

# the invisible riptide

Building Mental Wellness - Together

## Discussion Guide and Activities - Grief

Discussion Points and Activities using *The Invisible Riptide* to help youth move through grief and loss

1. We all have our own emotional riptides, meaning our feelings can overwhelm us.
  - What do you think your own riptide looks like? Draw it! What feelings are in it?
  - What situations can make your riptide smaller? What situations can make it bigger?
  - How has your riptide and the riptide of your family members changed since losing your loved one?
  - Do you think there is one way you are supposed to feel or grieve?
2. Stella talks about how all feelings are OK and part of being human. She also makes a new declaration. "It is OK to not be OK. It doesn't mean something bad will happen, but that something needs to change."
  - How can feelings be both helpful and unhelpful?
  - Can you have more than one feeling at a time?
  - Can you miss someone and feel their absence and still have moments of joy?
  - What can you do when your feelings are so big, your grief feels too big, or you feel like your grief will never go away?
3. Stella learned about **emotional safety**: being able to identify, express, and work through emotions and having people respect your boundaries.
  - How does it feel when you express your emotions and feel heard?
  - Ask people that are safe and grieving what helps them feel emotionally safe. We can learn a lot from others.
4. You may notice certain feelings happen more often or are bigger than others. Sometimes it's hard to identify or even talk about your feelings. We're not born knowing how to handle feelings. It's something we learn along the way. If we reach out and connect we can work through some really hard thoughts and feelings.
  - Write down feelings or worries and hand them to a parent, a teacher or other trusted adult.
  - Text your feelings or words instead of saying it aloud.
  - Journal, draw, or color to sort out your thoughts and feelings.
5. Stella feels so overwhelmed by her feelings at one point that she describes it as feeling like "she is drowning and all alone." Have you ever had thoughts that you wish you could go be with your loved one who passed away?
  - Feeling sad, worried, mad, or even different are all part of losing someone we love. These big thoughts and feelings are your body's way of saying things are too hard and too much right now for you on your own. It's time to lean on a trusted adult. They know just what to



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do to keep you safe. You never get in trouble for being brave and sharing how you feel about a friend that you are worried about.

- It's important to know you are not alone, and together you can handle anything. It's a sign of bravery and strength to tell an adult how you feel or if you are worried about a friend.
  - If it's too hard to say it out loud you can email your teacher or school social worker, write in a journal to your parents, or text it, instead of saying it aloud.
6. Stella becomes more aware of the Invisible Riptide when the Coronavirus pandemic started because there has been so much change, uncertainty, and loss. And the Coronavirus made it harder for some people to grieve and feel like things were really real.
- Do you notice an invisible riptide in your body when you start to feel really sad or lonely? You can draw the riptide and then draw yourself on the riptide, holding on tight, to what helps keep you grounded and safe.
  - Brainstorm some ideas with a trusted adult for what to do IF you start to feel this way so you can ride the riptide until it passes. Your adult can also help you learn how to ride the wave of these BIG emotions until they get small again.
  - Make a plan if you are going to an event that will remind you of the person you lost or will feel sad that other kids have their special person with them.
7. Stella feels brave and excited to get help from a "feelings doctor" or therapist (Ms. Tina). She teaches Stella it's OK to share her feelings. If we don't show trusted adults our inside, they don't know how to help us best. Even one safe relationship can help our brain calm and change for the better. How cool is that?
- How do you feel when asking for help? Comfortable? Embarrassed? Relieved?
  - Who do you feel safe with?
8. The book talks about feeling the emotional riptide of those around us and how it affects us.
- Give examples of how emotions can be contagious - in other words how we can feel the emotions of others.
  - Draw the people in your life and the emotions that surround them.
  - Who helps make your riptide smaller? Who might make your riptide bigger?
9. Balance and connection are the core of health. We feel and function best when our body's systems are in balance with friends, family, community, and nature" (Perry and Winfrey, What Happened to You, pg. 48). This is why Stella chanted, "People need people." Stella wants people to lean on one another
- What parts feel out of balance?
  - How does your riptide react or what feelings do you have when you feel out of balance?
  - What are the early signs that you are starting to feel really sad or anxious?
  - What makes you feel like you belong?
  - Make a plan for school and home that helps keep you physically and emotionally safe. You can include your favorite teacher, the school social worker, art teacher or anyone that makes you feel safe.
10. Stella wants people to lean on one another. Having lonely thoughts and feeling like you are the only one who had to lose somebody can be hard to handle on your own. Stella has good friends, but even she feels alone and isolated sometimes. What can you do if you feel this way?



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- Talk to a trusted adult.
  - Make a plan for school and home that helps keep you physically and emotionally safe. You can include your favorite teacher, the school social worker, art teacher or anyone that makes you feel safe.
11. Let's talk about **co-regulation** - a big fancy word that means we can catch calm from others. You can catch some calm by getting a hug, sitting in silence with someone you love, telling someone you just want to talk and don't want any advice or suggestions, sitting beside each other and coloring, or throwing a ball to each other.
- Identify an adult figure who makes you feel emotionally safe at home and school.
  - What is it about that person or what does that person do to help you feel safe?
12. Stella liked dancing, especially to help her calm her body and release her feelings.
- What are some rhythmic and soothing activities you enjoy?
  - What ways do you like to get your energy and wiggles out?
  - What helps remind you that you are loved?
13. Our brain is sort of like a muscle. We have to strengthen the calm parts when we are calm, so they work better when needed. Basically, our brain has to get used to what helps us feel calm so it works better for us.
- Explore ways to strengthen the calm part of your brain: use apps (Calm, BrainTap app, Insight Timer), short, guided meditations, yoga poses, or blowing bubbles.
  - Make a list with your family of things that help people calm down. Notice that calming activities can be different for different people (some want space vs. distance or stillness vs. movement). Your own needs may even change depending on the situation!

**Knowing what you need and letting your friends and family need lets them know how to better help you. You are not alone, and feeling this way is normal for more people than you think!**

For more helpful resources on discussing BIG topics and BIG feelings with children please visit [www.theinvisibleriptide.com](http://www.theinvisibleriptide.com) under Resources.



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