



Supporting Grieving Children in the Time of COVID-19



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Willow House Introduction

Who We Are and What We Do

Willow House is a non-profit organization that supports children, adolescents, families, schools, and communities when they are coping with the death of a loved one. We are recognized as a leader in the field of children's grief locally and nationally. Peer support group services are provided in four locations: Arlington Heights, Chicago, Libertyville, and Bannockburn. For 20 years, Willow House has provided direct services to hundreds of families each year. Thousands more have been served by community outreach programs that span the entire Chicago region, from the far south suburbs of Chicago to the Wisconsin border and beyond.

Grief Support Services During COVID-19:

- Monthly peer grief support groups online via Zoom
- Monthly Expressive Arts group online via Zoom for the entire family
- Monthly Survivors of Suicide Loss Group via Zoom
 - All groups are facilitated by licensed clinical Willow House staff and trained volunteers
- Referrals to individual therapists in the grief field

The death of a student, teacher or a school community member is a reality for school communities. Willow House school-based programs are designed to provide school personnel with the understanding and the tools to effectively support grieving students. Well-informed teachers and school personnel can be an important source of support to grieving students and families.

School Support Services During COVID-19:

- Assessments and Consultations with School staff
- Grief education presentations to staff of the school via Zoom
- Referrals to Individual Therapists in the grief field

Through donations, as well as corporate and foundation support, Willow House services are provided at no cost to our families. We are a non-for-profit organization and any donations are greatly appreciated.



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Guidelines for Parents

Guidelines for Parents to Help Children When A Death Occurs

The following are our strong recommendations based on best practices and experience of experts in the field of children's grief and trauma. The procedures and overall approach that you use in supporting your children is completely up to you as the parent. Please feel free to alter and adapt some of these suggestions to fit your families beliefs and needs.

These guidelines can be used when talking to children about a COVID-19 death as well as a death unrelated to the pandemic.

1. Give your child the facts in a simple, straightforward manner. Don't go into too much detail with younger children, they will ask more questions as they come to mind. If you don't have answers to certain questions, it's okay to say "I don't know the answer to that question, but I will try to find out."
2. Use direct, concrete language. Say the words that apply: "accident", "dead" "critical condition", "survivor" or "victim". Refer to the deceased by name.
3. Ask questions," What are you feeling?" "What have you heard from your friends?", "What do you know about what happened?" This gives you as a parent a chance to determine that your child has accurate facts and not some scenario that came out of rumors, which can and do travel quickly among children in any community. Repeat this process, making sure they have accurate information and ask directly if there are any new words or information that need further explanation.
4. Share some of your feelings about the event with your child. Identify and talk about these feelings. You are their role model. Share your feelings of sadness, grief, sympathy and concern. Your sharing openly empowers your child to express their feelings more comfortably, and helps them to learn empathy and concern for others.



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5. Keep in mind the age and level of comprehension of your child and speak to that level. You don't want to overwhelm them with too much information and / or feelings that might be problematic for them. End each conversation about the event with a "positive" statement such as how safe you feel because of... (Whatever safety measures are in place in and around your home, in your lives and your community) end with a nurturing hug and supportive, encouraging words.
6. If your child is clinging to you more, exhibiting regressive behaviors or experiencing sleep disturbances he or she may be fearful about something happening to you or someone in the family. They may not be able to put words to these fears and may not even be conscious of these fears. If your child is feeling insecure and frightened, they will need a great deal of reassurance from you, a lot of touching and contact with you. Over time this will help your child to relax and feel less fearful.
7. Don't hesitate to refer to the deceased by name. The person may be dead, but he or she is someone to be remembered, spoken about openly and respectfully, by name.
8. Depending upon your religious views and your child's age and questions you may want to talk about your belief about what happens when someone dies. Be careful not to say things like, "It was God's will", etc. Statements like this raise more concerns and questions than they answer. Avoid euphemisms when talking with children about death because they think more literally than adults.
10. Remind your child that you are available to talk about any questions or concerns they may have. Don't, however, always wait for them to raise the subject. Avoid discussions at bedtime.
11. If they have "bad dreams" provide opportunities to talk about them, as this is a way to discharge stress.
12. You may want to read a book that discusses death to your child.



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13. Friends, family, neighbors, schoolmates often find solace and comfort in doing something to honor the person who died; for example, providing a memorial or advocating for a related cause. These memorial services can take place in an online format as we follow the guidelines for social distancing. This is especially important because COVID-19 has made it challenging to memorialize loved ones in the traditional way.

