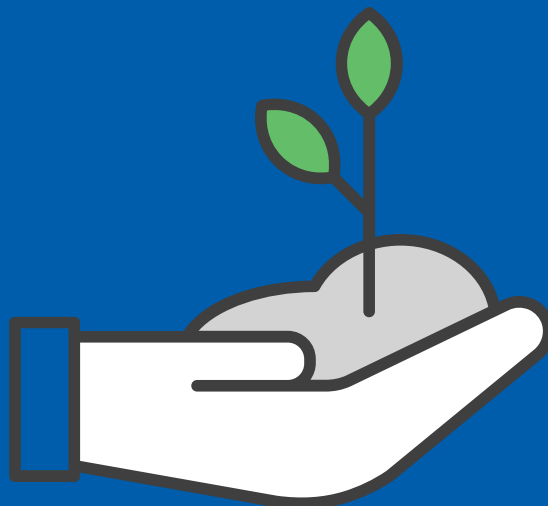




# Supporting Grieving Students in the Time of COVID-19 & Beyond

A tool-kit for school professionals and mental  
health professionals



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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 25 years, Willow House has provided direct services to hundreds of families each year. Through donations, as well as corporate and foundation support, Willow House [services are provided at no cost](#). We are a non-for-profit organization and any donations are greatly appreciated.

### Grief Support Services - Peer Support Groups

- **Family Peer Support Groups**
  - Arlington Heights, Chicago, Libertyville, Virtual
  - Pre-K to High School, Young Adults (18-28) , Spouse/Partner Loss, Child Loss
- **Survivors of Suicide Loss**
  - Bannockburn, Virtual
  - 1st Grade to High School, Adults (18+)
  - Relationship to deceased is open
- **Expressive Arts**
  - Bannockburn
  - For the whole family
- 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.

### School Support Services:

- Assessments and Consultations with School staff
- Grief educational professional development and workshops to staff and students
- 8-week peer to peer support groups in the classroom for grieving students
- Referrals to individual therapists in the grief field



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# Guidelines for School Staff

## Guidelines for School Staff to Support Grieving Students

The following are our strong recommendations based on best practices and experience of experts in the field of children's grief and trauma. The policies, procedures and overall approach adopted by your school in response to a tragedy may require you to alter and adapt some of these suggestions.

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

1. Speak about the death and pandemic factually, in a simple, straightforward manner. Don't go into much detail, especially with younger children. They will typically ask more questions as they have them and more often these will be asked to their parents. 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 or, it may even be preferable to say "That is a good question for you to ask your parents."
2. Grieving students do not need you to become an expert grief counselor. They do need you to be a good role model for an experience that is likely completely new and uncomfortable for them. They will look to you to be there for them by letting them talk about their fears, concerns and feelings related to this pandemic. They need to feel safe and not judged others.
3. Use direct, concrete language. Say the words that apply, such as "accident," "illness," "died," "critical condition," "survivor" or "victim." Refer to the deceased by name. The person may be dead but he or she is a person for whom many will always have feelings and memories.
4. Parents, teachers and other adults are "modeling" for children the behaviors and feelings that are normal follow a tragedy. It is important that adults model healthy, healing behavior to children in their care. For example, if you have a discussion about the COVID-19 with your students as a group, share some of your feelings about the pandemic with them. Identify and talk about these feelings. Share feelings of sadness, grief, sympathy and concern for the family and community affected by this event. This empowers your students 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 the students in your care and speak to that level. You don't want to overwhelm them with too much information and/or feelings that might be confusing and problematic for them.

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

Activities that will allow the class to process their feelings about a death will vary according to age group, but general projects that are appropriate for younger children and teenagers include:

- Writing condolence letters or cards to the family
- 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?"

7. Students 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. This is especially important because COVID-19 has made it challenging to memorialize loved ones in the traditional way. Organize a special memorial activity a little while after the death, so that students will have time to process their feelings.

8. 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. If you find that a student seems to be struggling and developing problems that you don't know how to handle, seek professional help with your school social worker, counselor or psychologist.

