



SUPPORTING CHILDREN & ADULTS AFTER SOMEONE HAS DIED BY SUICIDE



When someone we know dies by suicide, we are unexpectedly confronted with devastating loss and grief.

In addition to the pain and difficulty that accompany death of any type, there are further complicated feelings and experiences for survivors of suicide death. These might include shock, disbelief, denial, guilt, shame, anger, regret, confusion, relief, hopelessness, self-blame, isolation, or stigma, among others.

Family members and friends surviving a loved one's suicide death may be left with questions such as:

- *How could this have happened?*
- *Were there warning signs?*
- *Could I have done something to prevent this?*
- *Was it my fault?*
- *What if...?*

People often treat a death by suicide differently than they would treat a death by

an accident or an illness such as cancer. Children may fear being teased or excluded by peers who learn that the death was the result of suicide.

The stigma or sense of shame that is often experienced by survivors of suicide death can make it difficult for adults as well as children to find people who they can safely share their feelings and experiences with, without feeling judged.

CHILDREN & GRIEF

Every child's grief is unique, just as their relationship with their loved one was unique. However, there are some reactions to a death that are common among children.

During times of stress, loss and grief, children of any age may regress to earlier levels of development (for example, using "baby talk," having bathroom accidents, etc.). Children may be worried that something bad will happen to surviving family members and may be fearful or

anxious about separations like sleeping alone, going to school, or even attending social events with friends.

Providing structure and maintaining daily routines can be helpful for children who are experiencing grief. On the other hand, it's also important to be flexible and responsive to a child's needs following the death of a loved one.

DISCUSSING SUICIDE DEATH WITH A CHILD

It's difficult to know how to talk with children after any death, and even more so after a death by suicide.

While it's entirely natural to want to protect children from unnecessary suffering, children are helped by being given information about what has happened. Hearing the news of the death from a trusted adult can prevent the additional confusion that might arise if the child learns the details of the death through the media or by overhearing others discussing it.

When children are not given answers to the questions that arise, they're likely to "fill in the blanks" from their own imaginations or from pieced-together information they may hear from others, leaving them feeling even more confused and unsettled.

The feelings of grief and confusion that adults themselves experience can make it especially challenging to know how to provide information or respond to children's questions. Consider reaching out for support to a trusted family member, friend, or professional as you prepare to talk with your child about the fact that a loved one has died by suicide.

As you talk with your child, it can be helpful to:

- Choose a safe and comfortable place
- Give truthful information using simple, age-appropriate language
- Avoid graphic details
- Listen without judgement
- Follow the child's lead by allowing their questions and their level of curiosity to guide the type and amount of information that's provided

If there's a specific question a child has that you feel unprepared to answer, it's perfectly fine to let them know that. You can explain that you need more time or information, but assure them that you'll provide a more complete answer in another conversation.

Keep in mind that this will be an unfolding dialogue as your child is likely to need to go over this again and again.



In addition to being told that someone they love has died, children also need reassurance that they will continue to be cared for



physically and emotionally by trusted adults. Your ongoing willingness to listen to and talk with your children as they ask questions and express emotions communicates this message in a powerful way.

AGE MATTERS: HELPING CHILDREN & TEENS

Choosing the words to begin telling your child about a loved one's death can be one of the hardest situations you may face. Here are some suggestions to help you support children of different ages:

INFANTS may not understand the circumstances surrounding a death, but will be aware that something has changed. Providing physical and emotional comfort will help to reassure them that they will continue to be cared for even though a loved one has died.

TODDLERS & PRESCHOOLERS think in concrete ways and have a limited concept of time, so they may believe that death is reversible. The “magical thinking” common to preschoolers may cause them to worry that their behavior or angry feelings may have somehow caused their loved one's death, and they may need reassurance that this is not the case.

Providing basic information using simple language is helpful to very young children. You might begin with saying,

“I need to tell you some sad news. Your dad died last night. That means that his body stopped working.”

Allow the child's response and questions to guide additional conversation. If they ask about how the death happened, answer their question simply while staying away from explicit or upsetting details.

ELEMENTARY-SCHOOL CHILDREN are likely to have many questions about death as they try to understand how and why bodies can stop functioning. When a death is the result of suicide, help the child understand that just as people can die from illnesses like cancer or heart disease, they can also die from illnesses that affect their brain. You might choose words like,

“Daddy’s brain wasn’t working the way it used to and it caused him to see things very differently and to do something that made his body stop working.”

“Mommy had a kind of sickness that caused her to feel a lot of pain and she didn’t know how to make the pain stop.”