14. Sudden, violent death, or death of a young person is especially hard to grieve, and disruption of sleep, appetite and daily activities are normal responses. 15. Some symptoms of ongoing internal stress include:

- Withdrawal from friends and/or school activities
- Little or total lack of emotion regarding the loss or event
- Prolonged inability to acknowledge that the event has happened
- Extreme reactions to the grief and/or fear that last a long time
- Changes in health
- Prolonged sadness
- Extreme changes in behaviors

16. Provide supportive activities. These allow children/teens opportunities to process their feelings and find the meaning of the loss for themselves. Activities may also give children/teens an opportunity to feel less hopeless and helpless by actually doing something, especially if it is something for those affected by the tragedy.

Some examples of supportive and creative activities include:

- Writing a letters to your loved one that died
- Reading fictional or factual accounts about other people's losses
- Drawing pictures that represent grief and loss or related feelings.
- For younger children, ask: "If sadness were an animal, what would it look like?"

16. If you find that your child is developing problems that you don't know how to handle, don't hesitate to seek professional help. Many therapists are currently providing telehealth therapy sessions.

17. Remember, [grief is a natural, normal response to death](#).

Partially Adapted from Helen Fitzgerald



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Common Grief Reactions

Children and Adolescents

This list of emotions contains some of the emotions that children and adolescents may feel while grieving. This is only a guideline and all reactions to death are normal and in most cases, common. Here are a few examples of emotions felt by students:

Shock / Apparent lack of feelings - Children grieve developmentally and in a way that is different from adults. They grieve at a pace they can tolerate and in “waves” that are more tolerable and consistent with their coping skills.

Physiological Changes - stomachaches, headaches, sleep problems, eating problems (more/less), tightness in throat, nervousness/trembling/shaking, rashes/hives, muscle aches/weakness, tiredness, lack of energy, increase in illnesses, (colds, etc.) due to increased stress, assume symptoms of deceased loved one.

Regression - separation anxiety, need to sleep/be with parent all the time, baby talk, bed-wetting, feeling “sick” to avoid school or other social situations, desire to be cuddled or rocked, need to have others do self-care things for them, demanding more attention, regression in social skills.

Disorganization and Panic - Who will take care of me? Will I die? Will other family members die? Intensity & complexity of feelings may be overwhelming - cry easily, hypersensitivity, difficulty concentrating, sleeping.

Explosive Emotions - anger at the person who died, anger at the death/situation, feelings of frustration, pain, helplessness, fear, sadness, etc. These feelings need to be safely expressed.

Acting-Out - fighting with others, temper tantrums, rage against everything, “I don’t care,” “It doesn’t matter anymore,” “Nothing matters anymore.” Acting out is influenced by feelings of insecurity, i.e. “Don’t get close to anyone because then I’ll lose them.” Acting out is external expression of internal feelings.

Hyper-maturity - opposite of regression, assuming roles of deceased or absent parent. Well-meaning adults may promote this with “You’re the man in the family now.”



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Fear - fear of surviving parent(s), siblings or others dying, fear that they are “alone” when parent(s) are not emotionally available, fear of parent(s) crying when they cry, fear of dying themselves.

Guilt - “magical thinking” in young children who “wished” a parent would go away, etc. and believe they caused the death, belief that because of their “bad “ behavior they deserved for their loved one to die, sibling’s guilt may also be present because they got upset with deceased sibling for taking parents’ attention, for messing up their toys, their room, etc.

Relief - common when death results from suffering, illness and associated stress. Illness has meant a lack of “normalcy,” consistency and safety in their lives. Relief may also be the reaction when a parent was an abuser to child...and this may also lead to guilt.

Sadness - prolonged withdrawal and sadness usually when reality that the deceased will not return sets in, which may be weeks, months or even years after the actual death.

Reconciliation – This occurs when the child/teen has the integrated loss of their loved one as a reality and they are moving forward in life without that person. This may lead to return of more normal behaviors, ability to enjoy life again, more energy, and recognition of death and associated feelings as part of life... they are now looking ahead to their future.

Partially Adapted from Alan Wolfelt, “Healing The Bereaved Child”



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Understanding Grief Reactions by Age

The following are general categories. Not all children will fit “neatly” in to one of these groups. Be mindful that each child is different and grief looks different for everybody.

