![PATHways Center for Grief & Loss logo]

BEREAVEMENT AND THE
DEVELOPMENTALLY DISABLED

Individuals who are developmentally disabled and bereaved are a unique population. Grief for the developmentally disabled may take longer to work through. This is due to their cognitive functioning, their need to have information repeated many times and their life-long dependency attachments. Simple honest explanations, as well as the clear intention to include the individual in the process as much as possible is the most effective way to support someone who is developmentally disabled and grieving.

Philosophical discussions of death have little meaning. Concrete examples are a necessity. Teachable moments and applications to daily life are the most helpful way to reinforce the concepts. These literal experiences will deepen understanding. *Lifetimes* by Mellonie and Ingpen, *The Dead Bird* by Margaret Brown, *It Must HURT A Lot* by Doris Sanford are excellent books to help make the idea more concrete and understandable.

The Need for Repetition:

Those who are developmentally disabled are more likely to forget what is taught and require more frequent explanations to grasp the ideas. Don't assume that once you've explained the death, or even once they've experienced a loss, they will therefore understand the next time. Frequent review and repetition is needed. Role-playing, art activities, and teachable moments about the cycle of life and death are invaluable tools to use since they will have difficulty generalizing to new situations. For example, although you may have explained in great detail what to expect at a viewing at the funeral home, it may be wise to arrange for a private showing before the public one. This will allow the developmentally disabled person a chance to clarify what was understood, to ask questions and feel more fully prepared before dealing with the added emotion that occurs at the time of the actual viewing when a lot of people are around.

Similar to children because of cognitive limitations, those who are developmentally disabled often see the world from an egocentric viewpoint, so when a death occurs they may be more likely to assume that they are to blame. Watch for magical thinking. They will also pick up on the intensity of the emotions around them regardless of what they have been told, so it is not wise to withhold information. They will fill in the blanks regarding what they haven't been told and often their thoughts are worse than the reality.

Addressing Behavioral Problems:

Acting out behaviors are common. It is important to remember that these are in response to the grief and should therefore be viewed as clues to emotions. Deeply troubling thoughts, concerns or fears may be underlying the feelings and behaviors, and these can be quite persistent. Look for ways to uncover these. While modifying the behavior also explore the feelings that may be causing the acting out behavior. As a caregiver, your role is to facilitate the grief process and appropriate means of expressing feelings. Remember that "grief expressed is grief diminished."

(over)

STRATEGIES

- Provide a safe place…
  - to ask questions
  - to mourn

- Use teachable moments throughout the year

- Routines are helpful…
  - they promote security
  - and predictability

- Look for the question behind the question

- Draw from your own experiences and examples

- Provide hope for healing

- Encourage expression of feelings and memories with any interventions listed which may be appropriate

INTERVENTIONS

- Art Activities
  - Drawing
  - Clay Modeling
  - Painting
  - Collages
  - Body Tracing

- Writing Activities
  - Journaling
  - Letters
  - Sentence Completions
  - Poems
  - Acrostics
  - Lists

- Puppet Activities

- Memorials
  - Memory Book
  - Memory Box
  - Photo Album
  - Scrap Book
  - Ornaments

- Story Activities
  - Books
  - Storycards