



St. Francis Hospice



# SOMETHING HAS CHANGED

FOR CHILDREN & PARENTS ABOUT ILLNESS AND DYING



Written by the social work team  
of St. Francis Hospice Dublin.

We would like to thank all the children who inspired this book and allowed us to share parts of their stories in the book. Each example of how children coped with change comes from a number of children, with some details changed and new names given in the story.

---

© St Francis Hospice Dublin, 2025

# CONTENTS

---

<b>When someone is sick .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Something has changed.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Things you may think or feel .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>What happens when someone dies.....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>What does dead mean? .....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>What happens next .....</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>Funeral.....</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>What might help .....</b>	<b>38</b>



# WHEN SOMEONE IS SICK

**It can be a confusing time when someone you care about is very sick. This book will help to give you information about what to expect. It will talk about some of the worries you might have. While you cannot take the illness away, there is a lot you can do to help.**

It is normal to feel confused or be worried about the people you love when someone in the family is sick. There are different types of serious illness, like cancer or motor neurone disease (sometimes called MND). It is important to know that no one caused the illness. It is something the person you love has in their body. They cannot give the illness to anyone else.





*I said horrible things  
when we had a fight.  
Did I cause this?*

*Did this happen  
because I was bold  
and didn't listen?*

*If I'm good, will  
they get better?*

*Will I get sick  
like that?*

*Is this my fault?*



**Remember** nobody caused this illness.  
It is nobody's fault.

**Remember** you cannot catch the illness.

**Because the person you love has a serious illness, they won't get better. Even though the doctors and nurses have worked hard to make them feel better, they cannot cure it. They will continue to help them feel comfortable and manage any aches or pains they may have.**

The person you love will start to get more tired, sleep more often and have less energy to do things like play games or drive the car.

As they get sicker, they may not want food and drinks as much anymore. They may sleep more. As time moves on, they may find it hard sometimes to open their eyes. They might not talk as much as they used to.



**Remember** they can still hear you and you can chat to them.



Ben fell off his  
bike and ripped  
his trousers

Today I went  
to the park

- | **Remember** it is okay to chat to the person you love.
- | **Remember** it is okay to give them a cuddle or to lie beside them.
- | **Remember** it is okay to enjoy things.



School was terrible. I got  
homework on a Friday!

Rover chased a  
squirrel, it was funny

I love you

School was fun



# SOMETHING HAS CHANGED

**Sometimes when someone has a serious illness it can change how they look or act.**

They may act or talk in ways that you are not used to.

People who are sick can be very tired, even after a long sleep. They can get irritated or annoyed more easily. Sometimes they might be cranky.

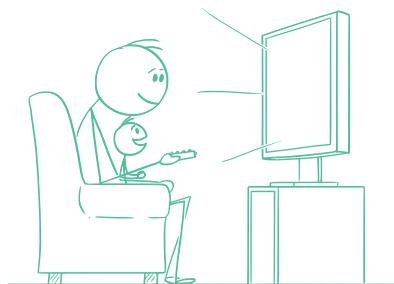


**Remember** they can't always stop this, and it is not your fault.

**PAUL is 9.** His granny has cancer. Granny always brought Paul to the library. Now she is too tired to bring him. Paul told his teacher. She gave him a book from the school library that Paul could bring home. He read the book to his granny.



**JAKE is 8.** His dad has a brain tumour. His dad's face is all puffy. His dad swears and shouts, which he didn't do before he got sick. Jake tries to help by giving dad a big cuddle when they watch tv before bed.