A Young Child: 3-5 Years of Age

UNDERSTANDING

- Sees death as temporary, believes that the person will return or can be visited
- Has difficulty handling concepts such as heaven, the soul or spirit
- Feels sadness, but often for only a short time and often escapes into play, giving adults the impression the child isn't really grieving
- Substitutes attachment to another person in exchange for attachment to person who died
- Needs a daily routine, structure, affection, and reassurance
- Acting out behaviors include: regression, nightmares, aggression, non-compliance

GRIEF REACTIONS

- A young child will begin to examine death with words.
- A young child understands the profoundness of the event, but may not know that the person is gone.
- A young child's primary expression of feeling will be through his/her play.
- A death affects a young child's sense of security.
- A young child can express strong feelings in his/her sleep and dreams.
- A young child may address a loss more spontaneously than an adult and thus may "recover" from it more quickly.

School-Age Child: 6-10 Years of Age

UNDERSTANDING

- Begins to understand that death is final and permanent
- Begins to have a fear of death and of others dying
- May feel guilt (magical thinking) and blame self for the death
- Has difficulty putting problems and feelings into words
- Often asks concrete and specific questions about the death, the body, etc.
- Identifies strongly with the deceased

GRIEF REACTIONS

- Acting out behaviors include: compulsive care giving, aggression, possessiveness, regression, headaches, stomachaches, phobias
- Language is becoming a more important tool in the processing of a child's grief.
- Physical expressions of the grief a child does not have the words to express.
- The family is a grieving child's main security.
- Peer relationships can help to support a child through a grieving time and help to avoid their feeling different.
- School responsibilities and outcomes may be affected



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Pre-Adolescent: 11-13 Years of Age

UNDERSTANDING

- Recognizes that death is inevitable and irreversible
- May view death as punishment
- Retains some elements of magical thinking
- Often very curious and interested in the "gory" details
- May come up with own theories or explanations of the reasons for the death
- May have many practical questions about the body, the funeral, etc.
- Acting out behaviors include: aggression, possessiveness, headaches, stomachaches, phobias, defiance

GRIEF REACTIONS

- The pre-adolescent is a young person full of changing behaviors when grieving. Emotional turmoil is heightened by physical change.
- They may swing back and forth in dependence support from the family to the peers.
- They begin to engage in discussion that integrates significant events in his/her life, but physical outlets for emotions are still necessary.

Adolescence: 14-19 Years of Age

UNDERSTANDING

- Nearing adult levels of concepts
- May worry or think about own death
- Often avoids discussions of death
- Fears "looking different"
- May question religious beliefs
- Often angry at the deceased
- May fear the future
- Acting out behaviors include: aggression, possessiveness, headaches, stomachaches, phobias, increased sexual activity, increased drug use, increased risk-taking, defiance, suicidal ideation.

GRIEF REACTIONS

- Discussion of the critical events becomes the primary means of processing grief.
- Teens may feel highly self-conscious about being different due to grief.
- Teens are self-centered and thus have an exaggerated sense of their own role in regards to death.
- Teens may fight their vulnerability in grief because it may cause them to feel more dependent on their family at a time when they are striving for independence.
- Teens are affected physically by the grieving process, especially in their sleeping and eating patterns

Adapted from the Dougy Center for Grieving Children



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Secondary Losses... What are they?

When a beloved family member or friend dies, we don't just lose the presence of that person as we knew them. As a result of the death, we may lose many other connections to ourselves and to our world. Children and teens feel these secondary losses, and these losses and changes can impact their development significantly. In supporting your grieving children, keep in mind the following common secondary losses that can make the grief experience more complex and challenging. COVID-19 also puts into play additional secondary losses families may face. When these challenges are not addressed, complicated grieving can become a risk.

The three broad areas that secondary losses fall into include:

- Loss of Self: self, identity, self-confidence, health and personality
- Loss of Security: emotional security, physical security, fiscal security, lifestyle
- Loss of Meaning: goals and dreams, faith, will/desire to live, joy

Specific Examples of Secondary losses during COVID-19 include:

- Loss of routine, no longer going to school
- Loss of in-person support system, classmates, teachers, extended family
- Having less money to buy clothes, toys, take vacations, go to social events, etc.
- Losing plans for the future, such as going to a faraway college or a costly one
- Losing special rituals or activities that the student only did with the loved one, not being able to hold a traditional funeral, see their loved one before they died

Additional Examples of Secondary losses can include:

- Having to move and leave the familiarity of a neighborhood, school, teachers, and friends
- Having a surviving parent have to get a job or work more hours to make ends meet and then being home less and giving the child less attention
- Losing friends because they are uncomfortable or feel awkward around the grieving person
- Losing one's identity, as a sibling, for example
- Losing the ability to feel safe and secure, as well as losing the ability to feel like a carefree child



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Funerals in the Time of COVID-19

Children and Funerals

Why are Funerals Important?

