

Pathways of Hope: Meeting Special Needs
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The loss of a loved one is difficult. It is painful, disorienting, and affects our lives in many unexpected and unpleasant ways. As each person works towards healing their loss, they rely on familiar ways of coping that have been helpful to them in the past. Although each individual will have her/his own repertoire of helpful ways to cope, there are certain things that are universally helpful. Friends and support fall into this category.

Most of us have adequate support and a number of friends to help us through a loss. Our losses are validated, acknowledged, and support is given without question. There are grievers, however, who go unrecognized or unsupported. These are grievers who have lost a non-family member, those who are very young, elders impacted by cognitive decline, or persons with mental retardation or other developmental disabilities. Stereotypes and lack of information may lead others to mistakenly assume these individuals are somehow insulated and protected from the pain of loss and grief. Their grief is often unrecognized and the support and friendship needed to help them through their loss is not available. These individuals may experience isolation and lack of support, intensifying their grief experience, and making their healing and day-to-day coping more difficult.

As part of its mission to serve grieving people in our community, Pathways of Hope provides services to support these often ignored grievers. Grieving adults of all ages are served through one-on-one counseling and a variety of support groups. For the past several years Pathways of Hope has begun to provide grief education and support targeted to help adults with mental retardation or developmental disabilities face the loss of a loved one. These groups have involved educational activities such as exploring questions about death and feelings of loss, writing condolence cards and visiting a funeral home. Individuals were provided with their own copies of supportive resources such as audiotapes, books and stories. Emotional support and opportunities to explore and share their thoughts and feelings were provided along with hands-on involvement in focused crafts activities. Participant response has been extremely positive and continuing services are planned.

Children's needs are met in a variety of ways. Child-appropriate informational and educational materials regarding death and grief are available through the Center. Pathways staff works with local schools to provide in-school support groups for youth who have a terminally ill loved one or are coping with the death of a loved one. Individual counseling and grief support groups for children and teens also are available at the Grief Center. A weekend camp for grieving youth, ages 6-16 continues to be held every summer at Camp Joy Outdoor Education Center. This annual three-day experience, which is held at the end of June, gives children a weekend of hiking, fishing, swimming and campfire activities coupled with opportunities to process their grief and loss issues.

Due to the generous support of community donors, *Pathways of Hope* is able to offer professional grief support at no cost to those in need.