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The Butterfly's Journey: An Evidence-Based Social Story for Teaching Grief and Life Transitions to Individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

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Abstract

Background:

Individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) frequently encounter difficulties understanding abstract and emotionally complex concepts such as the life cycle, aging, illness, death, loss, and grief. Limited access to developmentally appropriate grief education can contribute to confusion, anxiety, emotional dysregulation, and challenges coping with significant life transitions. Social Stories™ and other social narrative interventions are evidence-based practices that support learning and emotional understanding by presenting information through concrete language, structured sequencing, visual supports, and individualized content. Despite their widespread use in teaching social and adaptive skills, there remains a need for accessible grief-education resources specifically designed for individuals with IDD.

Purpose:

This project describes the development of *The Butterfly's Journey and Understanding Grief*, an evidence-informed social story created to teach concepts of growth, change, loss, remembrance, and emotional adjustment to individuals with IDD. Using the butterfly life cycle as a symbolic yet concrete framework, the intervention aims to facilitate understanding of the natural progression of life while providing a supportive approach for discussing death, bereavement, and life transitions. The social story was designed to promote emotional literacy, normalize grief reactions, and encourage adaptive coping skills in a manner consistent with the cognitive and communication needs of individuals with developmental disabilities.

Methods:

The social story was developed through integration of evidence-based principles from Social Story™ methodology, social narrative interventions, grief counseling literature, trauma-informed care, developmental psychology, and disability-focused educational practices. The narrative employs clear, literal language, predictable sequencing, and concrete visual imagery to maximize accessibility for individuals with varying cognitive, language, and adaptive functioning levels. The butterfly's developmental progression—from egg to caterpillar, chrysalis, adult butterfly, and eventual death—is presented as a parallel to the human experience of birth, growth, change, aging,



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loss, and remembrance. Embedded throughout the narrative are supportive messages that validate emotional experiences, encourage self-expression, and reinforce the importance of seeking support from trusted caregivers, family members, peers, and professionals.

Results:

The completed social story provides a structured, compassionate, and developmentally appropriate framework for introducing grief-related concepts. Using the butterfly metaphor, individuals are supported in understanding that all living beings experience a natural life-cycle, and that loss is an inevitable part of life. The intervention promotes recognition and acceptance of common grief responses, including sadness, confusion, anger, worry, and longing. Additionally, the story introduces practical coping strategies such as discussing memories, expressing emotions through communication or creative activities, engaging in self-care practices, and maintaining connections with supportive individuals. By combining concrete examples with emotionally affirming language, the narrative seeks to reduce uncertainty surrounding death and foster resilience during periods of transition and bereavement.

Conclusions:

The Butterfly's Journey demonstrates the potential value of nature-based social narratives as a tool for grief education and emotional support among individuals with IDD. By integrating evidence-based social story practices with principles of grief counseling and trauma-informed care, the intervention offers a developmentally sensitive approach to addressing a frequently overlooked area of disability services. The social story may enhance understanding of death and loss, improve emotional awareness and expression, support adaptive coping, and facilitate meaningful conversations between individuals with IDD and their caregivers or support teams. Future research is warranted to evaluate the effectiveness of this intervention in improving grief comprehension, emotional regulation, coping skills, and overall adjustment following loss across diverse IDD populations and service settings.

Keywords: Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD); grief education; bereavement; Social Stories™; social narratives; emotional regulation; coping skills; developmental disabilities; trauma-informed care; life transitions; disability services; loss and grief; adaptive functioning; evidence-based interventions.