- Provides a place for families to grieve together
- Funerals are a place to grieve physically and emotionally and allow one to express their grief
- Provides a way to honor the deceased's life
- Allowing children to be a part of the funeral services keeps the child from feeling left out, shows them that it is okay to grieve, allows processing of grief in a healthy way

Funerals During a Pandemic:

- Physical and social distancing can hinder the traditional funeral process but it is important to know that funerals are not impossible during this time
- The family can choose to do a new ritual like planting a tree in their loved ones honor
- Families can host a digital funeral service and/or live streaming the service to their guests with the help from a funeral home director.
- Families can choose to have the funeral now with a limited number of attendees and host a memorial service later
- Create art for their loved one that can be taken to the grave site, put in the casket/urn, or kept in a special place at home.

Ways to Involve Children in the Funeral Service:

- Always ask the child first how they want to participate. Explain to them what normally happens at a funeral and see what their suggestions may be.
- Allow the child to pick out songs or create art to have at the funeral service
- Have the child help pick out pictures of their loved one to put in a slide show
- Write a letter to their loved one that can be placed in the casket or cremated with their loved one
- Light a candle in honor of your loved one
- Visit the grave site after the funeral service

Adapted from Hamilton's Academy of Grief and Loss



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Self-Care and Coping Skills





What is a Coping Skill?

For Children, Teens, and Parents

A coping skill is typically an action or activity that one does in response to a difficult or challenging emotion. When feeling upset, sad, angry, anxious, and more, our mind and bodies can respond to the emotion through a coping skill.

For example:

When angry I can

- Rip up paper
- Talk to a friend
- Listen to loud music

When anxious I can

- Write my feelings down on paper
- Use a weighted blanket
- Call a loved one to process feelings

When sad I can

- Cry
- Dance to my favorite music
- Look at a picture of my loved one who has died

When stressed I can

- Take a bath
- Light a candle
- Eat a delicious meal

Every person has a different response to their emotions. One coping skill may work better for you than another. Try out multiple activities until you find what works for you to help you feel better. Check out the following pages for coloring sheets, breathing exercises, art activities, and examples of 50 Ways to Take a Break.



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Self-Care Practices to Explore

Breathing Exercises for Children, Teens, and Adults

4, 7, 8 breathing: Begins by breathing in through your nose to the count of 4, then holding your breath to the count of 7, and then breathing out through your mouth to the count of 8. Do these 4 times in a row.

Alternate-Nostril Breathing: Taking your right hand, close off your right nostril with your thumb and breathe in through your left nostril. Then take your right ring finger and close off your left nostril as you breathe out through your right nostril. Then breathe in through your right nostril, close it off with your thumb and then breathe out through your left nostril. Then breathe in through your left nostril, close it off with your ring finger and exhale through your right nostril. Repeat.

Five-Finger Exercise: Using either your right or left hand, close your eyes and touch your pointer finger to your thumb and think of a time when someone did something special for you. Now touch your middle finger to your thumb and think of a time when you did something special for someone else. Now touch your ring finger to your thumb and think of a time when you were really proud of yourself. Now, finally, touch pinkie finger to your thumb and think of something or someone you are currently grateful for.

Simple Qigong Move: Stand up with your feet shoulder-width apart. As you take a deep breath in through your nose with your mouth closed, raise your arms straight up over your head, and then as you exhale, lower your arms back down to your sides.

Finger Breathing: Begin with the thumb at the base of the pointer finger on the same hand. As you breathe in, gently move the thumb up to the tip of the pointer finger. Softly press the tips of the thumb and pointer finger together and pause for a second or two. As you exhale, move the thumb gently back down the finger. Do the same thing with the other fingers and the thumb. Do it with one hand or both.



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Expressive Arts

Benefits of Expressive Arts

Creative expression can be helpful for children, teens, and adults. When someone is grieving the loss of a loved one, finding words to describe what you are going through can be difficult. Digital art making, painting, playing an instrument, writing, and coloring sheets are only a few ways that someone can express themselves. Art making allows for reflection and processing of one's grief by putting thought down onto paper or canvas. It also allows you to honor or memorialize your loved one. Sometimes freely scribbling can be enough to release tension in the body! Creative expression gives someone the opportunity to say something without having to speak. The art can stand alone as a form of communication at any age.

