

# HOPES PROGRAM

## NEWSLETTER



### UPCOMING EVENTS:

- **HOPES Adult & NJ4S Youth Loss Survivor Support Group**
  - First Tuesday of every month in Piscataway
  - Adult registration: 732-815-5749. Youth registration: 732-253-6586
- **Comfort Zone Camp**
  - NJ Suicide Loss Camp (for ages 7 - 17); May 16 - 18
  - Register [here](#)
- **Miki & Friends OPEN AIR: Healthy in Mind & Body**
  - Saturday, May 17 at West Windsor Park
  - See flyer at the end of this newsletter for more information
- **AFSP NJ Soul Exhaustion**
  - Saturday, June 7 in Madison, NJ
  - Register [here](#)



### WHAT IS THE HOPES PROGRAM?

#### ***Helping Others Process the Experience of a Suicide LOSS***

The Traumatic Loss Coalition's HOPES Program exists to provide immediate encouragement and support to families bereaved by the suicide loss of a child (21 and under), empowering survivors to begin their healing journey and eventually thrive despite such an overwhelming loss.

The HOPES Team is a group of first responders with lived and professional suicide loss experience who go to the scene of a suicide and provide encouragement, support and resources to those newly bereaved by a suicide loss. If the team was not invited on-scene at the time of the loss, a referral can be made anytime thereafter for family support. The goal is to shorten the elapsed time between the death and survivors finding support and resources to help them cope with this devastating loss.

### AMONG BLOSSOMS, A HEAVY HEART

As the days grow longer and spring begins to bloom around us, many people find comfort in the return of sunlight, flowers, and warmer air. But for those grieving the loss of a loved one to suicide, this season can feel especially complicated. The world may appear to be waking up with joy and renewal, while inside, grief continues its own quiet, unpredictable journey.

Spring can stir memories and emotions that feel out of sync with the world's outward cheer. You may feel pressure to "enjoy" the season or take part in traditions that now feel hollow. Please know: there is no right way to move through this time. Grief does not follow a calendar, and your healing is uniquely yours.

Still, there are gentle ways to care for yourself this spring—ways to acknowledge your grief while allowing small moments of light to enter:

- Take a mindful walk in nature without the pressure to feel better. Simply notice what's blooming, changing, or still dormant—just like parts of you.
- Tend to a small plant or garden. Watching something grow can be quietly grounding and symbolic of slow, steady healing.

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**"The deep roots  
never doubt spring  
will come."**

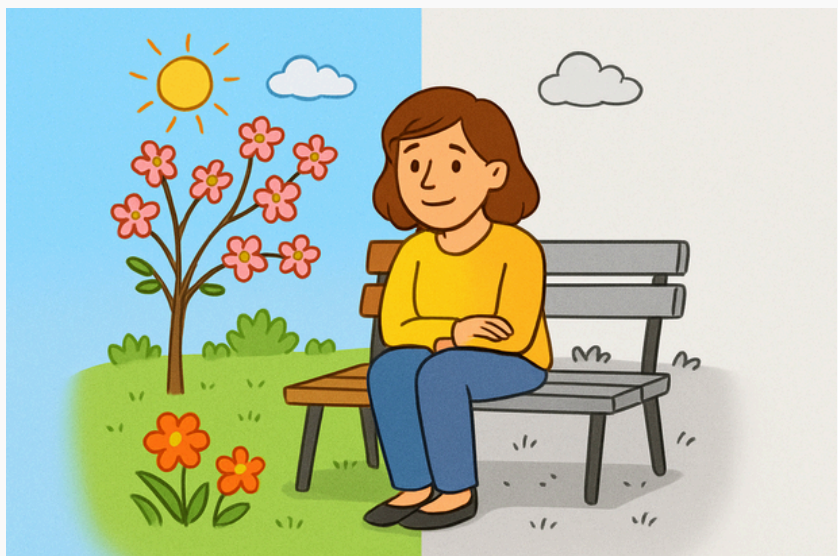
**— Marty Rubin**

*Grief can make it hard  
to see our inner  
strength, but it's still  
there—quiet and steady.  
As spring returns, we're  
reminded that healing  
takes time. Like the  
earth, we can trust in  
slow renewal and our  
own quiet resilience.*

### AMONG BLOSSOMS, CONTINUED

- Sit in the sun with a journal—write a letter to your loved one, or jot down what's been heavy on your heart. The act of writing can release some of what you carry.
- Engage with gentle movement, like stretching outside, yoga in a park, or just opening your window and breathing deeply. Movement can help shift emotional energy, even just a little.
- Make space for mixed emotions. It's okay to laugh in one moment and cry in the next. Let yourself feel whatever arises without judgment.

