



MENTAL HEALTH MONDAYS



“Tools for Helping Children Grieve During the Pandemic”

On Monday, August 3, Angela Melvin, founder and CEO of [Valerie's House](#) and April Lavigne, Lee County school teacher and Valerie's House mom, discussed “Tools for Helping Children Grieve During the Pandemic”. Below are key takeaways from their segment.

ANGELA MELVIN

At Valerie's House, we offer grief support for children and their caregivers who have suffered a death. Our programs and activities can help children with all kinds of losses. In this segment, we discuss how we as adults can help children with grief.

Parents have their own grief but also the grief of their little ones. The pandemic hit and one of the things that happened was we closed our doors. We had to isolate and stay inside. Just when the kids were starting to get comfortable with Valerie's House. April, with the pandemic, I remember you saying Ryan had lost everything, including sports and his friends. You said he said, “Why does God hate me?”

For those who have a child in their life who is grieving, one of the things we talk about is **validating whatever your child is feeling: anger, confusion, questions.** It's OK to be angry. We tell the kids, “yes, you were robbed. You should have had a parent to grow up with.” It's OK to let kids know that things are hard, and sometimes we don't have answers. It's important for parents to be OK with what the truth is. Be as honest as you can be. Sometimes we want to blame or make sense of something. Remind kids you are still a family. Try to provide as much stability as you can as a family, even if your family is one less now.

Stages of grief come and go. There is no set order or time. We don't even refer to them as stages anymore. It's a journey. There are waves of emotion that often come at you when you are least prepared. We often hear from grieving families that people think you will be OK after a while. That's not the case. Grief is very individual and it's very personal. Even kids grieve differently. It depends on the relationship the child had and who they are. Sometimes you may not even know they are grieving. Make sure they know there is a place they can come to.

Guilt is another very strong emotion children feel when someone has died. They think they could have done something different. Even with the pandemic, some kids may be taking this on, feeling like they did something to deserve the quarantine. We have to make sure we give kids the opportunity to talk about guilt and not hold that inside and think that they are less because of what's happening.

If you are a friend of someone who has had a death, don't be afraid to bring the person up. It means so much to us that their memory is still around. You may have a memory that we do not know about. Kids want to hear those memories too. There's no timeline for grief. It can take a year sometimes for a child to talk about a loved one. When they are ready to talk about it, they will. Sometimes they'll grieve and stop and grieve again. Grieving is natural, it just means we loved someone, and we miss them.

APRIL LAVIGNE

My Story: My husband was a power lineman who passed on the job last November before Thanksgiving. My children and I were both at school. My daughter, who was 7 at the time and is very emotional and often cries, could not find tears. My son became upset and angry. We took three weeks off school to cope. You feel numb, are trying to cope as a parent and find words to express to your children. I have found the hardest part is that children don't understand.

The first meeting we attended at Valerie's House was in mid-January. It was hard. I was nervous I'd have to face his death. I felt all kinds of emotions. Valerie's House was a huge part of us refocusing and understanding stages of grief that we started at different times. It was important seeing that there were other families that experienced a loss and seeing that their lives had changed but didn't end.

The pandemic was hard. My kids are involved in school activities and that was how they coped. When the world stopped, so did our world. We were faced with anxiety and depression. My daughter didn't want to practice her gymnastics. We all shut down. Fortunately, Valerie's House was still doing Zoom calls. Sometimes the in-person time with others was what they were craving.

One thing that I felt has really helped me is knowing **It's OK not to be OK.** I was trying to be the mom who had everything together. To not let the children see my emotional response or that I was suffering and not doing well. So often as parents we want to fix things and make their lives easier, so they don't have to go through challenging times. Emotion is OK. My son was trying to hide his emotions for the longest time. He was angry, but at 10 he felt like he needed to be the man of the house and he couldn't cry or show his feelings. When things triggered a memory, we had to take a moment aside right then and there and discuss it.

My kids are very different. My daughter likes to put her thoughts and feelings into songs. I got her a journal where she can put down her thoughts and feelings, and it calms her. I tried journaling with my son, but he said it was not what he needed. He enjoyed getting a punching bag, and when he had those feelings of anger that his dad wasn't around, he would release some of that energy in a way that was not damaging but helped him feel more settled. Too often, we try to make our kids be OK, and those were things I had to learn.



The waves happen. You may think they are doing great and the teacher will call and say he is withdrawn and not interacting. For my daughter, separation anxiety is huge for her. She constantly wants me to be with her. When the pandemic hit, my son was thinking that everyone was going to die. He didn't want to leave the house. He didn't want to go outside. It brings a lot of that fear into children's minds. They are constantly worrying. My son even got to the point of getting the mail and looking at the bills to see if he could pay some of them from his piggy bank. You don't realize what's going on in their minds when they are dealing with the world around them. The pandemic may not be the loss of a loved one, but a loss of your normalcy is the same kind of thing. Knowing that we are in the 8th month of grief now, it looks a lot different than month two and three. In the later months, it's harder with the realization that he's not going to walk through the door. The first birthdays, holidays without will need additional time.