Ideas for Creative Expression of Emotions for Grieving Children

Ask children to draw a picture of what they are feeling – Sometimes it is easier for children to express their feelings through art. Asking open ended questions such as “What does that feeling look like?” or “If your feeling were an animal, what would that animal look like?” can help give them a place to start exploring and expressing feelings.

Journaling Writing Prompts: I Never... I Wonder... I Wish... – This activity can be done by having a child finish one or all of those sentence starters with journaling or with drawing. These kinds of very open-ended sentence starters can be helpful ways for a child to explore and express difficult thoughts or feelings.

Create a Feelings Art Journal – While it can be helpful for children to express their feelings by journaling about them, not all children are able or comfortable expressing their feelings using words. Helping kids start a feelings art journal that they can use over time is a great way to provide them with an alternative way to express themselves. Feelings can be expressed through drawing, through painting, through collages made from pictures out of magazines, through photographs, etc...

Feelings Wheel – Creating a visual representation of the many feelings that children have can be a great exploration of those feelings, as well as a tool to help express feelings in the future. The child starts with a circle that has lines drawn on it dividing it like a pie. Then the child fills in each section with a drawing that represents each emotion, such as happy, sad, scared, angry, excited, lonely. The child can keep this feelings wheel and can use it to help identify and express what they are feeling in the future.



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All About My Loved One

Art Activity

Use this template to fill in all the important things you know about your loved one using words, drawings and colors. A suggestion is to use video chatting with family members to fill this out together to remember your special person that died.

The name of the person who died is...

This person was my...

This person died from...

My favorite thing to do with them was...

My favorite memory of my loved one is...

My loved one really liked...

The thing I miss most about my loved one is...

When I want to share stories about my loved one, someone I talk to is...



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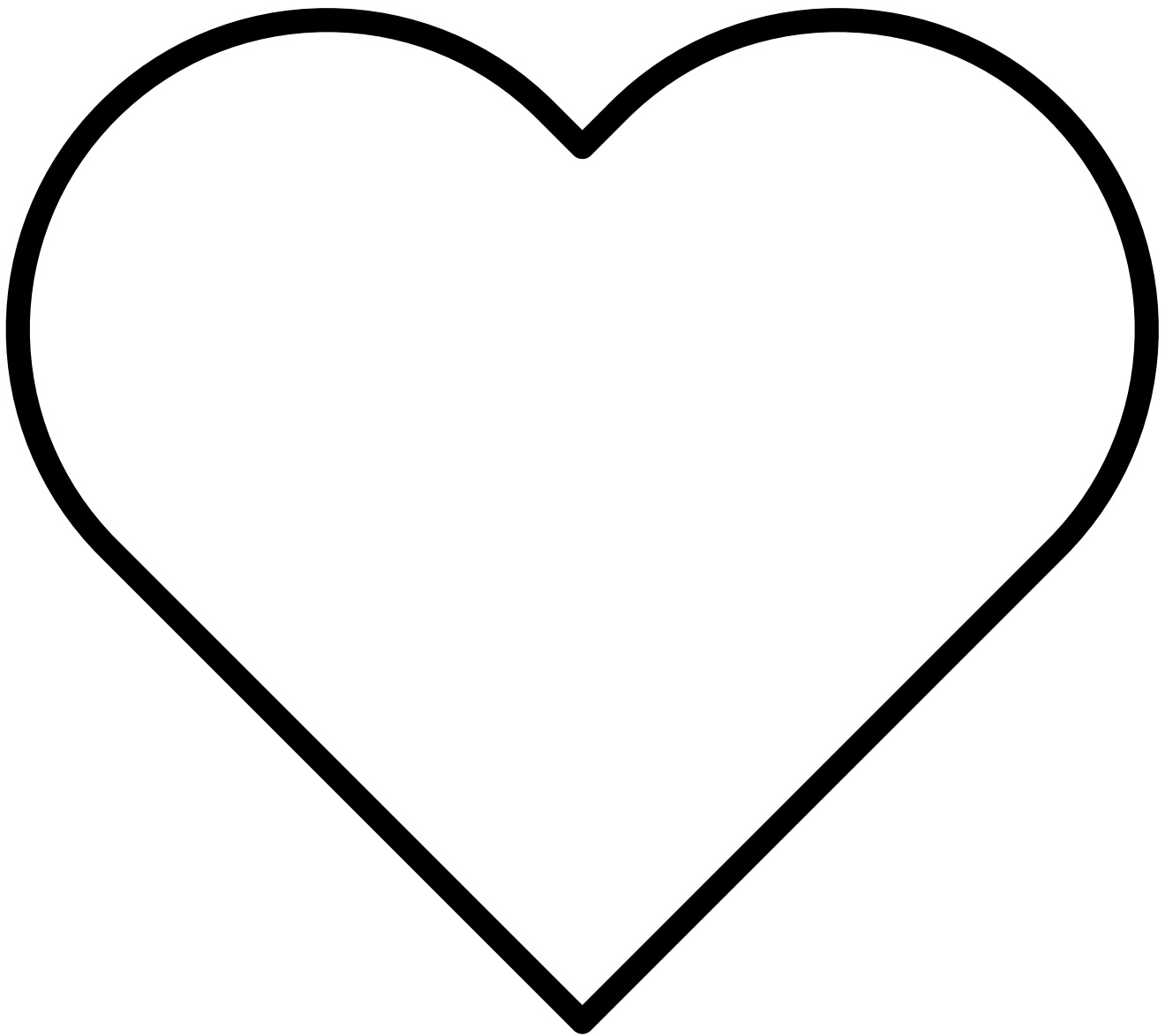
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What's In Your Heart?

