Supporting Children During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Seasons for Growth Grief Education

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What brings us together today?

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An opportunity to consider the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and ways that we might best support them.

What do you think children worry most about with the COVID-19 situation?

You may also have wondered…

What can I do to support them?

What learning might help them at this time?

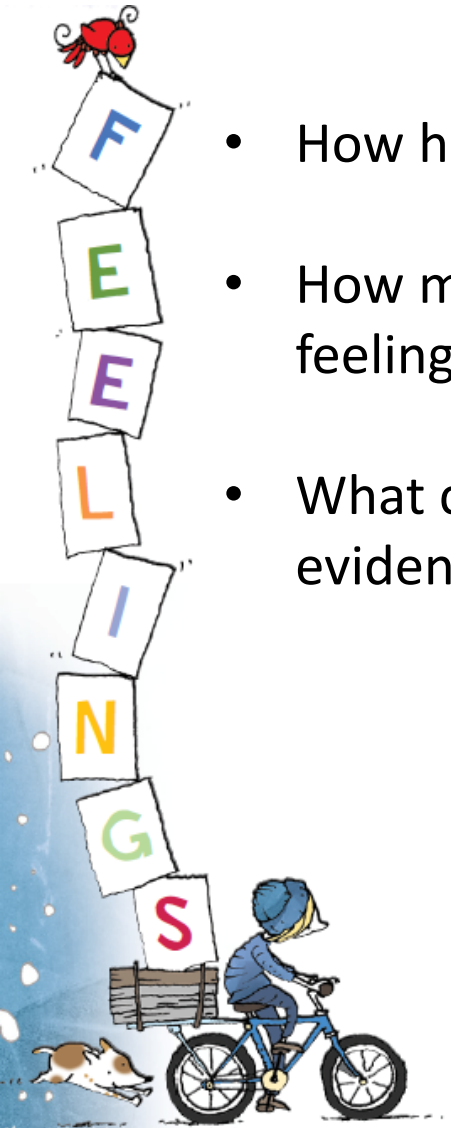
How are children feeling about this?

How might they be affected over the long-term?

How will I know what each child needs?

This session has been developed around these kinds of questions.

Reactions and Feelings



- How have I been feeling?
- How might children be feeling?
- What can the research evidence add?

Insights from the Evidence

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- 85% of parents report changes in their child during COVID-19 lockdown

(Orgilés et al., 2020)

- Previous lockdowns in North America suggest 30% of children meet the clinical cut-off for PTSD

(Cheng & Tang, 2004; Leppin & Aro, 2009; Main et al., 2011; Mihashi et al., 2009; Sprang & Silman, 2013)

- No long-term impact for children hospitalised with SARS

(Li et al., 2004)

Understanding Trauma

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Trauma is a deeply distressing experience that can be emotionally, mentally or physically overwhelming for a person (Bendall et al., 2018)

Children can demonstrate different trauma symptoms to adults and older adolescents

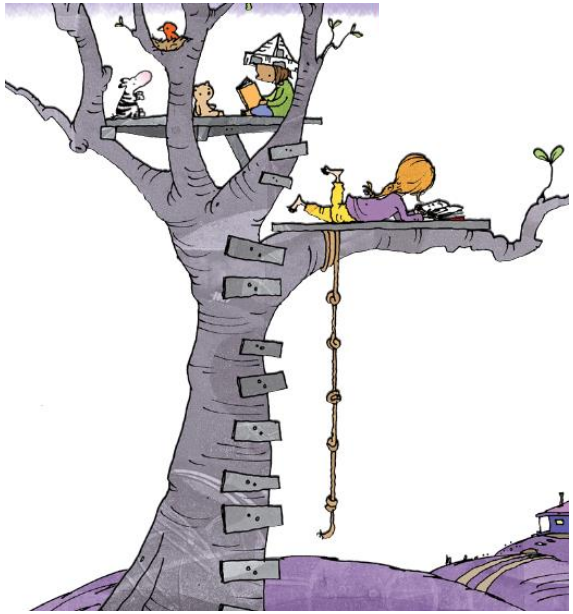
Responses to trauma can include clinginess / wanting to stay home / close to loved ones, phobias, nightmares, hyper-vigilance, emotional and physical distress with reminders of the event, irritability, sleep problems etc.

(Bendall et al., 2018; Phoenix Australia, 2019; Trickey et al., 2012)

What have we experienced so far?

