

I Never Thought this Would Happen!
How to Help Your Teen Deal with Suicide Grief: A handout for parents
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Has your child lost a friend or loved one to suicide?

Not only is your child grieving the loss of someone close to him/her, but this grief is intensified because the death was a suicide. The healing process may be painful and may seem unnaturally slow as suicide grief is extremely complex. Helping your child understand his or her emotions, as well as learning something about suicide in general, may help to ease some of his/her pain.

The first question is often *WHY* do some teens complete suicide?

We don't know for sure because when youth die by suicide, they take the answers with them. But, we do know that many are experiencing a number of stressors and many have a mental disorder, like depression, which is often undiagnosed, untreated, or both. We also know that most teens do not want to die, they just want their emotional pain to end. Help your teen see this and see that there are other ways to deal with this emotional pain, such as by getting help when needed.

Common Grief Symptoms/Behaviors a teen may experience:

Emotional Effects

Shock & Disbelief
Anger & Irritability
Depression/Sadness
Despair or Helplessness
Terror/Fear
Guilt or Self-Blame
Anxiousness or Worry
Loss of pleasure in activities
Confusion

Physical Effects

Fatigue
Insomnia or Disturbed Sleep
Stomach/Headaches
Decreased Appetite
Hyperarousal or Easily Startled

Cognitive Effects

Difficulty Concentrating
Trouble Making Decisions
Trouble Remembering
Impaired Self-Esteem
Intrusive Thoughts or Memories
Nightmares

Social/Behavioral Effects

Social Withdrawal or Isolation
Increased Relationship Conflict
Refusal to go to School or Activities
Crying Easily
Change in Daily Patterns
Regression in Behavior
Risk Taking Behaviors (substance use)
Aggression or Oppositional Behaviors

While the above are common symptoms, help your child understand that there is no RIGHT way to grieve. It is an individualized process and your child must grieve at his or her own pace. This is especially true for complex suicide grief, which leaves many questions unanswered.

Some things you can do:

- Be available and ask if your child wants to talk, but realize a teen may not come to you
- Listen to your child without judgment and let your teen tell his/her own story freely
- Share your own feelings and concerns honestly
- It is okay to tell your teen that you don't know answers to some difficult questions

- Try to re-establish routine, with appropriate expectations, as soon as possible
- Encourage your child to continue engaging in their typical activities, sports, etc.
- Try not to take anger or irritability personally as it may be directed toward parents
- Let your teen have his/her personal space
- Be careful not to glamorize, thereby positively reinforcing, suicide as an option
- Emphasize the importance of seeking help when needed
- Be aware of depression and/or suicidal ideation in your child (see warning signs)
- Accompany your child to funeral or viewings if they would like to go

Youth Suicide Warning Signs:

1. Talking about or making plans for suicide
2. Expressing hopelessness about the future
3. Displaying severe/overwhelming emotional pain or distress
4. Showing worrisome behavioral cues or marked changes in behavior, particularly in the presence of the warning signs above. Specifically, this includes significant:
 - Withdrawal from or changing in social connections/situation
 - Changes in sleep (increased or decreased)
 - Anger or hostility that seems out of character or out of context
 - Recent increased agitation or irritability

What is a Suicidal Emergency?

It may be an emergency if your child expresses any of these:

- Intense feeling of being a burden
- Intense feeling of not belonging
- Intense feelings of hopelessness; that things will not get better
- Intense thoughts of lethal self-harm
- Describing a specific plan
- Seeking means of self-harm

These warning signs are especially noteworthy after a recent suicide death or other loss of someone close to your child. If your child mentions suicide, take it seriously. *If there seems to be a suicidal emergency, do not leave your child alone. Get help immediately:*

- *Take them to a local crisis center*
- *Call 911*

Remember that the NUMBER ONE protective factor in the life of a child is a caring adult who listens to a child without judgment. This is most often a parent!