Art Activity

Use this template to fill in your heart with words, images, colors, drawings, feelings, ect. Think about what you love most about your loved one that died and create and image that represents and fills your heart. Also, think about what you love most about your support system and the people that take care of you currently, include these images as well.



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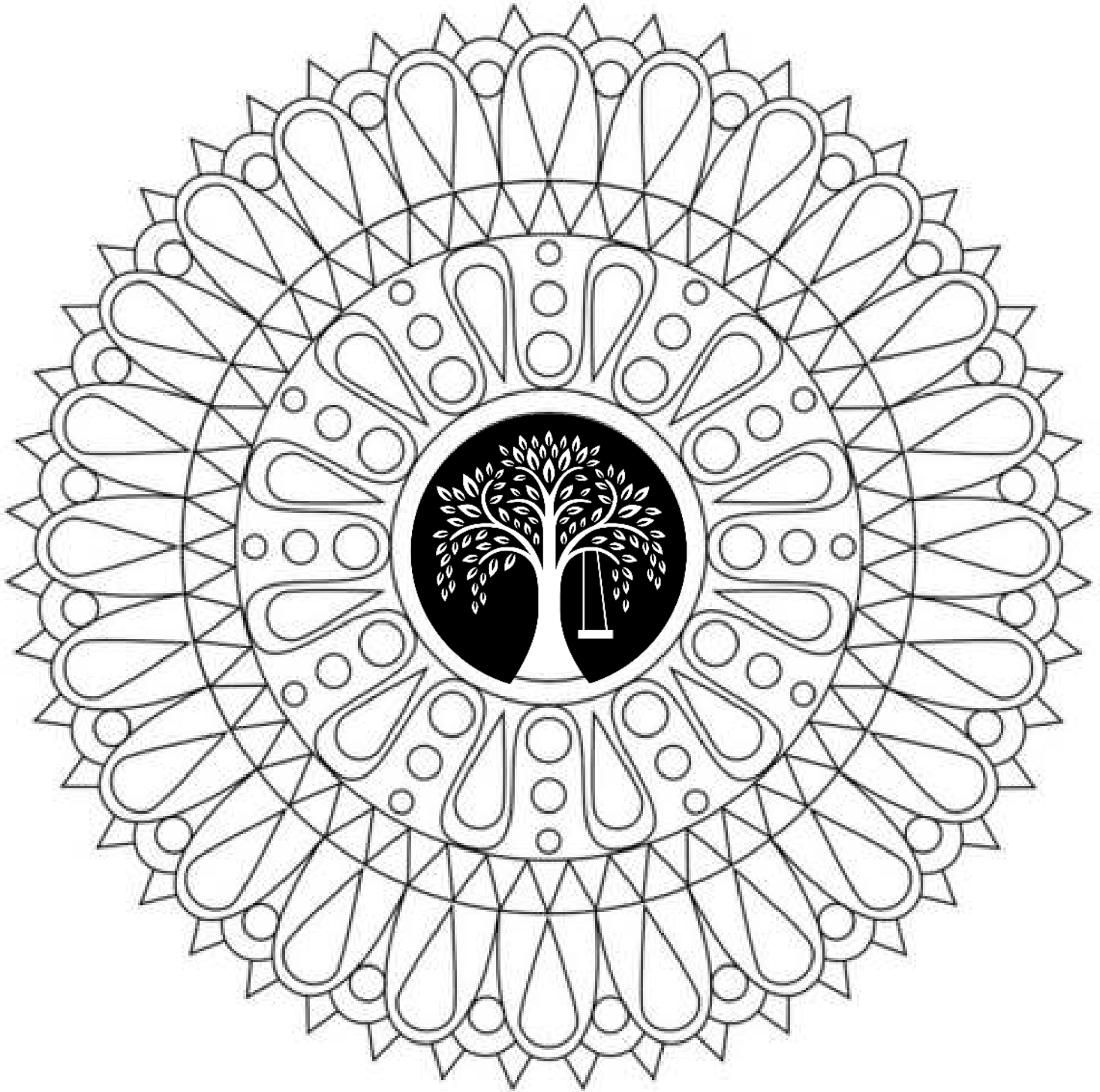