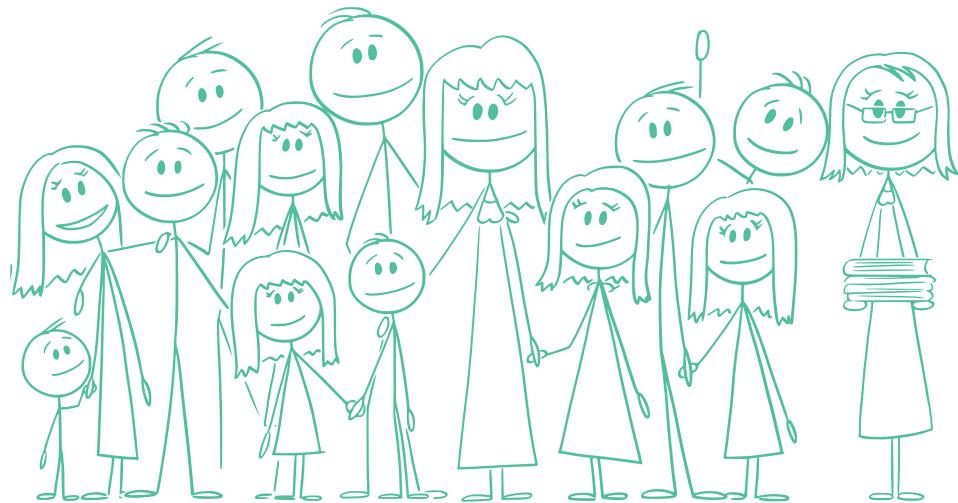
**JESSICA is 12.** Her mam has motor neurone disease (MND). Mam used to bring her to football but can't anymore as she can't drive. Jessica's uncle brings her now. At first Jessica didn't like it because it wasn't the same. Mam encouraged Jessica to go and have fun. The next week, Jessica enjoyed her match. Her uncle sent mam photos of her goal. Jessica told mam all about it when she got home.



It can be upsetting to see and hear the person you love so different to how they were before the illness. You may find yourself getting upset, irritated, angry, embarrassed, shouting, laughing, crying. This is okay. It is you trying to cope with the changes in the family when your loved one is sick.



**Remember** there are lots of people who can support you.



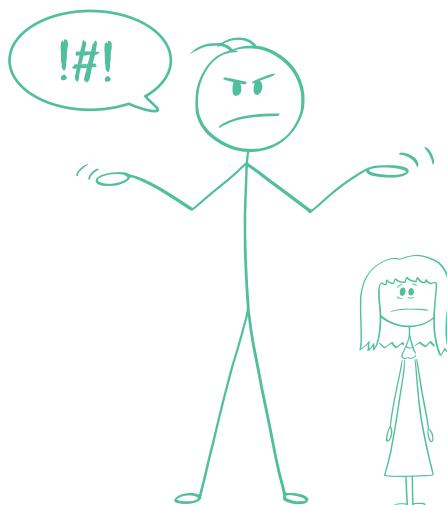
## **When someone is very ill, people might behave differently around you.**

Some people talk more to you. Some may stop talking to you. This may be because they don't know what words to use or what to say about your loved one being sick. Sometimes you might like it if someone asks you 'how is your mam after her treatment?' or 'how is your granddad since he got home from hospital?'

But sometimes you might not want to talk about it. You might have a lot of different feelings about what is happening and some days you might be too sad to talk. You might want to keep your family business private. Other days, it can help to talk to someone.



**ANN is 6.** Her dad has cancer. At the end of class Ann's teacher quietly asked her how her dad is. Ann told her teacher that dad is cranky and sad a lot of the time. Ann's teacher explained that sometimes when people are sick, they get sad or cranky. She told Ann it was not her fault. She asked Ann what might help dad? Ann didn't know. Her teacher said they could make special cards in school tomorrow to bring home. Dad would like that. She also said they could ask mammy to get other ideas.



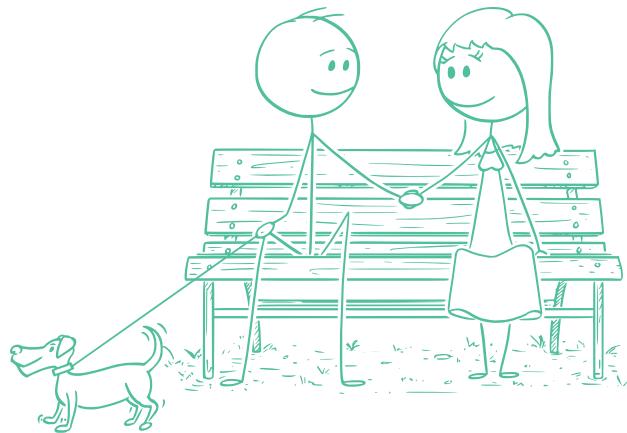
## **We all have arguments from time to time.**

You might argue with your friends, and you always sort it out. There can be disagreements when someone is sick. This may be between your parents or between them and other adults, or between you and them. It can be upsetting when family members disagree or argue. Disagreements at home can be a worry sometimes, or cause sadness or anger.

Talk to your parent, teacher or another adult if you are worried about arguments at home.



