sexual relationships.
3. Engaging in any other dangerous or high risk behaviours.
4. Having anxiety attacks or panic attacks.
5. Harming themselves by hitting, cutting, pulling out their hair, or scratching excessively.

### IS THIS A SUICIDAL THOUGHT?

When someone important to them dies, some children will tell their parents they want to die too. This isn't necessarily suicidal thinking. Sometimes they are expressing a longing to be with the person who died. If you're in any doubt, seek professional help immediately.

Don't keep thoughts of harm or suicide to yourself!

Get professional help if your child is harming themselves by cutting or has suicidal thoughts. If they're at immediate risk of suicide, please call 911 or take them to your nearest emergency department.

