

# IN MY HEART FOREVER

SUPPORTING CHILDREN THROUGH LOSS & GRIEF  
EXPERIENCES IN THE COVID CRISIS

**22nd May, 2021**  
**SAMVAD**

Support, Advocacy & Mental health interventions for children  
in Vulnerable circumstances And Distress  
(A National Initiative & Integrated Resource for Child  
Protection, Mental Health, & Psychosocial Care)  
Dept. of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry  
National Institute of Mental Health & Neurosciences  
(NIMHANS), Bangalore  
Supported by Ministry of Women & Child Development,  
Government of India



## In My Heart Forever

SUPPORTING CHILDREN THROUGH LOSS & GRIEF  
EXPERIENCES IN THE COVID CRISIS

**Saturday, 22nd May 2021**  
**5:30-8:00PM**



# Children's Loss & Grief Issues in the COVID Context

## The 2nd Wave...

- Increased severity of virus
- Higher levels of infectiousness & spread
- Continued lockdowns/ mobility restrictions
- It was unexpected...
- We were ill-prepared...
- High burden on public health systems
- Increased loss of lives—mortality in younger adult populations

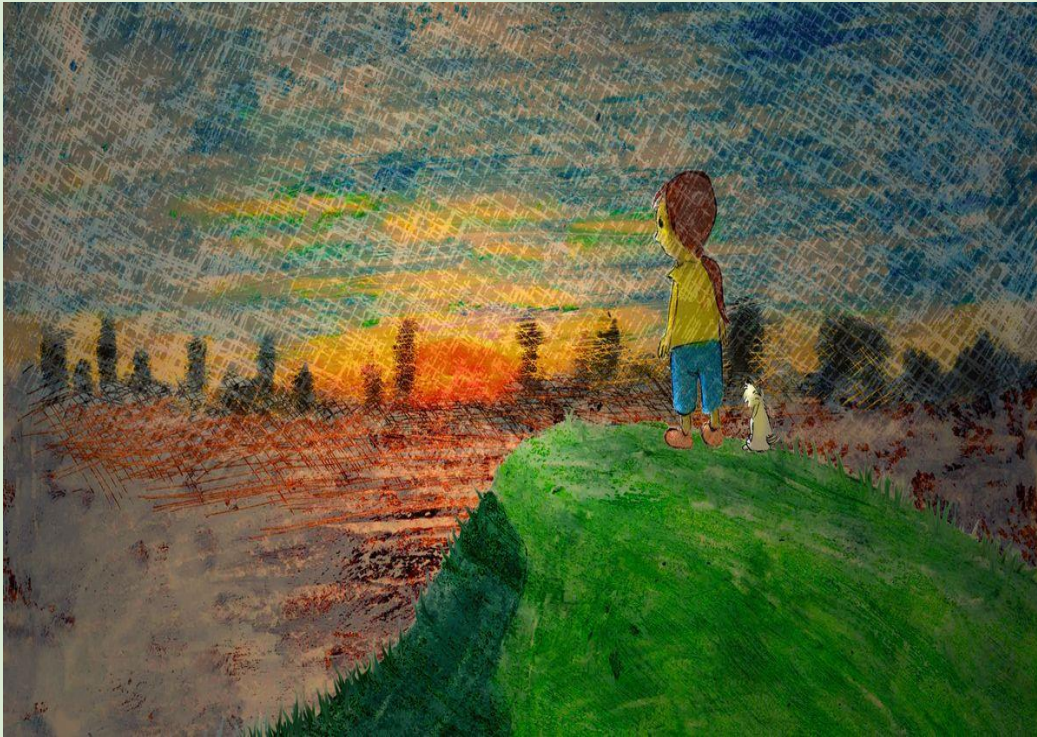


# Objectives

To respond to children's loss and grief issues in the COVID context by...

- Developing an understanding on how children are impacted by loss experiences.
- Enabling children to express their loss and grief experiences.
- Responding to (young) children on their questions and confusions regarding death.
- Supporting them through their loss experiences to help them move towards healing and recovery.