This spring, let yourself move at your own pace. Grief is not a season to "get through"—it's a part of your story, woven into who you are. Suicide loss grief can feel especially heavy, carrying layers of shock, guilt, unanswered questions, and deep longing. As the world around you begins to bloom again, you might feel out of step, experiencing both beauty and pain side by side. That is okay. You are allowed to hold your grief gently, to honor the complicated love and sorrow you carry. Healing doesn't mean forgetting, and growth doesn't mean leaving your person behind. This season, give yourself permission to rest when you need to, to remember when you need to, and to welcome moments of hope without guilt. Both your grief and your healing can coexist, just like winter makes room for spring.





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**“Where flowers  
bloom, so does  
hope.”**

**–Lady Bird Johnson**

*Even during difficult times, flowers can emerge. The same can be said about resilience and the possibility of healing. Grief can feel endless and heavy, but moments of beauty can spark hope. Just as flowers bloom after a long winter, hope can slowly emerge even through deep sorrow.*

### **AFSP NEW JERSEY'S SOUL EXHAUSTION WORKSHOP**

AFSP NJ is offering a workshop called Beyond the Brain: Soul Exhaustion and Soul Care, led by Sara Gaer, for suicide loss survivors more than two years post-loss. The session explores the often-overlooked idea of the soul and how modern mental health approaches have distanced us from our deeper selves. It introduces "Soul Exhaustion," shaped by trauma, loss, racism, and burnout, and how these experiences affect our core identity. The workshop highlights "Soul Care" as a holistic, non-clinical way to support healing alongside traditional treatments. It offers a meaningful, integrative path for those navigating long-term grief. Register [here](#).

### **COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT: ATTITUDES IN REVERSE**



Attitudes In Reverse or AIR® offers a comprehensive mental health plan to educate youth, from elementary level through college-age. AIR's programs, based on research, are wrapped in messages of understanding, empathy and kindness towards all. At AIR, we believe that good mental health programming makes the best anti-bullying and suicide prevention plans. Breaking down stigma allows AIR to help identify youth who are at risk. Programs are also available for parents, teachers and all school staff. The Middle and High School program is also offered in Spanish. Certified AIR Dogs, therapy dogs, accompany all program presenters.

#### **Attitudes in Reverse Offers:**

- AIR Student Presentations on Mental Health Education
- AIR Dogs: Paws for Minds School-Based Therapy Dog Program
- AIR In Their Shoes Exhibit
- AIR Awareness Outreach to health fairs, community events, state mental health conferences and more
- AIR Exploring Emotions through the Eyes of Dogs
- Learn about the upcoming release of **Miki & Friends Go to School** by Tricia Baker at the end of the newsletter!

To learn more or access all Attitudes in Reverse has to offer, please visit [here](#) or visit <https://air.ngo> for more information.

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**If you believe someone is struggling with suicide, start the conversation.**

**Consider sending a text or saying something like this:**

I don't know exactly what you're going through, but I'm always in your corner. Want to grab some air or coffee soon?

Your pain is real, and so is the care people have for you. I'm one of those people.

I'm really worried about you. You don't have to face this alone. Can we talk or sit together, or reach out to someone who can help?

### NAME IT TO TAME IT - EMOTIONS

This technique helps reduce the intensity of painful emotions by identifying and naming what you're feeling. It can be especially helpful after a suicide loss, when emotions may feel overwhelming or tangled. Research shows that putting words to emotions can help calm the brain's emotional centers and help to activate rational thinking.

**Pause and Breathe:** When you feel a strong wave of emotion, take a slow, deep breath.

**Gently Ask Yourself:**

- *"What am I feeling right now?"*
- Try to name the emotion with one or two words—like guilt, sadness, anger, confusion, or loneliness.

