

April: Thanks for joining us, I'm April Reilly joined by Valerie's House Program Director Amy Strom. Thanks for talking with me today.

Amy: Thanks for having me.

April: This is my favorite time of year. The fall is comforting and familiar. It's the weather and the smells and the food. But, that's not the case for everyone and we want to draw attention to that today.

Amy: Unfortunately, oftentimes holidays and seasons are related to some of our most comforting memories that we have with our family and our loved ones. So, unfortunately when these holidays come back around, they bring with them reminders of the lost loved one that we have. So it's important that as holidays come that we are respectful of families as they again, maybe have some triggers that will be associated with this time of year.

April: What are some of those markers or specific examples, you mention triggers, that people associate with Fall that might bring about those feelings of grief.

Amy: Well, I think when we think about triggers they can be so individualized. It can be anything from seeing pumpkins and the changes of leaves, the smell of maybe the kitchen, maybe pumpkin pie, butternut squash soup. Something that was a constant reminder of ways they celebrated together or enjoyed the change of season. So I think, unfortunately it's hard to pick out just one or two triggers because it is so individualized to each person.

April: Halloween is a big part of the fall season as well, but there's also a big focus on death with that. How can that affect someone who is grieving, especially a child, when they're bombarded with images of headstones or skeletons or even ghosts?

Amy: Right, I think for so many, we think Halloween is such a great time of year. We have so many great memories. It's fun to get dressed up in costumes and the air is getting more brisk and we see changing leaves and of course candy and trick or treating bring fun images, but as you mentioned April, the images of death and dying and skulls can trigger a lot of these negative experiences in families who've lost a family member, especially if it was in a brutal, traumatic way. So it's important that as we come to the holiday, that we listen to where our kids are, especially as they're grieving. They may have some worries or concerns. It's not uncommon for kids to worry about who else will die and then what will happen to them. So, just being present and being able to listen to them and if they want to change routines. Maybe they did go trick or treating and this year they don't want to go trick or treating. Let your child lead how you're going to now celebrate.

April: Would you be able to give any specific examples of some of the reactions that a child may have when they maybe see something that is going to bring up a lot of emotion?

Amy: Yeah, I think it's easy to say that most of their kids, we either tend to notice that they either internalize and those are the unseen behaviors. So they may withdraw, they may want to spend more time in their room, maybe only want to listen to music or play video games and really withdraw from family activities or activities that they were used to participating in before. The other way would be behavioral and acting out. So behaviors that may not be typical for them to do. It's kind of their way of crying out, so maybe more temper tantrums or maybe refusing to follow rules. Also, things that they can

control. We might notice that their grades are dropping because they have control over that, so not turning in homework.

April: When it comes to Halloween, how can parents calm their fears and worries? Any what precautions should they take if they want to take their child out trick or treating, maybe after a major loss.

Amy: I think it's always best to reassure our children first and to let them know, if they are experiencing any discomfort or worry that we validate their concern. So, just being available to listen and hearing what they are saying, it's important to be an active listener and hearing what those concerns are and not trying to make assumptions about what our kids are feeling. And then if we're able to validate what their feeling, then maybe we can help some of those fears subside. Fears often evolve from a lack of knowledge and control and so with the loss of a loved one, we often feel out of control. So, by providing information and making them feel safe and secure with boundaries and letting them know at any time if they're out trick or treating if they need to come home or need to stop that that's always an option for them.

April: When these triggers come about, people or children aren't always in a place where they feel that they can show emotion comfortably. What should they do in those instances and how can others be supportive?

Amy: Well I think that's more often the case than not, that you're out in public and something triggers one of your memories or an emotion. It could be a sight, a smell, a sound. It's okay to remember that it's okay to have those feelings. It's okay to be sad, to cry, to take time. These are all symbols of how much you cared for that person and that relationship. But it's okay to remember to take a moment. If you need to step out of a store or put your head down if you're in class or in the middle of school, or ask to go to the bathroom. Some of those things may change the scenery, give you some of that privacy that you want. We also know that some people can repress those feelings for a while. It's okay to do that too, but just make sure that you're allowing yourself to enjoy some of those memories and to actually feel some of those emotions and not having them pent up.

April: Sometimes it's not always sad. Sometimes when we think of our loved ones, we smile and it's not so much a sorrowful feeling. Is that a positive sign that maybe the person who is grieving is on a path to healing?

Amy: Yeah, I think it's important for each person who's affected by loss to adapt to their new reality without their loved one and really begin to see a new future for themselves, through the development of their resiliency and their coping skills and what their future is now, it's changed, but that still doesn't mean that it doesn't have to be positive. So, as we begin to develop those new coping skills and identity, we can begin to enjoy more of those memories.

April: How can someone stay connected to the memories of the person and association they've made with a particular season?

Amy: Yeah, I think it's important that we need to stay connected to our loved ones. If you're talking about theory and research, they talk about continuing bonds and really what that's saying is we want our memories to come with us, that we don't want an abrupt ending. Just as that person has died, we want our memories to continue and grow with us and come with us so that we can continue to share them with others. So it's really important that we may keep some of the traditions and memories alive,

but it's also okay to start some new traditions without that loved one. That will also bring comfort to your family.

April: Thank you, Amy.