**CLARA is 10.** Her mam has breathing problems and is on oxygen all the time. Her mam loves walking their dog Charlie. Her dad worries that maybe mam should stay inside and rest. Clara hears her mam and dad arguing about this. Mam has tears in her eyes. Dad gives mam a big hug and tells her he understands that she wants to do the things she loves. They agree to do the dog walk together in the park. That way if mam gets too tired, dad can walk Charlie and mam can take a break. She can sit on one of the benches.





# THINGS YOU MAY THINK OR FEEL

**There are different thoughts and feelings that many people have when someone in their family is seriously sick.**

Not everyone will have all of these thoughts or feelings, and some people say they don't really have any of these.

The thoughts and feelings might come and go as well.



**Remember** all thoughts and feelings are okay. Sometimes you might need help to find ways to express them, so they don't build up.

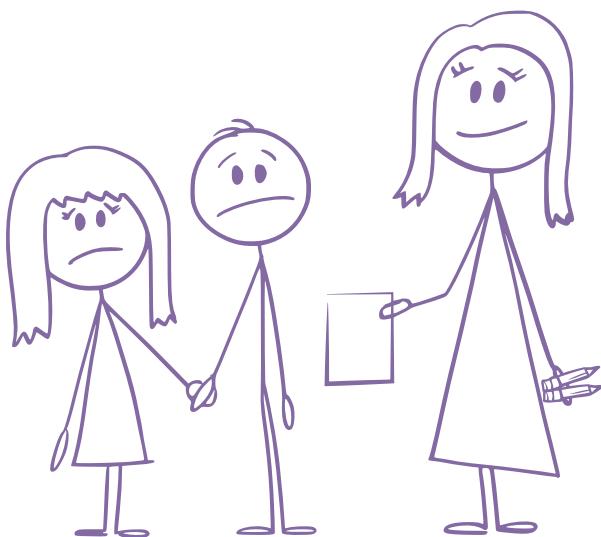


## SADNESS

You might feel sad because the person you love is sick. They can't do all the things they used to do. Your friends might not understand what you are going through as it has not happened to them. They might not know what to say or do. It is okay to feel sad sometimes.

It can help to let this out. Some people find crying can help. Others want a hug or to talk to someone about what is happening. Sometimes it can help you to spend some time on your own and then join family or friends when you're ready.

**MOLLY is 12.** Her mam has been sick for a while. She can't do all the things she did before. Some days Molly feels sad. Other days, her younger sister Susie and her brother Robert are sad. It can help to give each other a hug. Sometimes they draw a picture for their mam. Sometimes Molly, Susie or Robert can make the other person laugh and have fun playing to distract them from being sad.





## ANGER

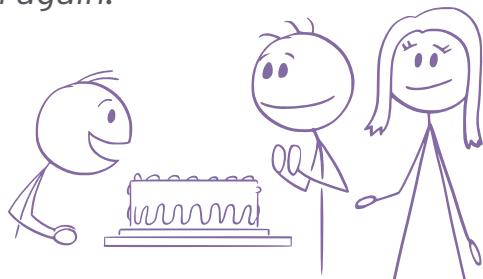
It is natural to feel angry when someone we care about is sick. You can feel angry about what is happening to you or your family. You can feel angry at all the changes. You can feel angry that others in the family are too busy caring for the person who is sick to have time to do things with you.

You understand it is not their fault, but it's still hard.

**BOBBY is 11.** He likes spending time with his granny in the garden and having cake. Granny is a good baker. Bobby doesn't get to spend much time with granny anymore. His mam is always busy looking after her. Bobby understands his mam needs to help granny, but is angry he is being forgotten, and granny is sick.

*Bobby began to get into trouble at his football practice and in school. Bobby's parents helped him to see that the feeling of anger is natural. They helped him to find different ways to express it, so he didn't get into trouble. They helped him to bake a cake for granny using her recipe. They planned a movie night together.*

*Bobby found this helped to manage his anger and his worry. He began to enjoy his football again.*





## WORRY

Lots of people worry about different things. It is normal to worry about someone who is sick. You can worry if they are in pain or cranky. You can worry the person is going to die and what will happen to them and to you. It is okay to have worries about this. It can help to talk to your parent or an adult you trust about your worries. They can support you through this.