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Mandala Coloring Sheet

Coloring a mandala promotes mindfulness and relaxation



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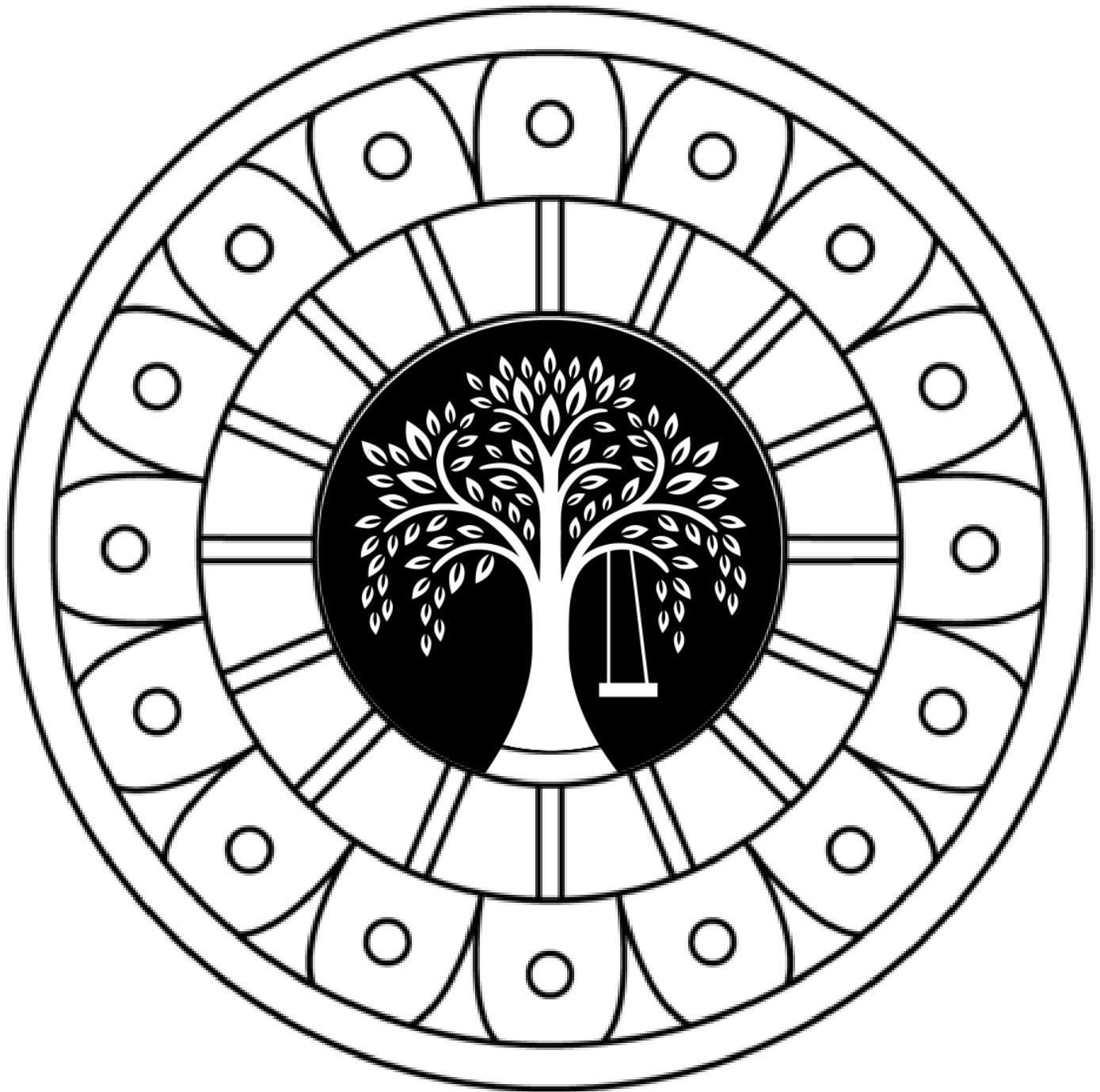