9. Remember... [Grief is a natural, normal response to death.](#)

10. As a teacher or clinical helping professional and role model, ask yourself and your colleagues how you can turn this tragedy into a learning experience that will teach and empower the students in your care.



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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 working with 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

## 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, Teachers, 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.

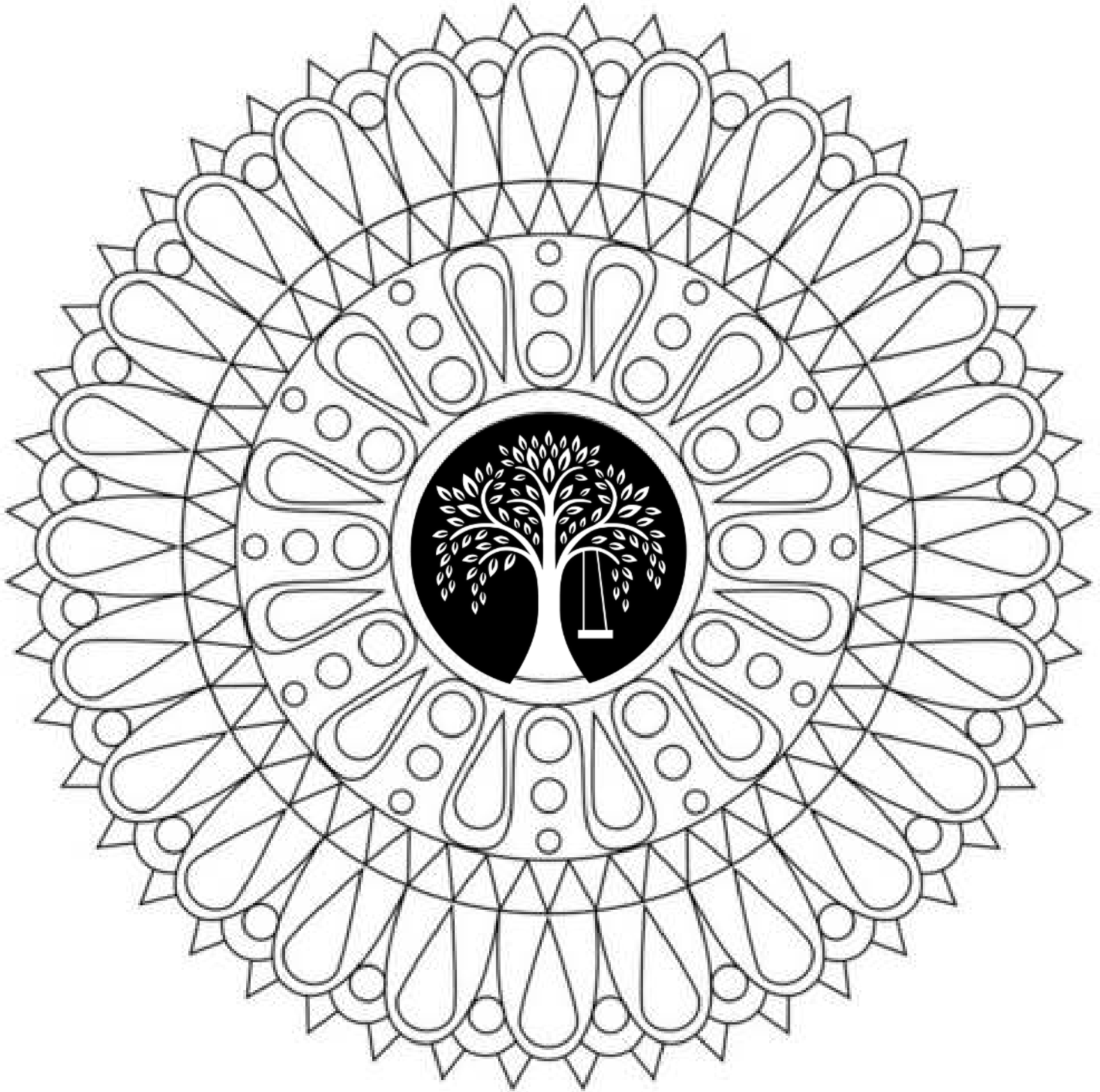






# Mandala Coloring Sheet

Coloring a mandala promotes mindfulness and relaxation



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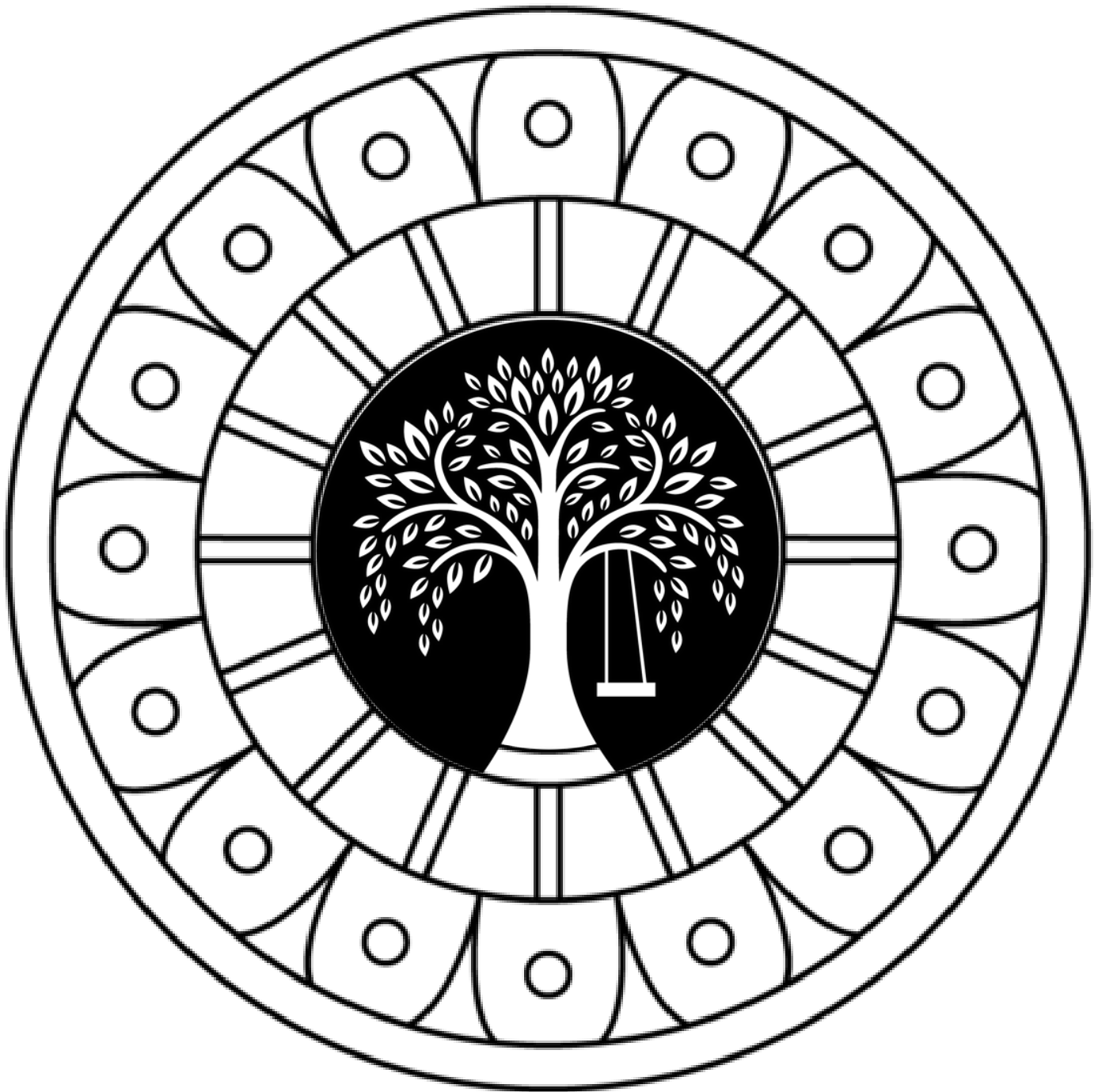
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# Mandala Coloring Sheet