Lockdown: many things rapidly changed - school, work, play.

Life will not go back to 'normal' just yet.



'After lockdown': different again - more new changes to adapt to.

Evidence from other contexts…

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Parental Separation

- Change
- Personal
- Not specifically threatening

Foster Care

- On-going change
- Personal
- Underlying safety issues / trauma

War

- On-going change & loss
- Community wide
- Sustained, obvious threat & damage
- Difficulties meeting basic needs
- Trauma

Terrorism

- Some change
- Community wide
- On-going invisible threat
- Trauma

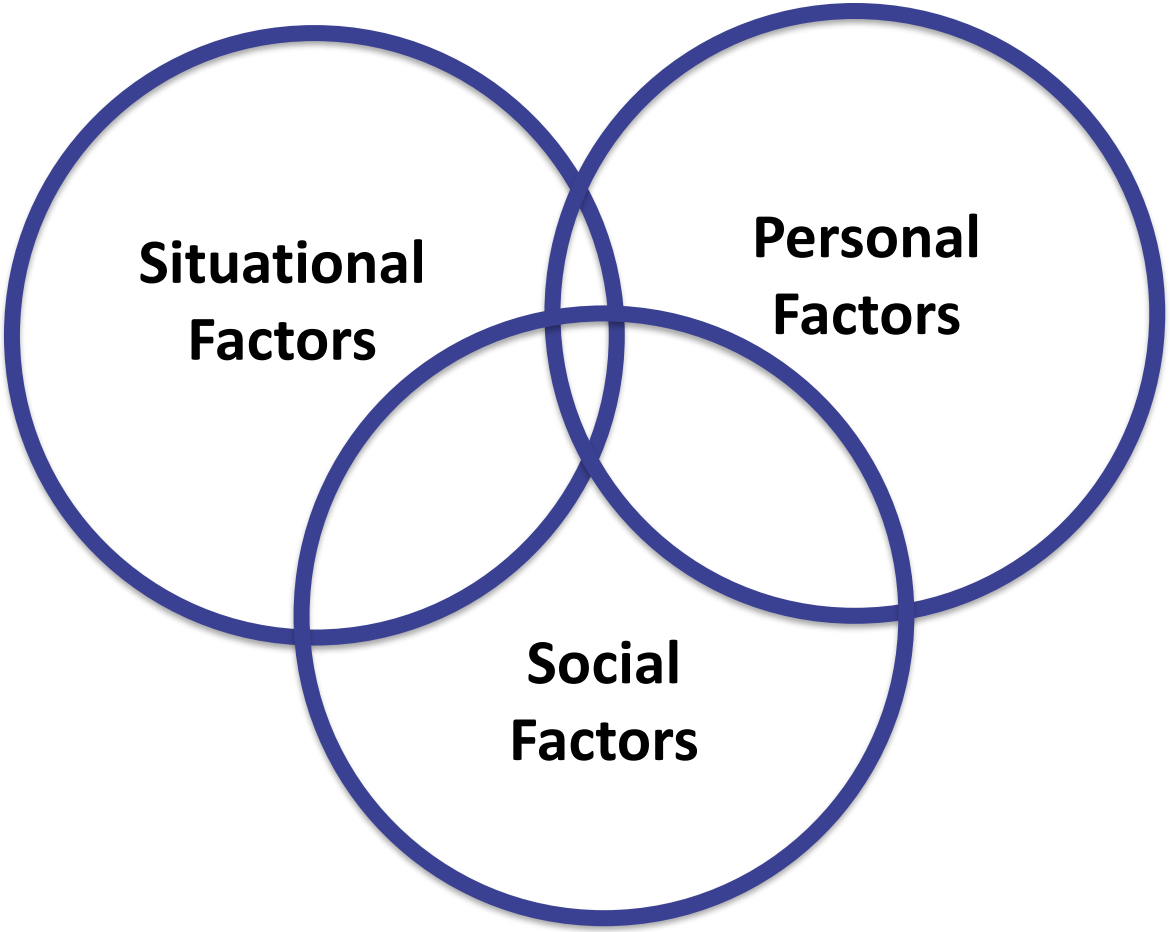
Natural Disasters

- Change
- Community wide
- On-going threat
- Visible damage & loss
- Traumatic experience

