

HOW BEST TO HELP THE BEREAVED

When a suicide occurs it is extremely important that a close network of family, friends, and/or colleagues come together to provide support to those who have been bereaved as and when they need it. It is important to remember that the primary

goal when talking to someone bereaved by suicide is to reduce the distress felt by that person. There are helpful ways to talk to children about their loss, and some important 'do's and 'don't's when helping the bereaved:

DO

- Provide opportunities for the bereaved to express their grief in a safe and secure environment.
- Listen. Grieving is a long process on which there is no time limit, and it cannot be rushed. It is important to be available for that person and to listen when they are ready. This is an important part of the healing process.
- Accept the feelings of the bereaved without judging them. There may be rage, depression, and blame-placing. Be patient and give them the time they need.
- Allow the bereaved person to cry, but do not make assumptions about their feelings or reactions. People react differently and not everyone *will* cry.
- Mention the loved one who has died by name. If there are children affected, encourage the bereaved to talk about the loss with them; they will need support and the space to express their feelings too.
- Normalise the feelings of the bereaved. Working through grief can take years, and the loss will never be forgotten.
- Remind them that there is no 'normal' way to feel. With time, grief will lessen, and there are supports available to help.
- Provide practical support to the bereaved. Offer to help with household, family or work duties, and day-to-day tasks. These may be unmanageable for them at first.
- Provide information on professional help available to the bereaved if they feel they need extra support.
- Pay attention to what is said and what is not said. Each bereaved person will show their grief differently.
- Urge the bereaved person to wait before making any big decisions or major life changes such as moving, giving away possessions, or leaving a job.

DON'T:

- Don't assume that you know best. Don't tell a bereaved person, "I know how you feel." Everyone's experience of grief is unique and personal, so try not to make comparisons.
- Don't tell the bereaved person what to feel. Let them feel what they are feeling, when they are feeling it. If they are feeling anger or pain, don't try to change their feelings, even if they make you uncomfortable.
- Don't treat the person as if they don't have enough sense to make their own decisions, or to understand what they are being told.
- Don't preach at the bereaved person. If faith or religion is important to them, they will draw strength from it.
- Don't tell them that what has happened is God's will. For many bereaved people, their belief system may already have become challenged.
- Don't tell them to call you any hour of the day or night, unless you are prepared to honour this.
- Don't encourage the use of medications or other substances, such as alcohol, to deal with the grief, other than those that have been prescribed by the bereaved person's GP. Encourage close contact with their GP to discuss difficulties that require medical attention.
- Don't try to keep a parent from talking about the loss of a child, or about what happened.
- Don't presume that you know why the bereaved person's loved one died, or make insensitive statements as if they were facts.
- Don't try to take over. Many bereaved people wish to remain involved in activities and responsibilities, even if they may need some support in these.
- Don't stop seeing the bereaved person. It can be uncomfortable to be around someone who is grieving, but it is important that they are supported and do not lose contact with friends and family.

Children and young people

Explaining to a child or teenager that someone close to them has died by suicide can be a daunting task. However, it is likely that news of a local suicide will quickly become public knowledge, so it is best to be open and honest with them from the start. It is normal to want to protect children, and it is important that they know they can trust you. A parent is the best person to tell their children this difficult news, but if this is not possible, it is important to try to have a parent present when they are told. Even if the child or young person has already been given an explanation for the death other than suicide, it is advisable to go back and explain things again. Remember that it is best to be open with all young children, and they are never too young to know the truth. In the absence of clear and honest information, children may fill in the gaps from their imagination or from overheard snippets. Some key things to take into consideration are:

- Avoid unnecessary details; there is probably no need to be detailed about the method of the person's death at this time.
- Avoid keeping secrets or telling lies. While your instinct might be to protect them by doing so, in time, withholding the truth can cause greater problems for the young person.
- A child is never too young to know the truth, but the emotional maturity of each individual child should guide the language used to explain the death to them, and the level of detail they are given.

Finding the right words when talking with children

When telling a child or young person that someone close to them has died by suicide, it may be helpful to do so by breaking the news down into five stages. The below are a guide only, and how you speak to the child or young person will depend on their age and developmental understanding, their relationship to the deceased, and their previous experience of death:

1. Explaining that the person has died.
2. Giving simple details about how they died.
3. Saying that the person ended their own life.
4. Providing a more detailed explanation of how the person died. (you need to take into account the age of your child)
5. Explaining possible reasons why the person may have taken their own life, bearing in mind that some details may never be known.

There is no definitive way to tell a child or young person something as difficult as the fact that someone they know has died by suicide. Explaining it in steps as suggested above may make the task more manageable, and allow it to be done at a pace that suits the child or young person in question. Talk to children using words they understand, and ask questions to check they have understood what you have said. Always encourage children and young people to ask questions. This will let you know what way they are thinking, and how they are dealing with the death. You may not have answers to all of their questions, and that's ok.

If you are dealing with affected children or young people, remember the following:

- It may be helpful to discuss and explain changes the death may bring to the family unit.
- In the case of a parental death by suicide, it is very important to stress that the parent's choice does not mean they no longer loved their child or children.
- After a death, it is normal that bereaved children and teenagers may worry about other family members dying in a similar way.
- It is important to reassure the child or young person that nothing they did or said made this happen, and that there was nothing they could have said or done to prevent it.
- Listen to children and young people, and encourage them to express their emotions. This will help them to come to terms with their loss in time.

Children

After a suicide, children may:

- Feel abandoned, worried, anxious, or guilty.
- Feel sad, confused, angry, lonely, or numb.
- Blame themselves for the death.
- Act as though nothing had happened.
- Become distant and withdrawn.
- Attempt to cope by engaging in play, especially immediately after hearing the traumatic news.
- Wish that what had happened would all just go away.
- Complain of feeling unwell, or of having head or tummy aches.
- Be anxious that they will be left to cope alone.
- Behave in uncharacteristic ways.

At this difficult time, continuity in their daily routine is important. Children will need plenty of cuddles and comfort, as well as familiar toys, and the assurance of continued love and support.

Teenagers

Following a suicide loss, teenagers may:

- Feel shock, anger, loneliness or sadness. They may struggle to express their feelings and anger may be expressed by lashing out, verbally and/or physically, usually at parents or siblings.
- Feel guilt and regret, especially if they had been in conflict with the person who died.
- Regress to more childlike behaviour.

- Act as though they can cope alone, or try to be very grown up.
- Feel as though they have to take on a more adult role, like caring for younger children.
- Withdraw, stay in their rooms, or sleep a lot. They may not spend much time at home, or may start engaging in risky behaviour, experimenting with alcohol or drugs, or engaging in unsafe sexual activity.

At this difficult time, teenagers will need:

Involvement – allowing teenagers to help out a little will support them in feeling some control and not feel isolated.

Friends – contact with their peer groups is important as friends are often their main source of emotional support.

Routine – keeping busy with school, sports, and other interests will also help.

Remember that listening and encouraging children and young people to express all of their emotions will help them come to terms with their loss in time. Children and teenagers are far more resilient than adults sometimes acknowledge. Giving your time and support will help them to adjust and process what has happened.

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