The Healing Hearts Family Bereavement Camp: An Innovative Approach to Healing

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A weekend bereavement camp can provide a safe environment to nurture the healing process for families who have experienced a death through cancer. The Healing Hearts Family Bereavement Camp affords children, teens and adults the opportunity to connect with others who share the pain and suffering of a loss.

The experience of a death in the family can be devastating and life-changing for both children and adults. Immediately following a death, family, friends, and community often gather around the grieving family to offer condolences and support. Yet, after just a few short months, those rallying around the bereaved family have resumed their lives, leaving the grieving children and adults feeling alone and different from others in their circle of friends and community. These feelings of isolation can result in increased pain and suffering. Providing a “safe” and nurturing environment to allow for conversations around grief can help in the healing process. Such a camp provides a space for families to share their stories and display them as a unified group. This allows the children and teens to divest into groups according to their ages for the morning activity. The activities are created, understanding the developmental life stages of children and teens and how the stages impact their adjustment to loss.

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Camp Programs and Schedule

Friday evening

Families have an opportunity to meet each other, staff and workshop leaders. There is shared and weakened roles and responsibilities. The children and teens especially revel in their new friendships and parents have the opportunity to reduce their isolation. Camaraderie flourishes during these times. Activities can include fishing, horseback riding, swimming, and arts and crafts.

Saturday morning

Following breakfast, families gather for family project:
- College: Families work as an individual unit on a symbolic memorial tribute to their loved one. Upon completion, families share their stories and display them as a unified group.
- Groups divided by age: The children and teens are divided into groups according to their ages for the morning activity. The activities are created and understood, the developmental life stages of children and teens and how the stages impact their adjustment to loss.

Saturday evening

Community tables allow our families to “break bread” together, and share their stories over the family-style meals that are served in a fun and friendly atmosphere.

FREE TIME

Free time allows our families to bond within their unit as well as with others. The children and teens especially revel in their new friendships and parents have the opportunity to reduce their isolation. Camaraderie flourishes during these times. Activities can include fishing, horseback riding, swimming, and arts and crafts.

Social workers are available for individual emotional support throughout the weekend.

Sunday morning

TRANSITION PANEL

Recognizing the healing power of time, a panel of individuals who have survived the traumatic loss of their loved ones share their stories of hope and resilience. Past panels have included:
- A 22-year-old college student whose father died when he was 6.
- A 13-year-old high school student whose mother died when she was 6.
- A 50-year-old radiologist whose father died when she was 3.
- A father, raising two children, whose wife died when the children were 8 and 4. He is now remarried, and speaks about raising children and rebuilding his family.

This is a very powerful activity in our camp, as these newly grieving will hear from others who lived with loss, but created fulfilling and successful lives.

BUTTERFLY RELEASE

Families join together for a symbolic butterfly release as they metaphorically compare their loss and transition to that of the butterfly. A panel of past participants share how they transformed the world from one of chaos to one of beauty.

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SUPPORT GROUP FOR PARENTS AND GUARDIANS

Adults and guardians are separated into one of two support groups, each facilitated by an LCSW to process their own loss while simultaneously addressing raising children who are coping with loss. Family members are offered the option of attending the same support group.

LOGISTICS AND SCREENING

Location: The Malibu Dude Ranch, Milford, Pennsylvania

Choosing a theme example: Butterfly

Outreach: Recruitment for camp families, volunteers and staff

Assessment of Families

New Families:
- Where did the loved one die? (MM/DD/YY)
- Where did you hear about the Healing Hearts Family Bereavement Camp?
- How long was the loved one sick? How long did the children know about the illness?
- How long did the children cope with the illness of the loved one?
- How did the children know about the illness? How did the children know about the death of the loved one initially?
- How are they coping with the death now?
- What are they looking to get out of the camp?

Returning Families:
- Date deceased
- How long was the loved one sick?
- How long did the children know about the illness?
- How did the children cope with the illness of the loved one?
- How did the children know about the death of the loved one initially?

Registration forms are mailed to the families with the understanding that campers are not accepted until the registration forms are returned.

How did the children grieve the death of the loved one initially?
- How have they been coping with their feelings using “Muffin” the therapeutic bunny as an example.

- The children and teens will work with musicians to create a song of words. English proverb: “Just when the caterpillar thought the world was over…it became a butterfly.”

Memorial Program

To create a peaceful and beautiful atmosphere while calming music is played:
- Burning floating candles are placed in the pool to represent each deceased loved one.
- Each family will be given a tapered candle upon entrance.
- Families will light individual candles and form a large circle around the pool.
- Reflections and meaningful essays are shared.
- The names of each deceased loved one will be read.
- A bell will ring after each name, and the flames will be extinguished.
- The teens perform their created song “Fly Butterfly Fly” at the conclusion of the service.

FUNDING

Healing Hearts is made possible through generous corporate, individual and in-kind donations. It takes many hands, donations and funding to create this unique and healing event.  

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