Evidence from other contexts…

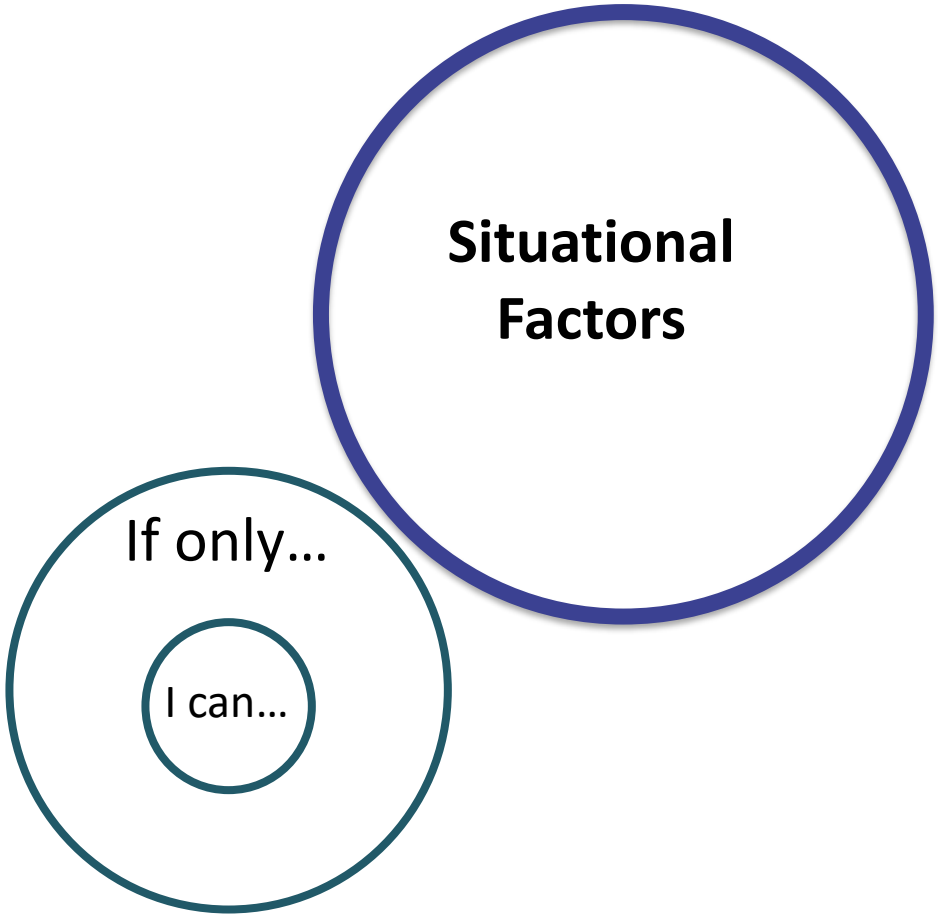
Regardless of the context… the same insights emerge time and time again regarding what helps and hinders children to grow positively during uncertainty and adapt well to change

What influences coping?



(Betancourt & Khan, 2008; Gibbs et al., 2014a,b; Kelly & Emery, 2003; Masten 2001; Mohamed & Thomas, 2017; Mooney et al., 2017; Mutch, 2013; Pine et al., 2015; Shepard et al., 2017; Stone, 2017; Townshend et al., 2015; Trickey et al., 2012)

What influences coping?



- Parental (Un)employment
- Family economics
- Schooling
- Health
- Bereavement
- Extent of additional changes

(Betancourt & Khan, 2008; Gibbs et al., 2014a,b; Kelly & Emery, 2003; Masten 2001; Mohamed & Thomas, 2017; Mooney et al., 2017; Mutch, 2013; Orgilés et al., 2020; Pine et al., 2015; Shepard et al., 2017; Stone, 2017; Townshend et al., 2015; Trickey et al., 2012)

What influences coping?

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- Personality /character
- Understanding and cognitive processing
- Pre-existing mental health issues or trauma
- Age?
- Social and emotional skills

Personal Factors

(Masten & Narayan, 2012; Mooney et al., 2017; Page et al., 2011; Schonfield et al., 2015)

What influences coping?