**Remember** nobody caused this illness.  
It is nobody's fault.

**RUBY is 8.** Her grandad used to collect her after school. They had great fun building bird tables and watching the birds in grandad's garden. Grandad hasn't been able to collect her for the past few months as he has been sick. Ruby found it hard going to the childminders at first. Now she enjoys going and playing games with the other children.

Grandad is getting sicker. Mam and dad have said he is going to die soon. Ruby worries grandad doesn't miss her like she misses him. When she talks to her dad, he says grandad does miss Ruby and wants her to visit. Ruby worries that dying will hurt. Her parents talk to her about the medicine the nurses and doctors could give grandad to help him.

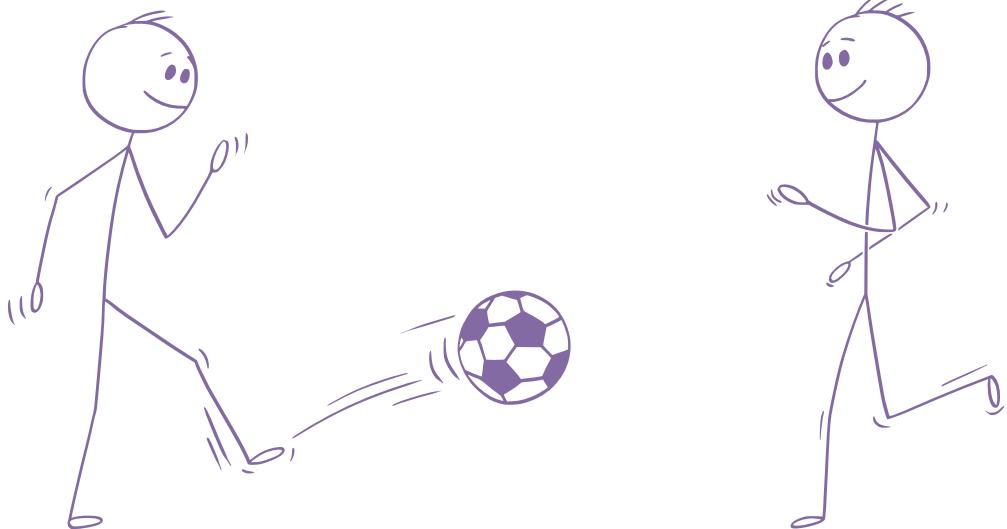
Ruby visits grandad. They watch the birds in the garden together. Grandad tells Ruby he will die soon. He tells her not to worry, as he will be in her heart always and forever.



## CONFUSION

Sometimes our thoughts and feelings can be jumbled up. A lot has changed and may still be changing for you and your family. It is important to spend time doing things you like to do. Sometimes we lose interest in our hobbies for a while. Spending time doing fun things can be a good distraction. It can help not to think about all the changes for a while.

**JOEY is 12.** His dad has been sick for a while. A lot has changed at home. Dad is tired a lot and mam has to work. Some days Joey gets fed up and doesn't feel like going on his PlayStation or going to his football match. Other days he wants to stay out all the time with friends. It's confusing really. His uncle Derek says it's okay to have fun even when someone is sick. Mam says he is right.





# WHAT HAPPENS WHEN SOMEONE DIES

**Over a few days or weeks, the person may get weaker.**

The doctors and nurses will talk to your family about this. They will tell them that the person is beginning to die. Your parents or someone close to you will talk to you to let you know. They will explain what dying means.

# DYING

Dying means that a person's body is slowing down before they die. When someone is dying, they are not able to do the things they did before. Their body gets more tired and they sleep more. They don't eat or drink as much because their body doesn't need this. They can be in bed a lot of the time. They are more quiet and don't talk as much. Sometimes their breathing is slower or different or noisier.



**Remember** they can still hear you when you talk to them but might not answer you all the time.

Sometimes a lot of family and friends visit the person when they hear they are dying. Some people call this 'saying goodbye' before the person dies. Some people don't say the words 'goodbye' out loud, but others do. Some people might tell the person how much they love them. Others spend time with the person sharing stories. There can be tears at times. There can be laughter at other times.



## THINGS YOU CAN DO

There are lots of things you can do to help the person and other people in your family. You can show them how much you love them by **drawing a picture** for them. You can **give them a hug**. You can **blow them a kiss**. You can **light a candle**. You can **say a prayer**.

You can **talk to them** or other people about the person.