**Acknowledge It Without Judgment:**

- Say it to yourself (or out loud):
- *"I'm feeling grief right now."*
- *"This is sadness mixed with guilt."*

**Normalize the Experience:** Remind yourself:

- *"It's okay to feel this. It makes sense."*

Consider using this skill when you need a little space between your emotions and your reaction—it can help you respond with care rather than feeling overwhelmed.

### UPDATES FROM THE TRAUMATIC LOSS COALITION

The HOPES Team onboarded 8 new volunteers in April 2025 to provide companioning support across the state of NJ. Welcome!

In honor of National Sleep Awareness Week, the Traumatic Loss Coalition hosted a conversation with Dr. Tina Goldstein, Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Pittsburgh. Dr. Goldstein shared findings from her study on the link between sleep health and suicidal behavior, highlighting how issues like insomnia, poor sleep, and irregular schedules may increase risk. View and download the presentation [here](#).



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### MEET THE HOPES TEAM LEADERS

#### BRETT PEPPE



Brett is the Program Manager of the HOPES Program. Brett is a Licensed Professional Counselor, Licensed Clinical Alcohol & Drug Counselor, and was a former Somerset County TLC Coordinator. In addition to his professional experience, Brett is a survivor of suicide loss.

#### WENDY SEFCIK



Wendy is the Team Lead of the HOPES Program and works as the Bergen County Suicide Prevention Coordinator and Co-Chair of the NJ Youth Suicide Prevention Advisory Council. In addition to her professional experience, Wendy is a survivor of suicide loss.

***No matter when you went through your loss, we are here to support you. Call us anytime at 732-815-5749.***

### SURVIVOR SUPPORT RESOURCES

- [Alliance of Hope](#)
- [American Foundation for Suicide Prevention](#)
- [Comfort Zone Camp](#)
- [Friends for Survival](#)
- [Good Grief](#)
- [Imagine, A Center for Coping with Loss](#)
- [Local Outreach to Suicide Survivor Teams](#)
- [Mary's Garden Media](#)
- [The Compassionate Friends](#)

**The HOPES Program is funded by the NJ Department of Children & Families in partnership with Rutgers Health.**



**Reminder: 988 is the Crisis and Suicide Lifeline. Call, Text or Chat at anytime.**





**MIKI & FRIENDS**

# OPEN AIR™

**HEALTHY IN  
MIND & BODY!**

**CELEBRATING AIR'S 15<sup>TH</sup> YEAR!**

THE DAY IS FILLED WITH DOGS, MUSIC,  
FAMILY FUN, DOG WALK, AND A BUTTERFLY RELEASE.  
ALL GOOD DE-STRESSING COPING MECHANISMS.

***Saturday, May 17, 2025***

Registration 8:30 am – Event 9:00 am to 11:30 am

**Located at the Pavillion in**  
**WEST WINDSOR COMMUNITY PARK**  
Princeton-Hightstown Road, West Windsor, NJ 08550



*Attitudes In Reverse® is a 501c3  
non-profit starting conversations  
about good mental health and  
how dogs improve our lives!  
**People Saving Dogs!**  
**Dogs Saving People!™***

To register as a vendor, exhibitor or volunteer:

Email: **info@air.ngo**

For information: **tricia@air.ngo**



Visit us at <https://www.air.ngo/miki-friends-5k-walk-run-air>



Don't weep at my grave,  
for I am not there,  
I've a date with a butterfly  
to dance in the air.  
I'll be singing in the sunshine,  
wild and free,  
Playing tag with the wind,  
while I'm waiting for thee.



## BUTTERFLY RELEASE TO REMEMBER ...

### **AIR is about life.**

It is about education to preserve life.  
AIR is about remembering those who  
have gone too soon. We learn from  
them and they inspire us to continue  
our mission of starting the conversation  
to save others.