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- Family relationships
- Open communication
- Role modelling of positive adjustment
- Involvement in decisions
- Wider support
- Help others / sense of purpose

Social Factors

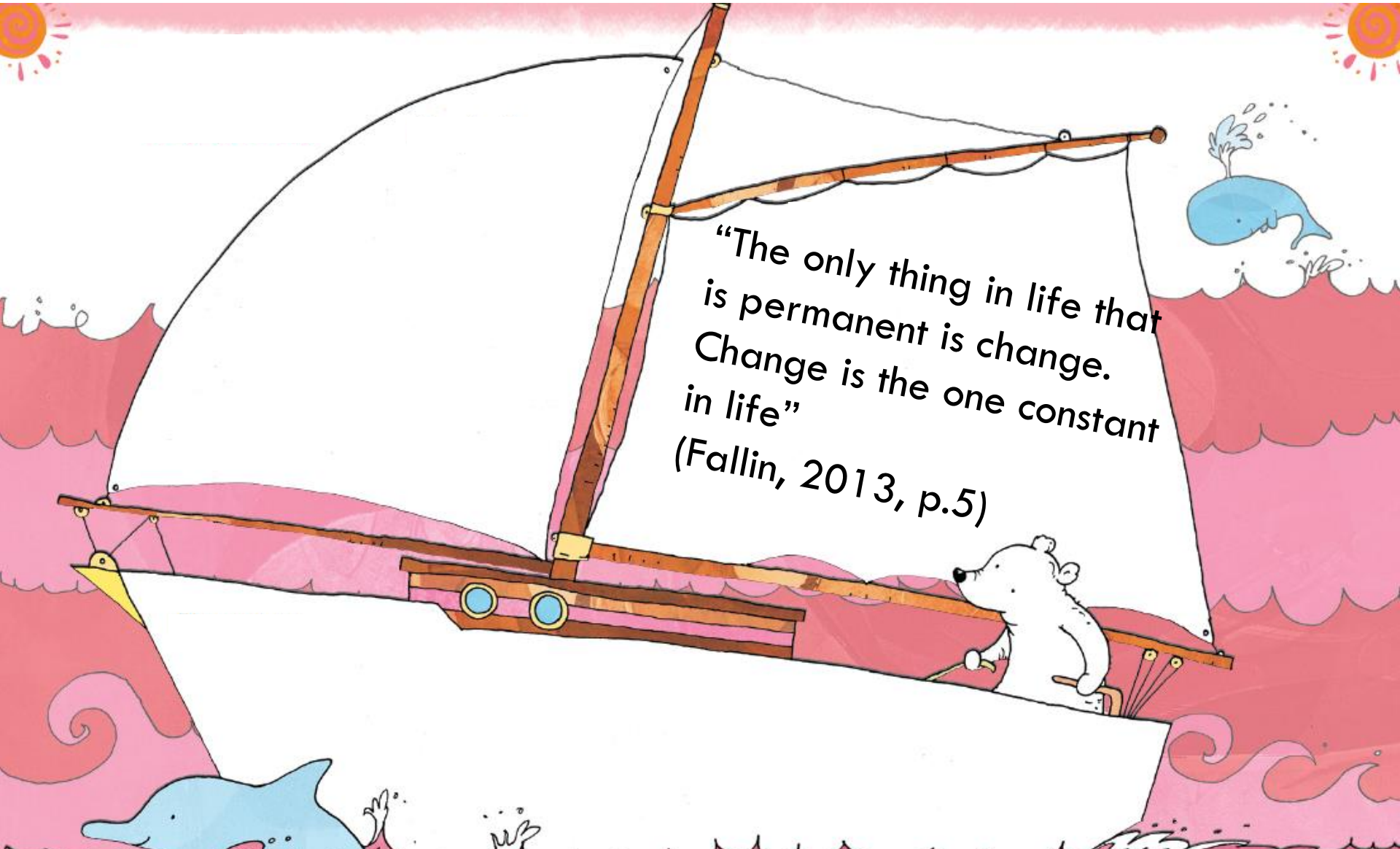
(Baggerly & Exum, 2008; Comer et al., 2014; Freeman, Nairn & Gollop, 2015; Gibbs et al., 2014; Goldberg, 2019; Lazarus et al., 2002; Masten & Narayan, 2012; Mooney et al., 2017; Mutch, 2018; Orgilés et al., 2020; Peek et al., 2018; Pine et al., 2015; Shepard et al., Sprang & Silman, 2013; Stone, 2017)

Involvement in Decisions

Practical decisions and problem-solving help us regain a sense of control.