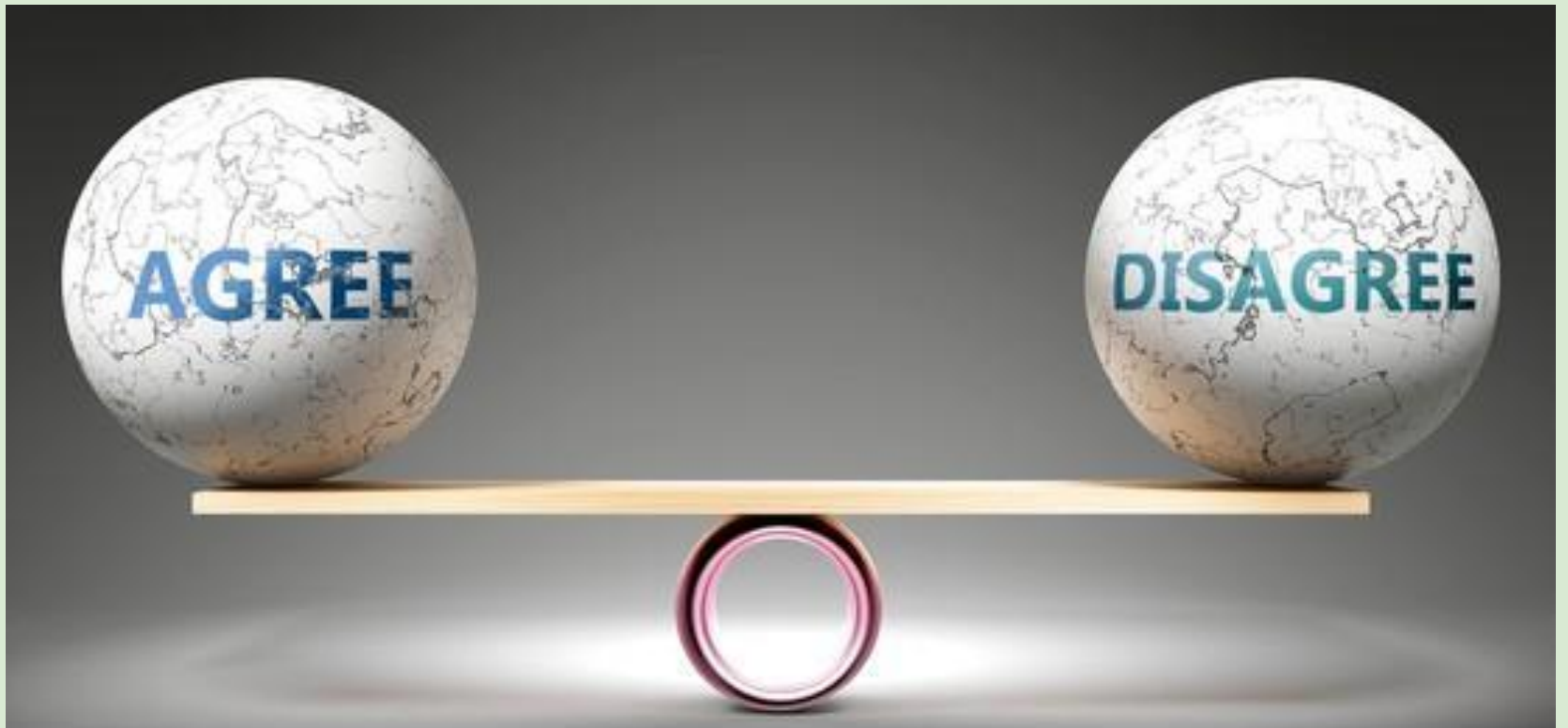
# Children in Loss and Grief



How does a child experience loss and death?

What happens to children in a house/situation where there is loss and death?

How do adults typically explain death to (young) children?



