



HEALING HEARTS

**A Game for Children about
the Journey through Grief**

by Sharon Rugg MSW

About The Game

Healing Hearts is a game for children and adolescents that teaches about the journey through grief.

The purpose of Healing Hearts is to help educate children about the many phases of the grief journey, about their feelings, the challenges and changes, the discoveries they make about themselves, and finally about the new beginnings they undertake.

Included

- Game board
- 72 cards (12 of each of the 6 decks)
- Instruction manual
- 72 Healing Gems
- 6 colorful pawns
- 1 die

Setup

Unfold game board and place in the middle of the table. Each player chooses a different colored pawn and places it at Start (where the heart is broken and aching due to a loss).

To decide who goes first, have each player roll the die, lowest number is first, followed by the player on his/her left.

Place each stack of cards, questions down, near its corresponding color-coded land on the game board.

Gameplay

The player will roll the die and move his/her piece the appropriate number of spaces. He/she will then draw a card for the area they land on, read the question, and answer it.

Land of Loss



Each of the blue cards, corresponding to the Land of Loss, asks questions which encourage the player to talk about the loss, what happened, who died or left, how he/she heard the news, etc.

As the counselor or parent, you might mention the normal shock and numbness which often accompanies the news that someone has died or parents are separating, etc. It is ok to pass, if a player is not quite ready to participate. However, after each player has drawn a card and attempted to answer it, he/she is allowed to select a Healing Gem (or comforting fuzzy- see *Classic Fuzzies* heading in this manual).

Land of Feelings



As the players move into the Land of Feelings, they will draw orange cards which will help to initiate discussions about feelings. Additional comments that might be provided during this part of the game could include discussions about tears, whether it is ok to feel relief or even happiness, or how it is possible to experience two feelings at once.

Notice that the feelings on the game board are denoted by masks. You might discuss with players how we sometimes mask our feelings, that is, feel one way on the inside but put on a different face for others.

Note that a path which at first appears to be a shortcut exists in the Land of Feelings. Some of the players may be tempted to try a shortcut to get away from their feelings and some of the challenges and

changes occurring in their lives. Point out to the kids that often when we do attempt shortcuts, we end up bogged down more than ever. Some of the long-term effects of trying to escape from our feelings of grief might be depression, use of drugs or alcohol, fighting, negative self-esteem, strained family relationships, poor grades, illness, etc.

Land of Changes and Challenges



As players move into the green area, Land of Changes and Challenges, they are asked to discuss how their lives have changed since their loss occurred. They may have had to move to the home of an extended family member, necessitating a change in schools, neighborhoods, friends, etc. A widowed or divorced parent may have decided to remarry, bringing a new step-parent into the home as well as step-siblings.

Land of Discoveries



The red Land of Discoveries focuses discussions on what students have discovered about themselves during their grief journeys. Do they feel stronger and more able to handle challenges? Have they discovered particular things that have helped them in their journey— being with friends, journaling, talking about feelings, crying, exercising, or spending time with pets?

Land of Memories



Next, players enter the purple Land of Memories. Here players should experience the comfort of remembering their loved ones. They will probably enjoy sharing stories with each other during this section of the game. However, the concept of anniversary dates and the difficulties that can occur on special days, like the loved one's birthday, Mother's or Father's Day, and holidays, are important issues to discuss. Some of the questions in the Land of Memories having to do with holidays will prepare players for the possibility of landing on the Special Days space in the Land of New Beginnings.

Land of New Beginnings

Land of New Beginning



In the light green Land of New Beginnings, players will draw questions that encourage them to look to the future rather than to the past and their memories. Examples are "Name someone you would like to get to know better and tell how you would do this?" or "Think of something new you would like to learn and tell about it." Discussions revolve around the fact that grief changes us.

Once we have told our stories, paid attention to and learned from our feelings, accepted challenges and changes in our lives, learned more about ourselves, and realized that we will always hold special memories of our loved ones in our hearts, we are ready to reach out to the future and embrace new relationships and new adventures.

Special Days



Players landing on the space marked Special Days move back to the Land of Changes and Challenges. This often happens in the grief journey. Special days can be difficult to get through.

Depending on time or on how the counselor and children decide to play the game, players landing on this space may spend just one turn in the Land of Changes and Challenges and then go back up to the Land of New Beginnings or they may continue back through the Land of Discoveries and the Land of Memories.

Discussions during this part of the game should revolve around the fact that there will be times during the grief journey when we feel we are not making much progress towards a healed heart. Sometimes, days will be dark and gloomy even when we are almost through our journey.

Cloudy and Sunny Days



The special Cloudy Day and Sunny Day spaces throughout the game also point out this same idea to the players. No matter where we are in our grief journey, we will have some sunny days when we feel like laughing and playing. During those times, it is ok to give ourselves permission to feel good. Players landing on Sunny Day spaces should skip ahead two extra spaces. Players landing on Cloudy Day spaces need to be reminded that these days also occur all throughout our grief journey. On those days, we need to be extra good to ourselves and recognize that we really are making progress in our journey even though it feels like we are sliding backwards. These players move ahead one space and are allowed to receive an extra Healing Gem.

One discussion could revolve around what the gem might represent - - hugs, a special treat, a compliment, time spent with a special friend, etc.

The Healed Heart



Finally, all players reach the Healed Heart, which is sunny and full of light. The faint scars on the healed heart represent the fact that a part of us will always miss the person that died or left. That is okay. There may always be a few rough days. That is okay. And we will never forget the person who is gone - the good memories and the not so good memories. But for the most part, we are ready to become full participants in life once more, reaching out to new experiences and new relationships with joy - - a sunny heart full of light and love.

The players will naturally want to declare themselves the winner if they are the first to arrive at the Healed Heart or if they end the game with the greatest number of Healing Gems. It is important to help children understand that we are all winners in the grief journey when we have arrived at the Healed Heart. Each journey is unique - some will arrive quickly, others will take more time. We are all on the same journey. We do best when we not only offer help and support to each other but are also willing to receive help and love from one another.

Note to the Professional Playing the Game with an Individual Child

We can all identify with a number of situations such as relocation and pet loss and answers will come easily when playing the game alone with a child. However, when the professional has not had the experience of divorce, suicide, or murder, for example, it will be important for the professional to refer to secondary experiences from other situations with which she/he might be familiar.



Classic Comfort Fuzzies

For a softer, more comforting experience, you may choose to purchase fuzzy craft Pom Poms from a craft store to use in place of the included Healing Gems. (for example Michaels item #10213140 multicolored 1" Pom Poms.) Counselors may choose to allow players to keep their fuzzies for the duration of the game or permanently.

About the Creator

Sharon Rugg, MSW, is a retired Licensed Clinical Social Worker, Certified Thanatologist, and Registered Play Therapist with over 30 years of professional experience in mental health, college teaching, hospice care, and grief counseling.

In her former private practice, Rising Sun Center for Loss & Renewal, her specialization and passion were to assist hundreds of grieving children and their families work through life-threatening illnesses and issues of loss and grief.

While engaged in private practice, she created and published a number of popular therapeutic grief materials and games for children, adolescents, families, and helping professionals. She also conducted numerous grief groups for children and adults and was a featured presenter on loss and bereavement counseling in many professional development conferences and workshops.

Sharon created the first Healing Hearts game for grieving children and its alternate adaptations to help children open up and express their feelings and experiences involving a dozen different types of loss and grief. In retirement, Sharon enjoys lake living in North Georgia, has been happily married to Ed Rugg, PhD, for over 50 years, and has two grown children and six grandchildren.



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