

Suicide Death



When a loved one dies by suicide, it may catch everyone off guard. Explaining and learning to cope with a suicide death is hard; but it can become even more difficult when there are children involved. Young children usually have a hard time understanding the concept of death, so telling them that a parent or sibling is dead can become more complicated when it was a suicide. Older children will usually have a less difficult time understanding what has happened, but they may take it more personally, thinking that something they did caused the person to choose suicide or something they didn't do could have prevented it. No matter the age of the children, be prepared to answer a lot of questions about what happened and what comes next. Consider these suggestions when talking to your children:

- **Be honest with your children about what happened.** Don't try to hide the cause of death from your children. Although they may not completely understand what happened, based on their age and/or developmental stage, being honest and telling them what happened can limit the confusion they may face if they are confronted with rumors or contradictory information about the death either immediately or later in life. Here are some ways parents have explained a death by suicide:
 - When someone dies, their body stops working, and a suicide means that they made their own body stop working.
 - People die in different ways - from cancer, heart attacks, car accidents, or maybe old age. When somebody dies by suicide it means that they made themselves die. Often this is because they had an illness in their brain and didn't think anyone could help them.
 - Sometimes a person's thought process can become distorted. They chose suicide because they cannot think clearly and cannot see other options to end their pain.
- **Use language that is developmentally appropriate for your children.** If you have children that are at different developmental points, it may be helpful to tell them what happened separately. Younger children may require simpler terms to understand what happened, and older children may want more advanced explanations or details that could scare younger kids.
- **Ask a trusted family member, friend, or professional counselor to help.** In the aftermath of a suicide, you may be at a loss for words on what to say to your children. Seeking the help of someone you and your children know and trust could help you get through some of the more difficult topics that must be addressed. This person may be able to help you figure out what to say to your children, or just be there as a source of support as you tell your kids what happened.
- **Reassure your children that this is not their fault.** Children, no matter their age, will always ask the "what if" questions. They typically think that something they did caused the deceased to want to kill themselves or that they could have done something or been there to stop it. The important thing is to reassure them that this was not their fault, and that the deceased parent or sibling loved them.

Once you let your children know what happened, begin focusing on helping your family and yourself grieve in whatever way you need. There can be stigma or social discomfort involved when someone completes a suicide, and because of this people may try to tell you how to grieve. But you need to grieve in the way that is most productive and healing for you, based on your relationship with the deceased. Consider these suggestions to help you along your grief journey:





- **Be honest with yourself.** After the suicide you may be tempted to try and forget the manner of death and erase the word “suicide” from your vocabulary. Instead, try to face it and use it to help you grieve.
- **Don’t assume that everyone is blaming you.** In the wake of a suicide, people often look to blame someone, and that typically ends up being whoever was closest to the person who died. A suicide is never anyone’s fault and someone else’s silence or passive response to the death may indicate their own confusion about how to approach you and not that they are blaming you.
- **Ask for help if you need it.** Your friends and family may want to help, but probably don’t know how to offer or don’t want to overstep their boundaries. Asking for help with cooking, picking up meals, or getting the kids to and from school can take some pressure off of you and give you more time to focus on your own grief.

A traumatic sudden death like a suicide can prompt you to review old actions and events with the deceased. Guilt is a common and natural reaction to any death. Be gentle with yourself and remember that you are only human. It can be hard to deal with the consequences of a suicide death, but identifying a support system and learning to ask for help when you need it can make the grief at least a little bit more manageable.

Further Reading:

- *After a Parent’s Suicide* by Margo Requarth
- *Understanding Your Suicide Grief* by Alan Wolfelt
- *No Time to Say Goodbye: Surviving The Suicide Of A Loved One* by Carla Fine
- *But I Didn’t Say Goodbye: Helping Children and Families After a Suicide* by Barbara Rubel

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