Language like this can help the child begin to understand that their loved one did not choose to leave them but instead was suffering from a type of illness that affected their feelings and behaviors.

If the child asks for more specific information, you can provide details such as *“Daddy used a gun.”* or *“Mommy took too many pills and they caused her body to stop working.”*



MIDDLE SCHOOLERS are beginning to grasp the finality of death. Often they have strong feelings but may still lack the complex language skills to express them in words. Although they may not tell you directly, they continue to need the supportive presence of adults inside and outside the family.

When telling middle schoolers about the death, use direct language:

“I have something very hard to tell you. Your brother died by suicide. Suicide means that he ended his own life.”

As with younger children, allow the child’s questions to determine further conversation.

TEENAGERS are able to understand the permanence of death and may have many questions about how and why the death happened. When sharing the news with teenagers, provide truthful and direct information:

“I need to talk with you about some very difficult news. Your cousin’s body was found this morning and it looks like she died by suicide.”

In the weeks, months, and even years following the death, it is helpful to be open to hearing and understanding the practical and emotional issues a teen may be concerned about.

In addition to their feelings of loss and grief related to the death itself, teens may also be sensitive to other things that sometimes accompany the death of a loved one, such as changes in relationships, finances, and living arrangements. They may also have questions of a more spiritual nature and



will need a safe place to voice these questions, even if the questions do not have answers.

Remember that children of every age need times of play, rest, socializing, and the availability of supportive adults as they continue to grow and develop in the presence of their grief.

LIVING AFTER A LOVED ONE DIES FROM SUICIDE

Survivors of a loved one's suicide death often report that they have difficulty finding support because of the stigma that sometimes surrounds suicide.

Other people, including their friends and family members, may feel unsure about what to say to convey support and understanding after a suicide death, and this can increase a survivor's sense of isolation. Survivors may blame themselves—or feel that others blame them—for the death of their loved one.

Children surviving the suicide of a loved one may experience a profound sense of abandonment or feelings of guilt, shame or anger. They may fear that they are responsible for the death or worry that they may have “missed” something that might have prevented it.

Children and teens who were present at the time of the suicide death or who discover their loved one's body may face particular challenges. In these cases, evaluation and therapy focused on overcoming trauma can be a helpful part of the healing process.

Children often wonder who will care for them now that their loved one has died, and may need reassurance that safe and

trustworthy adults will continue to be available to them.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Help your child find ways to respond to the questions of others about their loved one's death. These responses can range from straightforward descriptions like, “*My brother died by suicide,*” to responses such as, “*My dad died but I don't want to talk about the details now.*”

Over time, children will come to identify people who are able to support them in their grief journey and who they can share more openly with.

Do your best to create space for your children to share their feelings, thoughts, and fears. Reassure them that the death was not their fault if they appear to worry that they may have been responsible in some way.

During conversations, don't be afraid to show your own emotions—doing so shows the child that a range of feelings, including being sad and tearful, and sometimes even angry and confused, are normal parts of grieving a death.

You can acknowledge the reality that there may be lots of unanswered questions following a suicide death and that it can be difficult and painful to sit with these uncertainties.

Death by suicide sometimes casts a long shadow by focusing on the loved one's death in a way that eclipses the life they lived. Join the child in remembering and talking about their loved one's life while also being open to their questions about the death. Help the child or teen come to know that no one's life is defined by the moment of his or her death.

As we grieve the death of a loved one, what all of us — children and adults — most need are patient, non-judgmental listeners who are willing to be companions on the path of grief and who can allow us to express the full range of our thoughts, feelings, and questions — even the questions that have no answers.

Fred Rogers summed up the healing value of compassionate listening with these words:

“Anything that’s human is mentionable, and anything that is mentionable can be more manageable. When we can talk about our feelings, they become less overwhelming, less upsetting, and less scary. The people we trust with that important talk can help us know that we are not alone.”

Remember that the Highmark Caring Place is here for you, and that you are not alone. Contact us if you have questions or need further information.

RESOURCES

American Association of Suicidology — suicidology.org

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention — afsp.org

The Dougy Center — The National Center for Grieving Children & Families — dougy.org

Grieving the Death by Suicide — healgrief.org/grieving-the-death-by-suicide

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline — suicidepreventionlifeline.org

Support After Suicide — supportaftersuicide.org.au

What’s Your Grief — whatsyourgrief.com

If you’re thinking about suicide, are worried about a friend or loved one, or would like emotional support, the **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline** network is available 24/7 across the United States at **1-800-273-8255**.