Teachers, we are learning how to do school all over again in a different way. Kids who have had a loss or kids who didn't, they're going to be understanding a total new world for them. Life has changed. Understand there are coping skills for what you are trying to do. There's so much out there for some kids that can allow them to self-calm and sooth, especially in a school setting where they don't want to be different from someone else. If one thing doesn't work, you have to be open and mindful of trying another way. There's no handbook for this. We kind of make it up as we go along in our lives because it's constantly changing.

Part of this whole process is to make connections with others so your children understand they are not alone. Others have gone through it and made their way. You can find something that works for your family. With my Monday night group, it was hard at first. I wasn't sure what I wanted to share. I couldn't really speak in the first two meetings. When the pandemic hit and Valerie's House closed, we felt so lost. I decided, why not open a group chat with my group. We've had moms dealing with a wide range of things. Having the personal connection is what Valerie's House has given me.

A lot of the grieving process can just be about communication and outreach. Don't be afraid of counseling. It's a different adult perspective they can talk to instead of worrying Mom about it. There are lots of good resources at Valerie's House.

Be mindful of behavior changes, it could be a sign they might need more support. Always be watching, because it takes a while for kids to process that their world has changed. You don't have to go through this alone. Kindness is still out there.



RESOURCES

ANGELA

- We have free counseling at Valerie's House. [Contact us](#) to find out how we can help.
- [Compassionate Friends](#) is a group for adults who have lost adult children.
- We are working on starting a mentoring program for our children. It's a program if you are out there and you would like to take a child under your wing who is grieving. It will be specifically for children who have had a loss.
- Books for children:
 - *Memory Box A Book about Grief*, by Joanna Rowland
 - *The Fall of Freddie the Leaf*, by Leo Buscaglia, PhD
 - *The Invisible String*, by Patrice Karst
 - *I Will Always Love You: A Journey From Grief & Loss to Hope & Love*, by Michelle Lyons
- Books for Teens:
 - *Fire In My Heart, Ice In My Veins: A Journal for Teenagers Experiencing a Loss* by Enid Samuel Traisman
 - *Healing Your Grieving Heart: 100 Practical Ideas* by Alan Wolfert, PhD
 - *Straight Talk about Death for Teenagers: How to Cope with Losing Someone You Love* by Earl A Grollman
 - *You Are Not Alone: Teens Talk About Life After The Loss of a Parent* by Lynne B Hughes

APRIL

- We are starting a Facebook page for caregivers to relate to each other, put your raw emotions, and connect with others. It will offer additional help and support if you can't make it to Valerie's House or if you are just not ready. If you would like to join the Facebook page, please visit Valerie's House SWFL Caregivers (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/493075651477898>) or contact April Lavigne at alavigne63718@gmail.com.



ACTIVITIES

ANGELA

- **Sock it to Em:** Have children write or draw their angry and negative thoughts and feelings (certain colors can express these feelings). Have each person crumble and tear up their paper and put the pieces inside of a tube sock. Tie the end of the sock in a knot. Express that sometimes it's hard to control angry feelings. It's OK to feel angry, but not OK to hurt ourselves or others with words our actions. We can let our anger out in safe and healthy ways. Head to a safe place and allow each person to smack the wall, floor or another surface with the socks to let out their anger. Talk to them about what works when they are feeling upset. What are other things you can do? What makes you feel better?
- **Coulda Should Woulda:** Take a bowl of water, colored markers and dissolvable paper. Talk about how there are things we wish we could have, would have or should have liked to have done or said before our special person died. Have the child write down three of these things. These can be shared and then place the paper in the water and watch it disappear. Feelings of guilt and regret may be brought up; allow the children to process these feelings and normalize these feelings by making connections with the others. Talk about how the dissolving paper is symbolic of allowing them to let go these feelings.
- **Memories Family Activity:** Have families work together to write a poem, story or list of memories and then create a symbol for their special person or one of the memories out of clay. Acknowledge that everyone's favorite memories may be different, so they need to work together to come up with a memory from all members of the family. Questions to discuss: Was it hard for your family to agree on favorite memories and/or objects that remind you of your person? What did you learn about your person or another family member that you did not know?
- **Use Play Dough:** Have each color of the play dough represent a feeling. Red is anger, blue is sadness, green could be guilt, black is loneliness. You can come up with 5-10 emotions and have them pick the different colors they are feeling and create what their grief feels like inside.
- **Create a Vision Board:** This helps the child see what the future could look like. Even during the pandemic, we can dream about what we want our lives to look like when this is over. What will we learn? Get some magazines. Have them pick pictures that inspire them and what they want in the future. It gives them the sense that we will get through this.