You can **share happy and sad stories** and talk about the **things you love to do together**.



# WHAT DOES DEAD MEAN?

---

When someone dies their body stops working.

Their heart stops beating. Their lungs stop breathing. Their ears stop hearing. Their eyes stop seeing and they don't smell anymore. Their body gets cold and pale. They don't feel it if you touch their skin. They don't feel hungry or thirsty or happy or sad. They don't feel any pain. When someone dies, they stay dead.

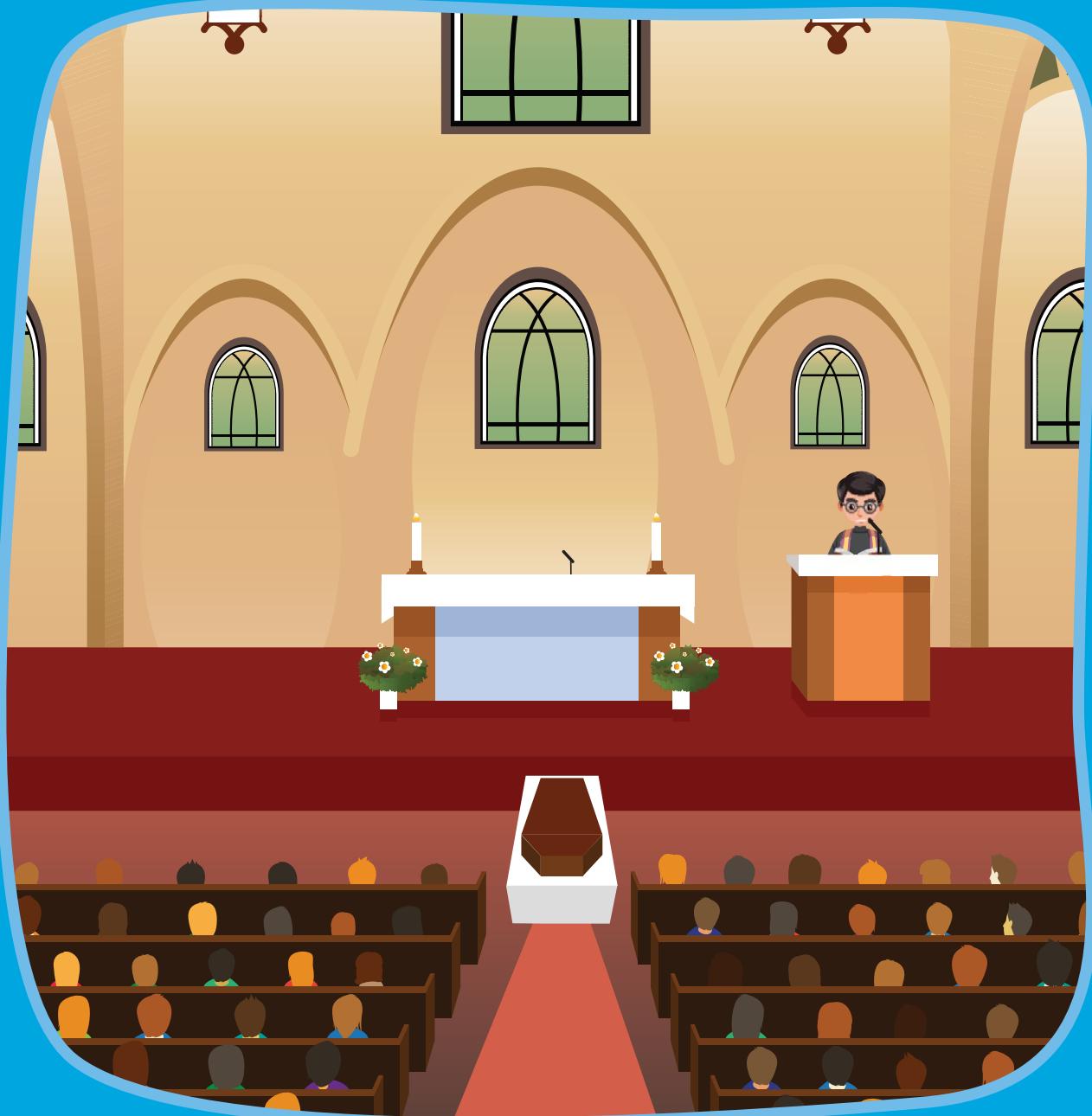


# WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

Your family will tell you when the person dies. Sometimes people cry when they are telling you. Your family will talk to you about saying goodbye to the person. You might see the person's body in the bed, or in a special box called a coffin.