- Discuss with children any big decisions that affect them
- Listen to their perspectives and genuinely consider them
- Explain any decisions made
- Offer opportunities for children to make small decisions
- Help children identify the immediate problem and think about possible solutions

Social & Emotional Skills



Seasons for Growth

- Small-group loss and grief education programme
- Metaphor of the seasons helps children understand that change and loss are a normal part of life
- Explores what we may experience and ways we can respond and adapt
- Provides an opportunity to gain understanding, skills and attitudes to adapt well

stormbirds
Growing through natural disaster

Rationale

Seasons for Growth is based on the belief that:

- Grief is a normal and valuable part of life
- We need to be provided with the opportunity to examine how grief, as a result of significant change & loss has impacted on our lives
- Seasons for Growth provides the opportunity for each participant to integrate the appropriate knowledge, skills and attitudes to understand and to cope with loss and grief.
- This takes place in an atmosphere of like- to- like peer support. It is NOT a 'one-to-one' process.

The Programme

Seasons for Growth®

DOES:

- Support Participants to understand & manage the change, loss & grief experienced.
- Assist Participants in understanding that the emotions associated with their losses are normal.
- Encourage the expression of thoughts and emotions
- Develop better support networks
- Draw on extensive research in developing a sound educative response to change, loss and grief.

DOES NOT:

- provide counselling or therapy

A Loss & Grief EDUCATION Programme

Seasons for Growth®

- Based on peer support small groups between 5 & 8 participants accompanied by 1 Companion.
- Uses quality educational methods to process loss and grief
- A withdrawal programme from normal lessons in schools
- Can be used in a variety of community settings, e.g.: care & child contact centres, parish/community groups, Hospices. In fact anywhere children gather for the appropriate length of time , and a recognised organisation is responsible for their care.
- Has 3 levels – 5-18 years / 3 Primary age and 1 Secondary age
- A 9 session Manual & Participants Journal for each level
- 2 flexible Reconnector sessions
- Ongoing support for implementation

Which grief theory is the programme based upon?

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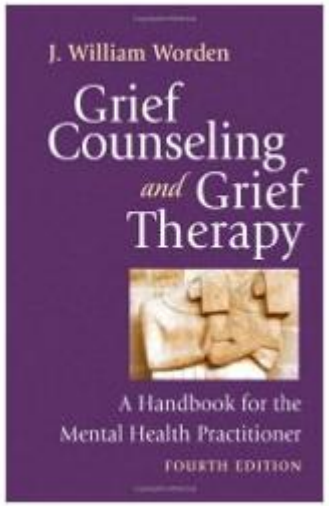
J. William Worden's **Task** Theory (1991/ 2008):

- To accept the reality of loss
- To process the pain of grief
- To adjust to a *changed* world after the loss*
- To find an enduring connection with what has been lost* in the midst of embarking on a new life
- ***(P9 Primary Manual. P 10 Secondary Manual)***



* The wording of Worden's tasks focuses specifically on bereavement. These have been adapted slightly for the *Seasons for Growth* Program.

Worden's Tasks	*Seasons for Growth*® Tasks		Session Content
To accept the reality of the loss	Learn that change and loss are part of life	**AUTUMN**	**Session 1:** Life is like the seasons **Session 2:** Change is part of life
To process the pain of grief	Learn about different ways people experience change and loss	**WINTER**	**Session 3:** Valuing my story **Session 4:** Naming my feelings
To adjust to a changed world after the loss	Learn skills to assist with adapting to change and loss	**SPRING**	**Session 5:** Caring for my feelings **Session 6:** Remembering the good times
To find an enduring connection with what has been lost while embarking on a new life	Learn about ways that help in moving forward with life	**SUMMER**	**Session 7:** Making good choices **Session 8:** Moving forward

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Comprehensive school mental health program