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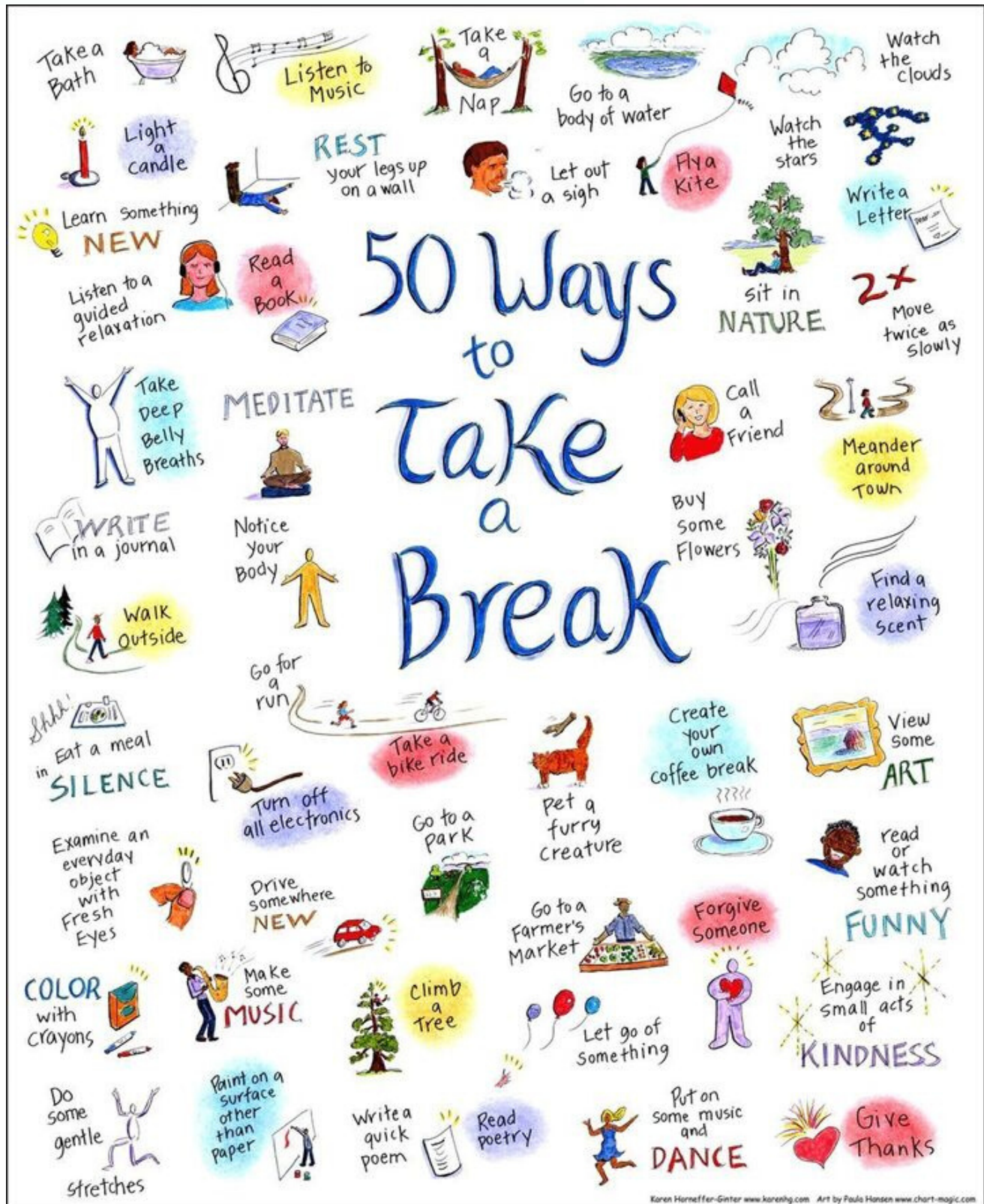


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