After A Cancer Death: A Family-Centered Camp Model for Healing and Resilience

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Abstract

Bereavement camps provide an opportunity for individuals to connect and share their grief experience with others who can understand. Research by Hanlon et al. (2019) reports that sharing experiences and peer support can help normalize feelings associated with loss and enhance relationships. However, traditional bereavement camp models usually focus on supporting the individual, which can create gaps in opportunities for collective family healing and peer connection.

Cancer*Care* created the Healing Hearts Family Bereavement Camp with a family-centered model for families (parents/guardians) with children ages 4 to 17.

Benefits of Participating in Healing Hearts Camp:

Safe Guided Environment: Family-Centered camp offers a safe space for families to grieve together, away from daily distractions, while encouraging grief conversations and creating new memories.

Inclusivity: Cancer does not discriminate. A family centered camp provides a space where families-adults and children-can participate and all voices are heard, spanning diverse experiences across age, race, culture, and religion.

Connections: Expressive Bereavement camps help children and adults connect with others who understand their grief, reducing feelings of isolation.

Hope: Learning other stories of individuals, who have navigated grief, provides a sense of hope and resilience for themselves, their children, and family.

The Role of Family Bereavement Camp:

Family-Centered Camp Model:

- Structured healing spaces where grieving families process emotions, connect with others, and build lasting relationships beyond camp.

Role of Skilled Facilitation and Structured Setting:

- Therapeutic activities and programs guided by oncology social workers, provide essential structure, thoughtful pacing, and emotional containment to support families throughout the grief process.

Developmentally Responsive Programming:

- Combines family-based activities with age-specific peer groups to support individualized expression and promote connection across developmental stages.

Program Outline

- 3-day, overnight family bereavement camp (Friday–Sunday) held in the Pocono Mountains
- Designed for families (parents/guardians and children ages 4–17) who have experienced the loss of a loved one to cancer within the past two years
- Free program; all meals, lodging, and activities included (transportation not provided)
- Limited to a maximum of 20 families
- Closed group model to foster safety, trust, and peer connection
- Intake and registration process assesses family needs, goals, and readiness for participation
- Led by licensed social workers, with support from trained volunteers throughout the weekend
- Combines therapeutic grief support with recreational and community-building experiences in a natural setting

Recruitment Process & Intake

- Families are referred through hospitals, cancer support organizations, community agencies, and former program participants.
- There is no financial need/income eligibility required to attend.
- Parents or guardians participate in a structured intake process with the program coordinator to evaluate suitability, family needs, and readiness for participation.

Therapeutic & Educational Components:

- Family-based interventions to strengthen communication and shared grieving
- Age-specific grief support groups (children, adolescents, adults)
- Creative modalities (art, journaling, music, mindfulness) to support emotional expression
- Structured memorialization and storytelling activities
- Facilitated clinical discussions to normalize grief responses and promote coping

Continuity of Care:

- An online support group before and after camp helps families stay connected, support one another, and feel cared for throughout their grief journey

Past Camp Therapeutic Activities:

- Write a bio of your loved one
- Family collage activity
- Children's book activity
- Vision boards
- Memory Pillows
- Resilience Panel focused on education, coping, and hope
- Tweens/Teens Group- Song writing activity
- Children Group- Learn a choreography
- Group for adults: 90-minute group sessions
- Memorial service to honor loved ones and create space for remembrance

Past Camp Recreational & Community-Building Activities:

- A combination of structured and unstructured activities designed to promote joy, connection, and emotional regulation, including horseback riding, fishing, arts and crafts, karaoke, s'mores, and field games.
- Dedicated social time for adults to strengthen peer support, foster connection, and build community with other bereaved caregivers.

Healing Hearts Camp Guidelines

- Safe & Supportive: Weekend camp for families with children (ages 4–17) grieving a loss to cancer.
- Confidentiality: All sharing is private to foster trust and safety.
- Participation Encouraged: Activities support healing; families engage at their own pace.
- Respect & Compassion: Treat everyone kindly; all grief experiences are valid.
- Supportive Communication: Listen actively and allow space for others.
- Emotional & Physical Safety: Staff are available; seek support as needed.
- Presence & Engagement: Attend all scheduled sessions to maximize benefit.

Clinical Implications:

- Meeting Families Where They Are: Grief is unique; flexibility in activities allows families to engage at their own pace.
- Therapeutic & Professional Guidance: Oncology and grief professionals lead activities that provide emotional support and safe expression
- Grief Differs by Age: Children often express grief through play and art, while adults may process through conversation or reflection. Both are valid.
- Balancing Grief and Joy: The mix of therapeutic and fun activities helps families learn that grief and joy can coexist—and take that understanding home.
- Shared Storytelling is Healing: Storytelling fosters connection, validation, and hope across generations.
- Community Strengthens Healing: Families gain comfort and resilience by witnessing others' experiences and sharing their own.

Limitations & Challenges

- Healing Hearts Family Bereavement Camp is not appropriate for individuals experiencing active suicidal ideation, recent suicide attempts, self-harm behaviors, or severe, unmanaged mental health conditions requiring intensive or inpatient care. Participants requiring a higher level of support will be referred to appropriate clinical services.
- As a brief, weekend-based intervention, the program is not a substitute for ongoing grief therapy, oncology social work services, or psychiatric treatment, and continuity of care beyond the weekend is limited.
- Eligibility is restricted to families who have experienced a cancer-related loss within the past two years, which may exclude individuals with non-cancer losses or more complex/prolonged grief trajectories

Impact Statements

"It was great to create a star with my boys, having the opportunity to see all the photos and discuss them with them, and then have a chance to share my loss with other individuals who have also experienced the same thing. There were still plenty of opportunities for the boys and me to have fun during the weekend, and then time to reflect on our loss. It is a fantastic weekend."

"I love that I can refer to the camp and those kids w/ my kids as others like them, as they don't meet others like them otherwise. Food was delish. Kind dining and CC staff offered multiple times to help me get from buffet to table, I really appreciated that. This camp has been extremely helpful to us in the hardest of times and the investment in our lives will pay off for our lifetimes."

"The social workers were very understanding and in tune with our feelings. The topics in the breakout sessions, the panelists, the activities, etc. were so helpful in many ways. We were able to cry and laugh during the weekend and find healing."

References

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