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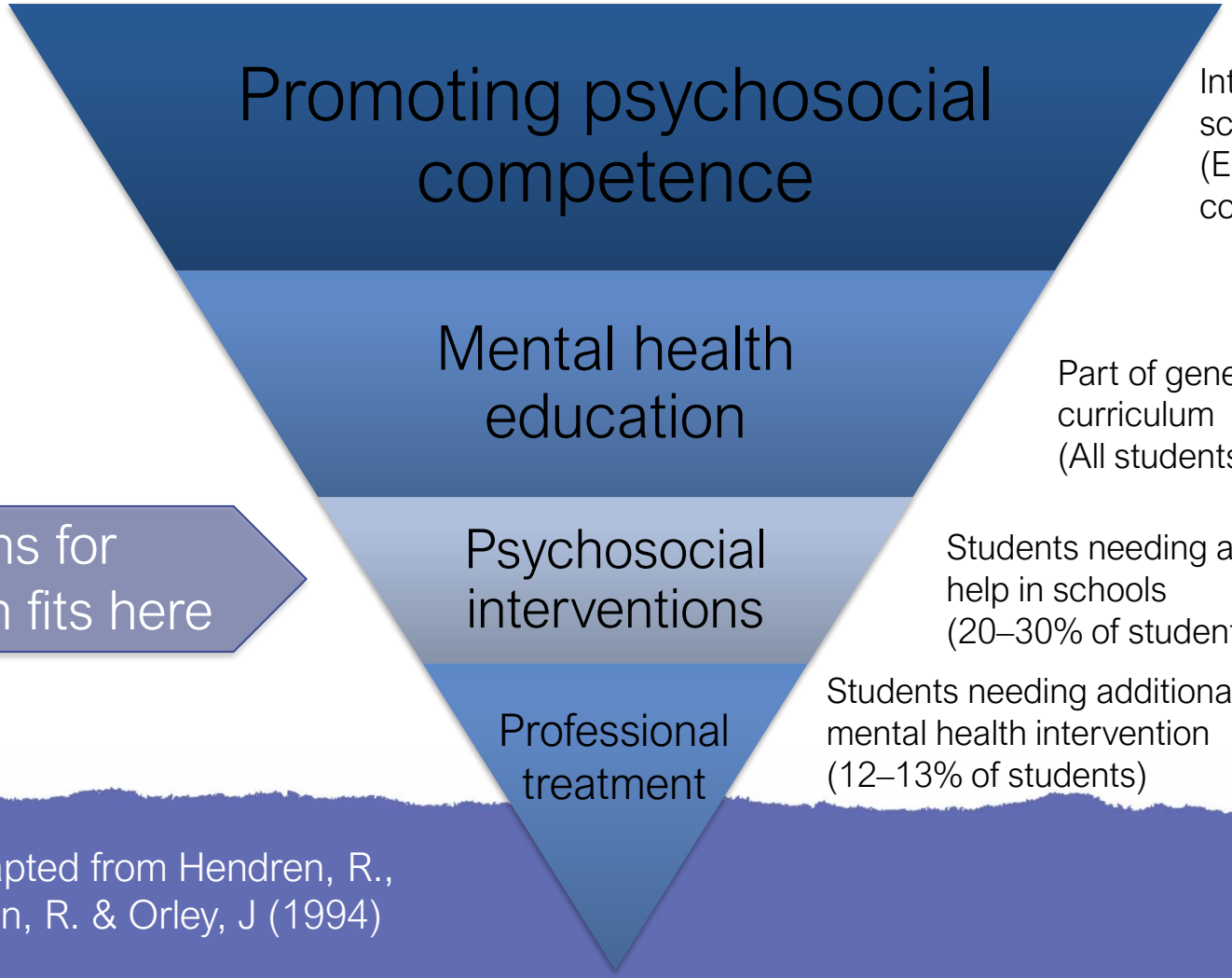


Integration into school curriculum (Entire school community)

Part of general health curriculum (All students and teachers)

Students needing additional help in schools (20–30% of students)

Students needing additional mental health intervention (12–13% of students)

Seasons for Growth fits here

Source: Adapted from Hendren, R., Birrell Weisen, R. & Orley, J (1994)

The Role of the Companion

Companion: 'One who accompanies another': Oxford English Dictionary

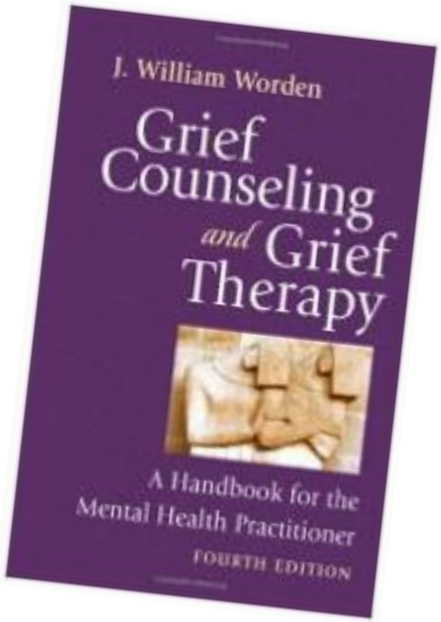
An effective Seasons Companion is a person who:

- Cares deeply about supporting young people to understand and accept their grief and can listen effectively.
- Can listen deeply and effectively
- Is able to facilitate discussion
- Can ask questions sensitively and respect silence
- Is not burdened by their own unresolved grief
- Has the ability to express and deal with their own feelings
- Can relate well to the age group they are companioning
- Understands the issues related to mandatory reporting
- Is willing to take part in the Companion training
- Does not bring personal agendas to the group
- Acts supportively, not rescuing, distracting or making participants dependent
- Trusts in the participants experiences and capacity to choose

Underpinning Theory

The Seasons for Growth programme is based on William Worden's Task Theory

- Identifies 4 tasks of grief
- Positions grief as a process not just a reaction
- Requires an active engagement to process the experience
- Tasks can be revisited



Translating the tasks for COVID-19

- Learn that change and uncertainty are part of life
- Learn about different ways people experience uncertainty, change and loss
- Learn skills to assist with adapting to change
- Learn about ways to help in moving forward with life

The Strengths of Task Theory

- Shifts change and loss from being a passive ('If only') to an active ('I can') experience
- Makes sense of the 'to and 'fro' of emotional turmoil and normalises such experience
- Helps empower by encouraging an intentional response
- Doesn't prescribe any specific order with tasks
- Can be revisited and reworked over time
- Important learning for children as they find their way in a rapidly changing world

The seasons metaphor & COVID-19

Arrival of Change

'After Lockdown' Phase

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"Life is filled with disappointments, reversals of fortune, heartache, and pain but also new experiences that bring hope and joy. That is the message of the seasons: a message of hope, not despair" (Fallin, 2013, p.3)

Help with managing feelings

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- Let children know it is ok to feel sad, angry etc. after a big change
- Help them to recognise and identify their feelings
- Help them to understand whilst feelings are ok, the usual boundaries apply for behaviour and actions –maintaining boundaries helps children feel safe and retain normality
- Help children to find other techniques or ways to diffuse overwhelming feelings

How can we support parents?

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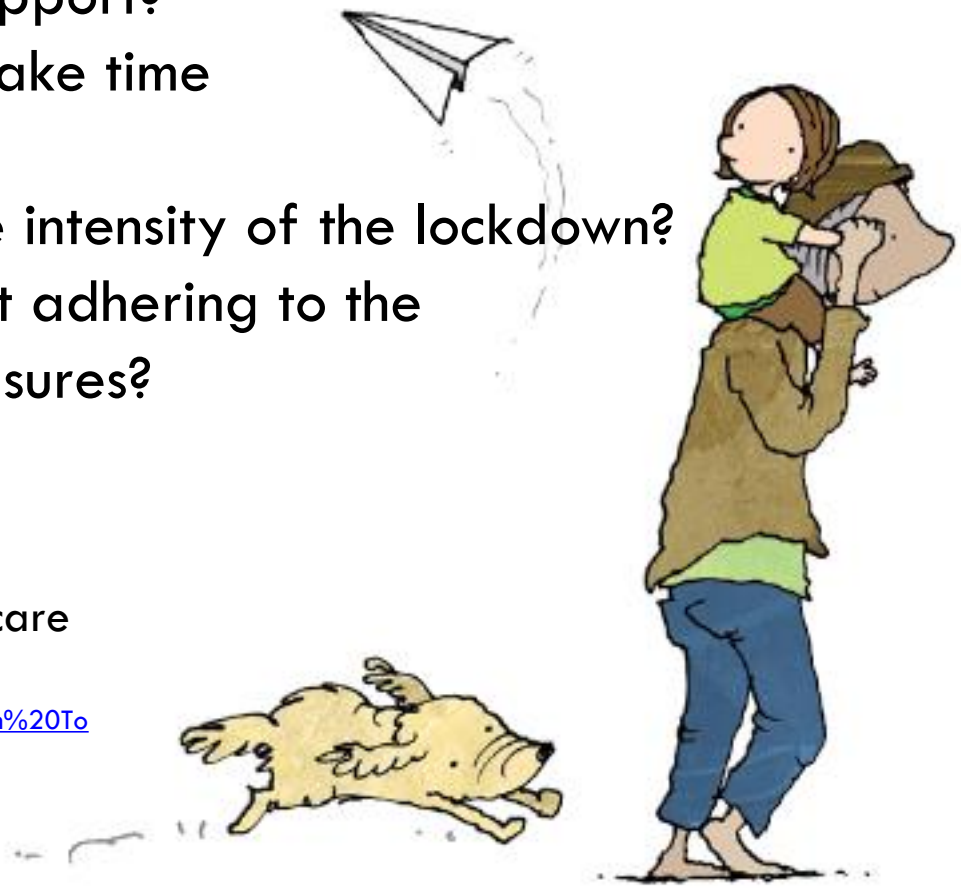
- What capacity do we have to support parents?
- Can we affirm their efforts and provide additional information, strategies and support?
- How can we help parents to take time to care for themselves?
- Can we offer respite from the intensity of the lockdown?
- What can we do locally whilst adhering to the recommended protection measures?