1. Children do not understand or experience loss & death.(Infants and toddlers are too young to grieve.)
2. It is alright never to tell children the truth about separation/loss/death because they will forget. (i.e. to say ‘Mummy will come back/ she has gone out of town’—when the mother is dead).
3. Children will be scared if they find out the truth.
4. Children don't hurt as much because they understand less.
5. Children are resilient; they bounce back.
6. Speaking of the deceased will reopen a child's grief wounds.
7. Children should NOT attend funerals or be involved in grieving.

# Ways In Which Children Grieve



# Age 0-3 Years

## Understanding of Death

- No understanding of death
- **Absorbs emotions of others around her/him**

## Patterns of Grieving

- May show signs of irritability
- **May exhibit changes in eating, nursing patterns, crying, and in bowel and bladder movement.**
- Dependency on nonverbal communications; physical care, affection, reassurances



# Age 3-6 Years

## Understanding of Death

- **Child thinks death is reversible; temporary, believes that people who die will come back.**
- "Magical thinking"; believes their thoughts, actions, word caused the death; or can bring deceased back;

## Patterns of Grieving

- Craves for affection / physical contact, even from strangers
- Connects events that are not connected
- Greatly impacted by parent's emotional state
- Regressive behaviors; bed wetting, security blanket, thumb sucking, etc.
- Difficulty in verbalizing, and acts out feeling
- **Have worries of abandonment and fear that when others leave that they are not going to come back.**

# Age 6-9 Years

## Understanding of Death

- Child begins to understand the finality of death; some do and some may not.
- Sees death as a taker or spirit that comes and gets you

## Patterns of Grieving

1. Defends against feeling helpless
2. Guilt - blames self for death
3. Continues to have difficulty expressing feelings verbally
4. Increased aggression;
- 5. Medically unexplained aches and pains**
- 6. School refusal**
- 7. Have a lot of questions about death**

# Age 9-13 Years

## Understanding of Death

- Child's understanding is nearer to adult understanding of death;
- **More aware of finality of death and impact the death has on them.**

## Patterns of Grieving

- Concerned with how their world will change;
- Questions have stopped
- Reluctant to open up
- Delayed reactions - at first seems as if nothing has happened, then grief reaction
- Disrupted relationships with peers
- Increased **anger, guilt**

# Age 13-18 Years

## Understanding of Death

- Death is viewed as an interruption.
- Death is an enemy
- Bodily changes emphasize growth and life.

## Patterns of Grieving

- Increased risk taking in effort to reduce anxiety or to defy fate
- **Escapes; uses drugs or alcohol, sexually acts out**
- **Wants to grieve with her/his peers not adults**
- Denial - tries not to think about it, doesn't want to talk about it
- Symptoms of Depression- Suicidal thoughts
- Anger

# Intervention 1: Creating spaces for children to express thoughts and feelings on loss and death experience



# Activity 1: Think about someone who you loved who has been lost.

## Objective:

- To understand what loss is and how we view it.
- Method: Visualization, drawing, narrative
- Materials: paper and colours

## Process:

- Close your eyes and think of a person who you loved and lost
- Imagine the event/ time as an image (not a narrative/ not in words)...like a still photograph.
- Now, draw it.
- Now describe it.



# Processing of the activity :Use the picture to ask the following questions

- What happened?
- Who were all there?
- “It must have been difficult for you”. “You must have been scared?”(Validation of Emotions)

# Using this activity with children:

- When we are in touch with our own loss experiences, do we have the sensitivity to deal with other experiences particularly children's emotions.
- Art is a starting point , not every child will respond to art but it is one possible way to tell you what happened.
- To start the narrative and to use the picture to describe emotions of the grieving person.
- It is **NOT** necessary to use it with every child . Offer it to the child , some children may just want to describe, others may want to use the story method.



# Intervention (2): Helping children Understand Death and Dying



# Premise for response to Children's Loss-Grief Issues:

- Truthfulness (No lies!)
- Based on the child's age and developmental level
- Answer children's doubts and questions.
- No one-word or half-sentence answers—provide detailed responses.
- Comfort, reassurance to the child... bringing peace and closure (not increase sadness and trauma).
- Centre on the child's personal beliefs (must not be an imposition of our beliefs).



