



Sleep Tips for Grieving Kids

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Recently at one of our groups, the kids were asked how they sleep at night, and not surprisingly, about 99% of the group expressed that since their loss, they have trouble sleeping...either getting to sleep, waking up frequently, or having nightmares. Many parents wonder, "Is this normal?" In grief, absolutely...sleep disturbance is one of the most common grief "symptoms", and it's important to understand the potentially adverse consequences on our health. Research has shown us that sleep deprivation impacts:

- the immune system, resulting in high correlations with various health conditions
- cognitive functioning, memory, and learning capacity, which all affect school performance
- mood...insomnia and depression feed on each other. Sleep loss often aggravates the symptoms of depression; treating sleep problems can help depression symptoms, and vice versa.

You don't need a clinician to tell you that simply put, poor sleep makes us feel worse, and when we're already struggling with so many challenges of loss, it adds insult to injury. Though this list is not exhaustive, here are five things you can do as a caregiver to help your child get the restorative sleep they need:

1. Daily exercise

Make sure your child gets plenty of good exercise at some point in the afternoon, ideally outside...the natural light affects our serotonin levels. Minimize sugar and caffeine, especially after 3pm.

2. Create a consistent bedtime routine

By doing this, not only are you teaching them the importance of self-care, but the consistency factor in and of itself is important for bereaved children. Structure, routine, and consistent expectations help provide children with the sense of safety they need to mitigate grief's common feelings of lack of control.

3. Go to bed with peaceful thoughts

The thoughts we fill our mind with before bed set the stage for our night. We've all heard the advice to never go to bed angry...in grief, it's also helpful for children to never go to bed fearful. After loss, it's common for children to fear something bad happening to them or to their surviving loved ones, and many children are afraid to go to sleep, whether this is consciously verbalized or not. Whatever nurturing communication you can establish with your child in the evening to invite them to share any worries, will be helpful. One idea that can be done at home is to create a "worry box"...before bedtime, have your child name and write down on a small piece of paper any worry they may have...together, release that burden by putting it in a small box, and consider taking the box to another room. It's important to then help them replace that worry with something reassuring before bed, such as a prayer, affirmation, comforting words or images, or a favorite stuffed animal.

4. Create a sleep sanctuary

Refrain from tv/computer/screen time an hour before bed, minimize electronic lighting in the room, and in general, make their sleep environment comforting and inviting.

5. Invoke the Relaxation Response

Grief is perhaps one of the most enduring forms of stress on our bodies and minds, and especially after a traumatic life event, our cells continue holding that “fight or flight response”, which can have harmful effects. The good news is that this stress response can be reversed by relaxation, and I’d like to offer some ideas of mindful relaxation practices to try with your children:

- **” tummy toy breathing”**: this is an exercise we practiced in group....lying flat on their back with eyes closed, have your child place a small toy on their tummy....in silence, practice breathing slowly and deeply for several minutes....have them feel their toy rising with each deep belly breath....you’ll be amazed at the results!
- **“the spaghetti technique”**: another exercise learned in group....child consciously tenses up their body like an uncooked piece of spaghetti, holding in their muscles for ten seconds, then releases into relaxation like a cooked wet noodle....repeat process until they’re fully relaxed!
- **“pizza massage”**: a fun and relaxing way to connect with your child....if they’re comfortable with you massaging their backs, pretend you’re making a pizza as a way to experience different massage strokes...”kneading the dough” can feel wonderful on their backs, then ask your child what toppings they want, playfully pretending to add toppings to the pizza, ending with a goodnight hug and kiss!
- **a good old-fashioned warm bath**: there’s nothing to replace this longstanding remedy, and there are many great aromatherapy bubble bath products made for children these days than can enhance relaxation.

I hope these tips are helpful for your child, and I lovingly encourage you too, as caregivers, to modify and use these practices to take care of yourselves as well!