Coloring a mandala promotes mindfulness and relaxation

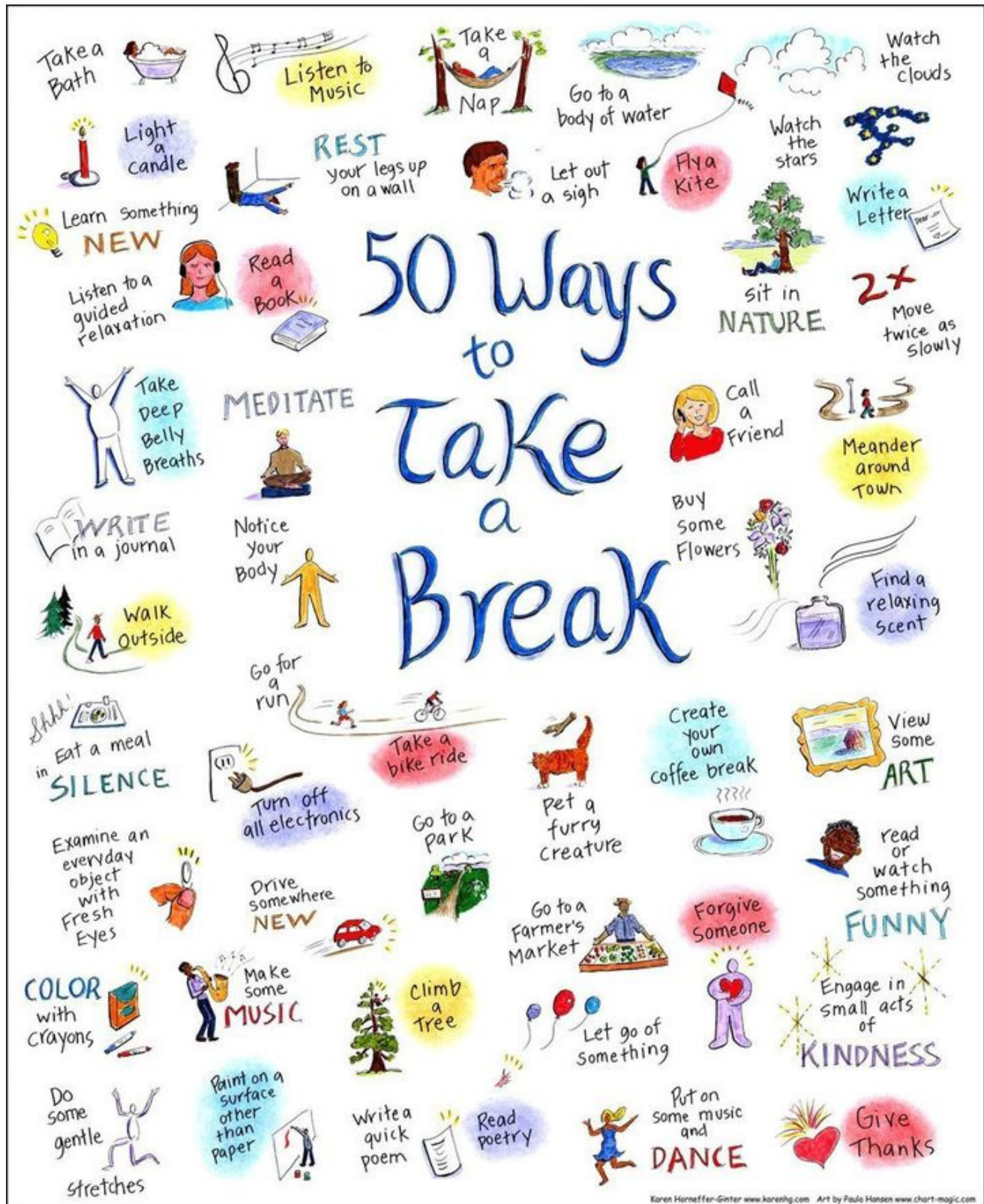


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