# Ankit's Story



Mummy was very sick. Sometimes people get really sick and even after the doctor tries to cure them with medicine, they are unable to get well—like with mummy. People who do not get well, die—they are not able to stay with us, in this world, any more.

When people die, they do not come back...so mummy will not come back (and I know you will be sad about that). No one is sure about where people go when they die but we all believe different things about it...some believe that dead people go to God or to heaven...some believe that they become a tree or flower or a star in the sky...what would you like to believe about mummy?

What happened to mummy?

Where did Mummy go?  
Will she come back?



There are illnesses that are small (like cough, cold, fever...), for which if you take medicines, you will get well. And there are illnesses that are bigger and more difficult to cure—those are the only ones people die of. Usually, two kinds of people die—those who are very sick and those who are very old...and you are not old or sick. So, you can't go to where mummy is now—but I understand that you really miss her.

Here are two flowers...what do you observe? As you can see, the first one is alive...means that it drinks water and eats food, so it looks healthy and can move when the wind blows; the second one is dead—since it has no life, it cannot drink water or eat and it looks dried up and cannot move at all. People are like that too—when they are alive, they can breathe, walk, sleep, eat, play, work...but when they die, they cannot do any of these things—so they cannot even be in the same place as people who are alive. Some people also believe that like plants and flowers, people also become mud when they die.

Will I also die when I get sick? Can I go to where mummy is?

What does dying mean?



When a person dies, his body is buried in the grave and his spirit goes up to heaven. (What is spirit?)...the body is like a rose...and the spirit is like the fragrance of the rose—you can smell it and feel it but you cannot see it.

I believe mummy sees you and watches over you every day. And because she loves you so much, she wants you to be healthy and safe and happy.

What does soul (or spirit) mean?

Can mummy see me?



No, mummy did not go away because she was angry with you. You are not responsible for what happened at all—and mummy would never think so either. She loved you very much. Sometimes things happen in ways we don't expect...like illness or accidents.

I know you are worried about how you will be taken care of...but we are here to take care of you and keep you safe. We will feed you, make sure you have all you need, send you to school...and while this is a new place for you, and adjusting to new things can be hard, we will help you....I believe you will find new friends to play with...and I hope you will be happy with us

Did mummy go away because she was angry with me? May be I did something wrong...

Who will look after me now?





# Case Studies for Loss/ Grief Work

- Case 2: 14 year old Rita's father died of suicide during the second wave of Covid , when he was forced to go back to his village as he was financially burdened due to loss of job and livelihood.



There is an illness called depression...a person who has it feels extremely sad, anxious and upset all the time. When the depression gets worse, the person may start feeling more and more hopeless—like there are no solutions to his problems. When that happens, the person also becomes very anxious and his mind becomes less clear, less able to make decisions clearly...that is what happened to your father...when he decided to take his life.

I understand that you feel that what happened was not fair and it is alright for you to feel angry, in addition to feeling sad. Nothing you did or said caused your father's death. Sometimes things happen in ways we do not expect or understand-- whether they are illness or accidents.

Why did my father do this [suicide]?

Why did this happen to me?



What you are feeling is legitimate—considering how much you loved your father and how important he was to you. What were some of your future plans? What were your father's dreams for you? Let us talk about them...

Why should I live? I don't want to live...



I understand that you feel frustrated...and I have no doubt you would have taken your father for help, had you known his condition. But the other thing about depression is it is not easy to recognize...even doctors find it difficult to know sometimes how serious the depression is.

Yes, he could have, in which case you would surely have helped. But perhaps he did not want to worry you with them/ he may have thought they would upset you. Also, when people become very depressed and don't want to live, they already have a strong belief that their problems have no solution, so they think it is pointless even to tell someone....

I could have prevented this from happening...and saved my father's life.

Why didn't my father tell me about his problems?



# **Intervention 3: Helping children to remember loved ones.**



# Memory Work.

- Converting negative memories to positive ones.
- Keeping alive memories of loved ones...using them to provide strength and move forward.