A leaflet from Good Grief on parent self-care at this time:
https://www.goodgrief.org.au/sites/default/files/Season%20Growth%20Toolkit%20Selfcare%20Times%20Uncertainty%20COVID19.pdf

Caring for Yourself

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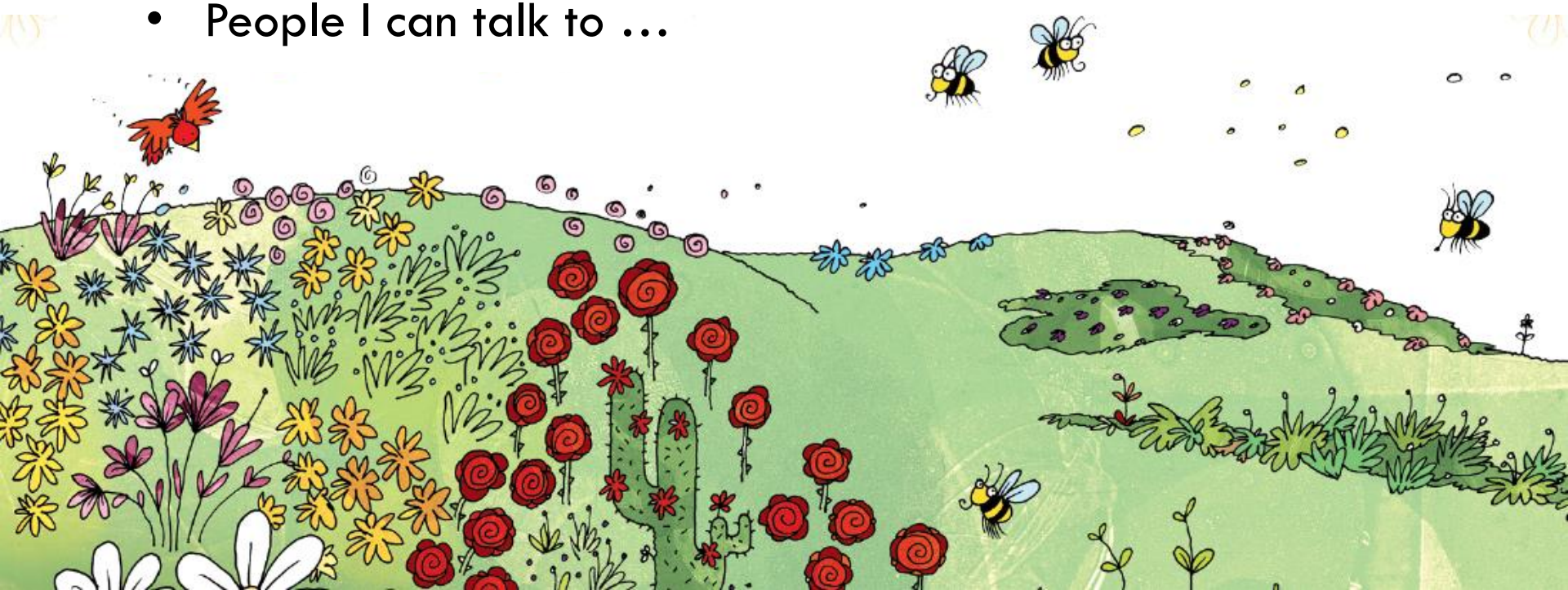
'Who and what supports me'?

- Things I can do …
- Places I can go …
- People I can talk to …



In summary…

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We cannot hide children from this pandemic nor from any other major community disaster of this kind.

While we can't change what a child has observed or experienced we can support their wellbeing by maintaining strong, positive relationships with them.

- Acknowledge the child's story (their status = 'I am')
- Open, honest communication (their voice = 'I have')
- Encourage children to identify their feelings and the actions / choices they can take (their agency = 'I can')

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Resources

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