

# Catching Physical/Mental Illness Associated with Death

It is not uncommon after a special person dies for children to worry that they can catch the physical or mental illness associated with that person's death. As adults, it can be difficult to explain this topic to children. It is important to use concrete language and allow children space to ask questions even if you do not know all the answers. Below are a few tips on how to have conversations on this topic.

## Explaining physical and mental health versus illness

- **Physical health** is when our bodies are not sick.
  - Some ways we stay physically healthy are washing our hands, getting sleep every day, eating foods that are good for our body, and getting exercise or moving our bodies around.
- **Physical illness** is when our bodies get sick.
- **Mental health** is when our brains are not sick.
  - We stay mentally healthy by playing and having fun; spending time with other people; and taking care of ourselves by sleeping, eating, and exercising.
- **Mental illness** is when our brains get sick.

Sometimes people get sick because they have trouble making healthy choices and sometimes people get sick for other reasons.

## Explaining genetics

- **Genetics** is a fancy word that means something we get from our parents or from our families. Some of the things we get from our parents we can see. For example, if you and your mommy both have blue eyes. There are also some things that we get from our parents or families that we can't see. For example, if you and your daddy have the same favorite food or you are both really good at playing basketball.
- Though sometimes we can get sick from something we get from our parents or families, just because someone in our family gets sick does not mean that we will too.

## Explaining communicable versus non-communicable diseases

- **Communicable disease:** Some illnesses we can get from other people by catching their germs. Examples of things we can catch are a cold or the flu. If we get a cold or the flu we can go to the doctor or take medicine and then get better.
- **Non-communicable disease:** Some sicknesses we cannot get from other people even if we share germs. Examples of things we can't catch are cancer or a heart attack.

## General reminders

- Reassure children that both you and they are safe.
- Explain the precautions you already take to maintain safety and well-being.
- Validate their feelings about the subject.
- Provide them with explanations that are age-appropriate and use concrete language.