# Getting the child to do things to remember and celebrate their loved one:



Light a Candle /diya



Cook their favourite food

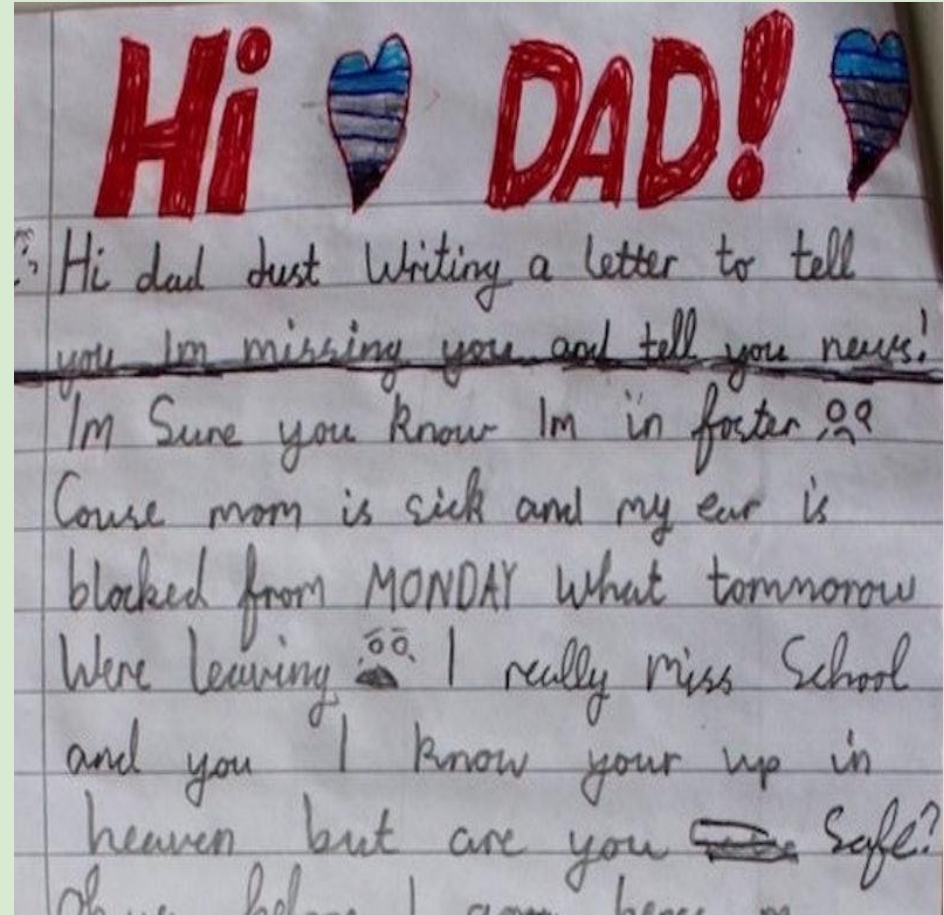


Create a photo album with loved memories

# When there was no time to say good-bye...

- Sometimes there is no opportunity to express the deep grief we feel/felt...there was no time to say good-bye.

- **Letter-writing:** what would you tell your mother/father about how you feel? Was there something you'd like to have said before they died?





Draw a picture or take out a photograph of the special person whom you lost:



# Processing:



## **Part A: Preserving positive/happy memories**

- Who was this person?
- What was this person like?
- What were some of the qualities about the person that you loved most?
- What things did you do together?
- What is one very happy memory you have of that person?
- What were this person's dreams/aspirations for you? What are some things he/ she said that inspired/ encouraged you?

# Processing:

## Part B: Gaining strength from memories

- How would you like to use the memory of this special person...to be sad and depressed or to think about her and remember the good times/ fun things you did together?
- Where would you like to keep this picture/photograph? What will you think each time you see it?