APRIL

- **Use Play Dough:** Another great activity that Valerie's House did with my kids was a play dough activity that showed the level of sadness, the level of anger and different emotions. When they squished them together, it shows that all of these things are part of their daily grief. They could see that to mix and mold together that gave a reflection of how they are dealing with things.
- **Share Memories:** Don't be worried about sharing memories or talking about your loved ones. One of the major ways we've gotten through this quarantine is when a memory hits us, instead of going inward, we share that memory, write it down or draw a picture. One of my daughter's fears since she is only 7 is that she's not going to remember her Dad. When things come up, we like to put them in a Dad Book and remember. Even though it's bittersweet to think about, you do feel good about the special things. They'll direct you and show you when they want to talk about things.
- **Stress Ball:** My daughter squeezes a stress ball when she gets anxious.
- **Draw a Picture:** When my son had challenging days, he would draw a picture of how he was feeling.

Questions from viewers:

Q: What is best for anxiety?

ANGELA: I know with the kids that we work with. It's bottled up and it explodes, and there's anger, depression and hopelessness. You must give kids the opportunity to work through it. April has tried to get her kids moving and active. Sometimes do something physical and then the mental follows.

APRIL: It is really hard to try to figure out what is making them anxious, what you can do to help. My daughter didn't want to go out of the house. I asked her to make a Dad garden and got her out of the house to do something in his memory. From there we would play tag. My son was anxious to go into stores. For him it was making a game plan ahead of time. What does our outing look like? What is our goal? What is our timeframe? As a special needs teacher, a lot of my students have anxiety. It's kind of trial and error. First, try to figure out the trigger. What is making them anxious? My daughter would cry all the time, and I would say, "go get a tissue" and she would forget why she was upset. Sometimes give them a task to throw off the constant worrying thoughts.

ANGELA: Let them know you hear them and that you recognize their anxiety. As a parent you want to cover it up or smooth it over. Know you are doing the best you can. There is no play book for this. You are a family. When my Mom died when I was very young, my Dad did a great job making us feel whole.



Q: How did the schools help with navigating grief and what are the things they could have done differently?

APRIL: That was a challenge for my children's teachers. They are also my friends. They weren't quite sure how to approach the matter. My daughter's teacher wanted to know how my daughter felt about things and did she want her 2nd grade class to know. My daughter had a tremendous amount of support from her friends. It made her feel more safe and secure. My son is a stronger individual and he wanted no special treatment and to make sure that no one acted or treated him differently at school. He slowly opened up to the idea. Eventually his class found out. There was a real difference between a second grader and fourth grader in wanting to talk and understand.

I don't think the school did anything wrong. Each teacher talked to me and to my children to find out the best approach. My school really tried. The guidance counselor would even take my kids for small group therapy to discuss the day. If there was something that triggered my daughter at school, the guidance counselor was able to get her calmed down. There are going to be triggers all over the world for them. The school was able to recognize there was a need and additional support was needed and understood they would go several weeks and seem fine and then miss a math lesson.





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About Kids' Minds Matter

The goal of Kids' Minds Matter is to raise awareness about the need for pediatric mental and behavioral health care services and to raise the funds required to make these services available in the region through Golisano Children's Hospital of Southwest Florida and Lee Health. An estimated 46,000 Southwest Florida children are impacted by mental and behavioral health disorders like anxiety, depression, eating disorders, psychosis, substance abuse, autism, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. As part of the region's strategic solution to the children's mental and behavioral health epidemic in Southwest Florida, Kids' Minds Matter is dedicated to fostering partnerships that support existing services, identifying and filling gaps in the continuum of care, and innovating new treatments.

Philanthropic support for Kids' Minds Matter has allowed Lee Health and Golisano Children's Hospital of Southwest Florida to: implement a tiered model of care that clinically aligns community, inpatient and outpatient care; hire additional psychiatrists, child advocates and other mental health professionals; offer Mental Health First Aid training to local pediatricians, emergency service providers and others who work directly with children; renovate an outpatient center in Fort Myers where a child's needs can be addressed in a therapeutic setting; and launch a first-of-its-kind Pediatric Digital Cognitive Behavioral Health diagnostic and treatment protocols interlaced with Tele-Psychology support to treat anxiety, depression and trauma. Most recently, Kids' Minds Matter introduced mental health care navigators into Lee and Collier County schools who will help families find resources and care to address their child's mental healthcare needs.

The "Mental Health Mondays" segments are a public forum, designed for open discussions that benefit a large audience, and to provide real-time resources and advice from pediatric mental health professionals and advocates. The information shared on this platform is intended for general public consumption and not intended for individual treatment. The views, advice, and resources shared by each guest speaker are solely their own and are not endorsed by Lee Health, Golisano Children's Hospital of Southwest Florida and Kids' Minds Matter. Kids' Minds Matter is dedicated to raising awareness and essential funding to enhance pediatric mental & behavioral health programs, services and access to care in Southwest Florida. To learn more about Kids' Minds Matter, visit KidsMindsMatter.com.

