

Helping People with Intellectual Disabilities Cope with Loss during COVID

Assisting in the grieving process:

- Do not evaluate or judge the grieving process against that of others.
 - Some people may be very emotional and others may not have a reaction.
 - Reassure that everyone is different in their reactions to grief and that is okay.
- Thoughts and feelings must be validated.
- Keep discussions consistent with the level of understanding.
 - Limit details that won't be understood or lead to fear or confusion.
- Provide support to process it, answer questions as accurately in language that will be understood.
- Enable involvement in social and spiritual activities surrounding death.
 - i.e. Zoom, facetime, writing letters to friends and loved ones, making cards, saying prayers, planting a garden etc.
- Keep connections with key supportive relationships and foster new relationships.
 - Write letters/email/facetime with family, friends day program peers/staff.
- Maximize opportunities for expression of grief and condolences.
 - i.e. Vigils, memory board, keeping pictures/mementos out, continuing to set person's plate at the table.
- Be patient; there is no clear timetable for the grief process.

Strategies to support:

- Listen and be present. Sometimes people just need to be heard and acknowledged. Give the opportunity for the person to express their feelings- whatever those feelings may be.
- Provide reassurance that you are there to listen and help them through this.
- Promote conversations about the loved one.
 - ask questions about their favorite or a funny memory of the person.
- Provide opportunities for the individual to make connections to the past that involve the person.
 - looking at pictures, make memory books or boxes, light a virtual candle, setting place at table, allow them to have a keepsake or memento, mass card, bring up memories or stories about the person.
- Some simple phrases to offer support:
 - “I am so sorry for your loss”
 - “I wish I had the right words”
 - “You and your loved one will be in my thoughts and prayers”
 - “My favorite memory of _____ is.....”
 - “I am here for you”
- Or even just say nothing, just listen to the person.

Remember:

- Individuals with disabilities may experience grief like all of us however the social norms we follow may not be the same. They may show their grief, not show grief, have a delayed reaction, become scared or sad, or express relief and turn the focus on themselves.
- Be aware and understand cultural and religious differences regarding death and grief.
- This is a challenging and different time, and the amount and types of loss that we may be experiencing may be unprecedented.