*“Of course one part of us will always be very sad when we think of this person, but there are many ways we can think about someone we have lost as you have just described .. So is it also possible to feel good about the happy moments?”*



## Finally, discuss with the child:

How would you like to use the memory of this special person...to be sad and depressed or to think about her and remember the good times/ fun things you did together? (Discuss how the child can replace the difficult and traumatic memories of death with happy and positive memories—which can then be the child's strength).

Where would you like to keep this picture/photograph? What will you think each time you see it? (Connect it to feelings of strength/ some inspiring quality the child saw in the deceased).

# Other supportive interventions



Guided Imagery



Encourage the child to do what they enjoy

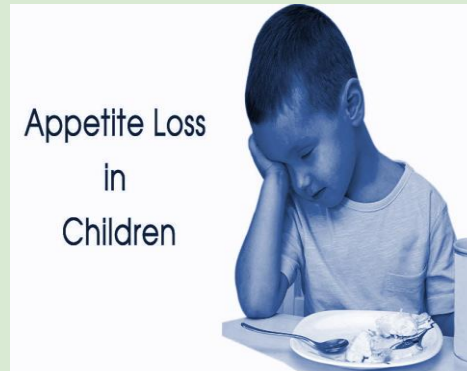


Daily Routine



Relaxation Exercises

# When To seek Help

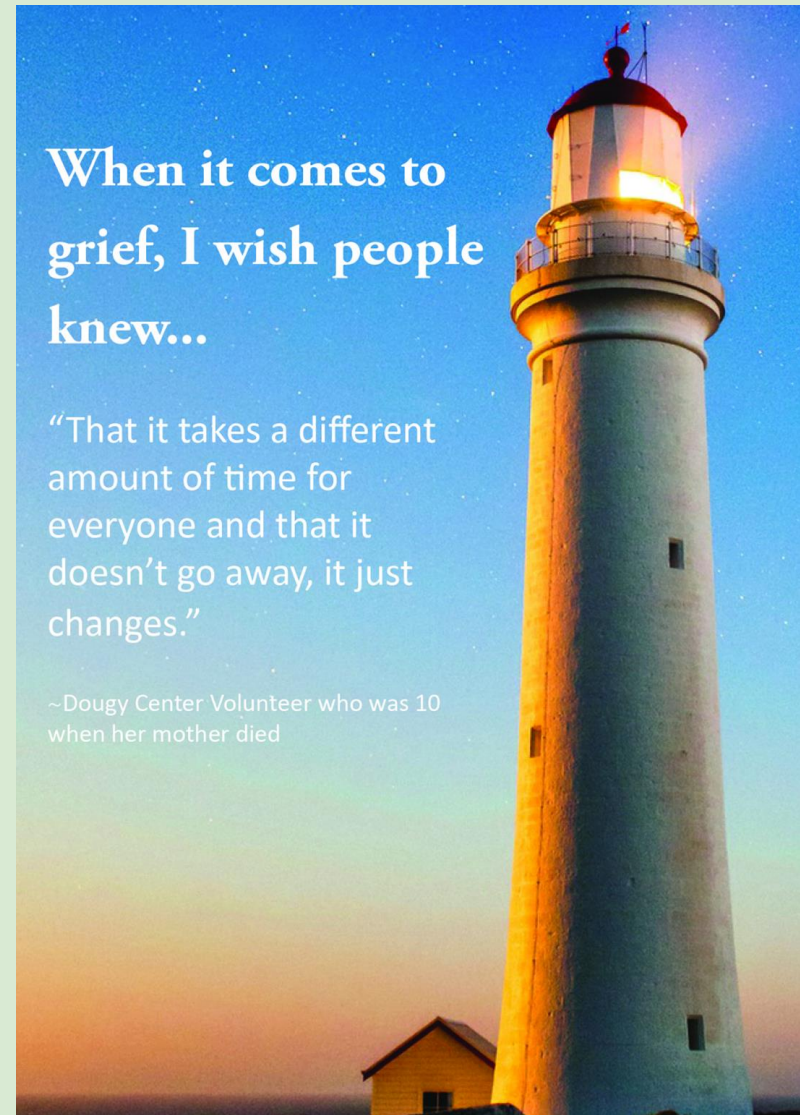


Nightmares/Flashbacks

A note to the caregivers.....