Some people are scared of seeing the person as they are not sure how they will look or feel. The person may look like they are asleep, but when they are dead, their body does not work anymore. Some people believe that the part of the body you cannot see, called the soul, goes to heaven.

You might want to put a drawing or a card or letter in the coffin with the person to say goodbye to them.



# FUNERAL

Different families have different types of ceremonies called funerals. A funeral is a way to say goodbye to the person who died and to tell people about their life. People can be sad at a funeral but also tell happy stories about the person who died.

You might need to take a day off school for the funeral. Your parents can talk to the school about this. Sometimes people from the school might go to the funeral. They can also help to support you when you are feeling sad or angry or worried.

You might get a job at the funeral like bringing up a picture or a symbol to remind people of the person who died, or you might say a prayer. Some of your friends might go to the funeral.



## BURIAL

After the funeral, the coffin may be buried in the ground in a graveyard. This is called a burial. Other times, the person is cremated, which means their body is turned into ash.

People who come to the funeral might gather with your family to talk more about the person who died. People want to show their support for you and your family.

In the weeks after the funeral, you might visit the graveyard. If the person was cremated, the ashes might be buried, or scattered in their favourite place, or kept in a special container called an urn at home.



# WHAT MIGHT HELP

We can feel lots of different thoughts and feelings when someone we love is sick or dying or has died. You may be angry, happy and sad all in the same day. You might be cranky or grumpy as it is a confusing time.

You may like seeing your friends, or spending time playing, but sometimes you might not. You may want to talk about the person who is sick or has died. Other times you might not want to talk about it. Other people in your family may be feeling or thinking or acting the same as you. Sometimes, they may be different to how you are. It can help to talk to others in your family to understand. You can help each other to find ways to cope with this.



**Remember** everyone deals with this in their own way and that's okay.



## Remember it is okay to:



cry



laugh



see your  
friends



go to  
school



to talk to a friend or  
to a family member



not to  
talk



to give a hug  
or get a hug

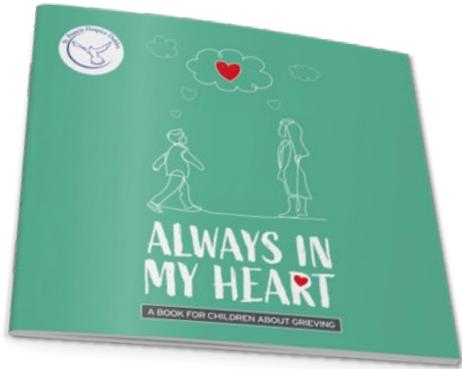


find ways to  
remember the person

It can help to do things we enjoy like playing sports or listening to music. Some people like to sing or to kick a football. Some people like to dance. You can remember the person and they will always be in your heart.

# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

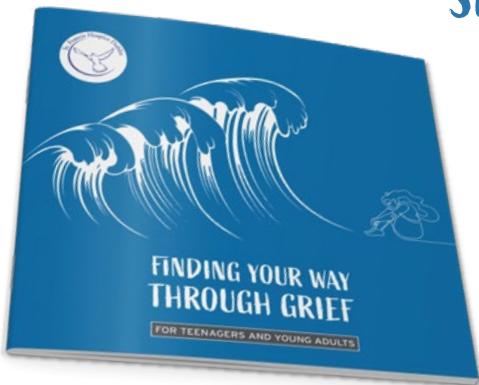
When someone dies, you can have a lot of new thoughts and feelings. This is called grief. You can ask your family to get more information to help you understand your grief. St. Francis Hospice has **a book to help explain grief to children**. You can order it here:



Scan QR Code  
for link



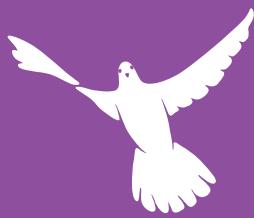
We also have **a book on grief for teenagers and young adults**:



Scan QR Code  
for link







St. Francis Hospice

Supported by



#AmazonInCommunities

ISBN 978-1-7399800-2-3

A standard 1D barcode representing the ISBN 978-1-7399800-2-3. Below the barcode, the numbers '9 781739 980023' are printed.