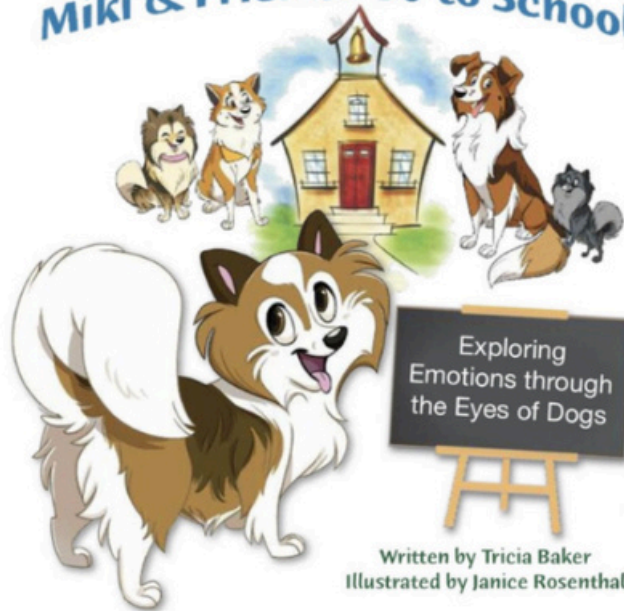


**On Saturday, May 17th at the  
Miki & Friends: Walk for AIR,  
we will be hosting a community  
Butterfly Release at West  
Windsor Community Park,  
271 Clarksville Road,  
Princeton Junction, NJ 08550.**



# COMING SOON

Miki & Friends Go to School



Written by Tricia Baker  
Illustrated by Janice Rosenthal



Here to help you understand your emotions. There are some great teachers, and they're all dogs!





Article

# School-Based Mental Health Education: Program Effectiveness and Trends in Help-Seeking

Jean Kirnan , Gianna Fotinos, Kelsey Pitt and Gavin Lloyd

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**Abstract:** One of the strategies to address the persistent youth mental health crisis is school-based educational programming. This paper reports on two distinct studies regarding Coming Up for AIR, a school-based mental health education program: (1) program effectiveness, measured as gains in student mental health literacy; and (2) trends in help-seeking behavior before, during, and after the pandemic. A survey on program content was administered to assess program effectiveness. Data collected between 2020 and 2023 from four schools yielded 473 responses. A comparison of pre- and post-scores demonstrated statistically significant gains in program content. Mental health literacy improved across gender and grade level (8th, 9th, and 10th), as well as for students with prior exposure to a mental health curriculum. In the second study, help-seeking behavior was evaluated before, during, and after the pandemic. While other programs measure intention, Coming Up for AIR measures actual behavior as students can ask for help for themselves or a friend. Data did not reflect individual student responses, but rather were aggregated and provided the number of students per presentation who requested help. Archived declaration card data from January 2019 through February 2024 was accessed, representing 28 different schools and 16,289 middle and high school student responses. School-level data were analyzed by grade level (middle school or high school) and date (pre-, intra-, or post-COVID-19). Significant differences in self-referral were found for both grade level and presentation date. Self-referrals were significantly higher post-COVID-19 compared to pre-COVID-19 with middle schoolers increasing 90% and high school students increasing 36%. Analysis of friend referrals showed a significant difference for grade level, but not presentation date. Again, middle school students were more likely to make a referral than high schoolers. The data suggest that the mental health crisis in middle school students persists at an alarming rate. Schools are at the forefront of addressing mental health issues for youth. External educational programming can bring awareness to mental health concerns and promote help-seeking in youth.

**Keywords:** youth; mental health; help-seeking; COVID; school; education

## 1. Introduction

The prevalence of mental illness in grades K-12 is a pressing topic in schools, generating increased concern from educators and the community. The frequency of mental health disorders and suicide has prompted a variety of initiatives including educational programming and counseling resources. The COVID-19 pandemic with its resulting closures and restrictions added to this already dire situation. The purpose of this paper is twofold: (1) demonstrate the effectiveness of a youth mental health education program,

CLICK HERE  
FOR THE FULL  
ARTICLE!



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Rutgers University Behavioral Health Care  
SUPPORTING MIDDLESEX COUNTY

# **NJ4S**

## **YOUTH SUICIDE LOSS SURVIVOR SUPPORT GROUP**



A supportive environment for youth ages 8-13 who have been impacted by a suicide loss. Youth will receive comprehensive bereavement support, resources, and encouragement in the aftermath of a loss.

**EVERY FIRST TUESDAY OF THE  
MONTH  
7:00PM-8:30PM**

Parents please feel free to utilize the lounge or join the adult group.

**\*\*Food will be provided\*\***



**NJ4SMIDDLESEX@UBHC.RUTGERS.EDU**

**REGISTER AT:  
(732) 235-6586**