1. Recognize and understand the impact of grief on child's emotions and behaviour.
2. Help the family talk openly and directly about the death.
3. Provide children with adequate information—clear and comprehensible information about loss and death, according to the age and concerns of the child.
4. Validate their feelings and do not minimize their concerns and sadness.
5. Encourage children to resume daily/ routine and activities, such as play and school, family and social interactions, so that their developmental trajectories are uninterrupted.
6. Assure children that they are not to blame for the loss/ death event that occurred. Alleviate their fears and anxieties by reassuring them that they will be supported and cared for.



When it comes to  
grief, I wish people  
knew...

"That it takes a different  
amount of time for  
everyone and that it  
doesn't go away, it just  
changes."

~Dougy Center Volunteer who was 10  
when her mother died



IT DOESN'T MATTER  
THAT YOU ARE  
NOT HERE IN  
PERSON  
AS LONG AS YOU  
ARE HERE IN MY  
HEART.



*The Little Prince Quotes via Gecko&Fly*




**SAMVAD**  
 Support, Advocacy & Mental Health Interventions for Children in Vulnerable Circumstances And Families  
 in Maharashtra & Karnataka  
 Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, IISMAHS, Bangalore  
 Sponsored by: Ministry of Women & Child Development, Government of India

**Saving Children from the Brink.**

ACTING UPON CHILD PROTECTION VULNERABILITIES IN THE COVID CRISIS.

**Saturday, 15th May 2021  
 5:30-8:00PM**

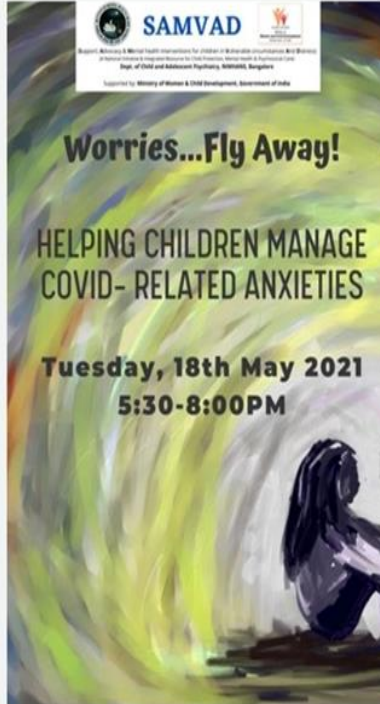


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**Worries...Fly Away!**

HELPING CHILDREN MANAGE COVID- RELATED ANXIETIES

**Tuesday, 18th May 2021  
 5:30-8:00PM**



**SAMVAD**  
 Support, Advocacy & Mental Health Interventions for Children in Vulnerable Circumstances And Families  
 in Maharashtra & Karnataka  
 Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, IISMAHS, Bangalore  
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**Breaking Bad News**

Disclosing Illness and Death to Children in the Covid Crisis

**Thursday, 20th May 2021  
 5:30-8:00PM**

**SAMVAD**  
 Support, Advocacy & Mental Health Interventions for Children in Vulnerable Circumstances And Families  
 in Maharashtra & Karnataka  
 Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, IISMAHS, Bangalore  
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**In My Heart Forever**

SUPPORTING CHILDREN THROUGH LOSS & GRIEF EXPERIENCES IN THE COVID CRISIS

**Saturday, 22nd May 2021  
 5:30-8:00PM**



**SAMVAD's COVID Series...**  
**“Children in the Covid Crisis...Like We Never Expected It to Be:  
 The What and How of Working with Child Protection and  
 Psychosocial Issues”**



YouTube:

<http://www.youtube.com/c/NIMHANSChildProtection>

Instagram:

<https://www.instagram.com/nimhanschildprotect/>

Twitter:

[https://twitter.com/nimhans\\_CPC](https://twitter.com/nimhans_CPC)

Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/childprotectnimhans>