



Child & Teen Grief after a Suicide: Factors to Consider & How We Can Help

A child or teen's grief is impacted by a multitude of factors including the circumstances of the death. Suicide is one mode of death that has special considerations for the bereaved as a result of its associated stigma, often sudden nature, and the confusion that is often left in its wake. Because of people's discomfort with the subject of suicide, young people can be left unsupported and isolated. While there may be a higher likelihood of trauma when someone takes their own life, this is not always the case, and each person's experience is unique.

How We Can Help

Share information in a timely manner. Young people will know something terrible has happened and the longer it takes for you to share the information the more likely they will hear about the death and circumstances from someone else.

Tell the truth. As difficult as it is to tell a child/teen about someone they love having died by suicide, it is best to be honest. While it is natural to want to protect children from distress, making up a story most often leads to confusion and broken trust when the child finds out what happened by other means (friends, social media). The truth allows for trust to be maintained within a family and also validates the young person's relationship with the deceased and the survivors.

Limit the information. Telling the truth doesn't mean telling the whole truth. Be careful with how much information you share. You want to start with limited information *"I have something very sad to share with you: _____ died."*

Remember the person. After a suicide it is important to provide opportunities to remember the deceased and share memories, positive experiences, and difficult experiences. People often want to limit conversations to the mode of death and their own personal beliefs about suicide. This can be difficult for survivors because the person's life can become overshadowed by their death.

Be guided by their questions. The best way to know what and how much they need to know is by paying attention to their questions. Acknowledge their questions (don't brush them aside) and respond. Your response doesn't need to fully answer their question, but make sure they know you've heard them *"I understand that you have questions about all of this"* and *"I'm not sure we will get answer to all our questions today, but we will try to get some answers"*. This is true when considering the specific means by which the person died (e.g. hanging, overdose)

Focus on feelings. Open the dialogue and focus on feelings and managing the grief. One effective way to open the communication and keep it going is to share how you feel *"I'm feeling confused"* or *"I'm having a hard time concentrating at work. Is it hard for you to focus at school or is it just me?"* Share in very small doses and do not burden them; children and teens are not our confidants. We need adults to play that role and we need to make sure our children and teens do not feel they need to take care of us.

Use the reassuring "we". Deaths in children and teens' lives shake their world and their sense of safety (see Child Grief & Teen Grief handouts). Our primary role is to help them feel safe physically and emotionally. Such statements as *"We're going to be okay"* or *"We'll figure this out sweetie"*, even if it's said through tears, feel reassuring.

Be mindful of your language. The ways that people talk about suicide can have a big impact on the bereaved. Consider your own beliefs about suicide and choose words that will allow for conversations rather than stigmatize the death further. For example, 'commit suicide' implies that the person who died broke the law and committed a crime. Some prefer terms like "took his/her own life" or "died by suicide". While there is no "right way", try to follow the family's lead and use non-judgmental language.

Reach out for support. There are times when someone outside the family can be helpful in offering support. Counsellors at Sage Centre Child & Family Grief Services can support young people by creating a safe space to explore some of the difficult emotions, questions, and experiences following a death by suicide. Children and teens may find it difficult to say what they need. Try offering specific things like watching a funny movie, share positive memories, or take a walk together.

Share you plan with others. Keep your children/teens aware of who knows what related to the death as this will help maintain trust. Share your ideas about how to respond to family, friends, and if appropriate school communities. Having people on the same page can reduce confusion and apprehension.

Factors to Consider

Changes: Consider changes in your children/teens' behaviours, friends, tastes, and moods. This will provide a window to their inner world and provide a sense of how the death has impacted them. This is especially important with suicide deaths as children and teens may not feel they can talk openly about the death or their grief.

Age: Children of different ages understand death differently (see Child Grief handout).

Relationship with deceased: The role the deceased played in the child/teen's life, their relationship and the nature of their attachment will colour their grief.

Circumstances of the death: Suicide brings some factors that may be of particular concern. Finding the body, suicide notes, and involvement of the authorities are elements that can be difficult to manage.

Personality + Coping styles: How have your children/teens handled difficult situations in the past? What coping mechanisms are they using now? Are they talking to someone, looking for comfort in you or other significant adults, refusing to acknowledge what happened, drinking, fighting? Good and effective coping strategies will enable a child/teen to feel some control and relief in these difficult times.

Family + Social support: What support is available to them? Who do they feel they can go to? Is their loss and grief acknowledged? Strong family support and communication will act as a buffer to the negative impact of the loss.

Culture + Religion: Unlike many other deaths, suicide is not openly acknowledged or accepted in some cultures and religions. This may result in children, teens and families feeling isolated and judged. Those who can find acceptance and support within their culture group will have more positive outcomes.

Please refer to the **Child Grief** and **Teen Grief handouts** for information on age-related understanding of death, common responses to grief and ways we can help. Note that grief responses are individual and that each child and teen's grief experience will be unique.

For more information, a consultation or to seek support for your child, teen and family, contact us: 403-263-4525 or info@childrensgriefcentre.ca