

I Never Thought this Would Happen!
How to Help Your Teen Deal with Suicide Grief: A handout for parents

Terri Erbacher, PhD

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.

Grief Symptoms/Behaviors your child 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
Crying Easily
Change in Daily Patterns
Nightmares
Regression in Behavior

Social/Behavioral Effects

Social Withdrawal or Isolation
Increased Relationship Conflict
Refusal to go to School or Activities
Risk Taking Behaviors (substance use)
Aggression or Oppositional Behavior

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

Suicidal Warning Signs:

A previous suicide attempt
Current talk of suicide or making a plan
Strong wish to die or a preoccupation with death
Signs of depression, such as moodiness, hopelessness, withdrawal
Increased alcohol and/or drug use
Hinting at not being around in the future or saying good-bye
Readily accessible firearms
Impulsiveness and taking extreme or unnecessary risks
Lack of connection to family and friends (no one to talk to)

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 in light of 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!

Source: Erbacher, T.A. (2013). Lending a Helping Hand: Suicide in Schools: Empowering School Districts. Booklet published by the Delaware County Intermediate Unit, Morton, PA.

RECOGNIZING WARNING SIGNS FOR SUICIDE

Warning signs are indications that someone may be in danger of suicide, either immediately or in the near future.

Warning Signs for Suicide

- Someone threatening to hurt or kill themselves
- Someone looking for ways to kill themselves: seeking access to pills, weapons, or other means
- Someone talking or writing about death, dying, or suicide, when these actions are out of the ordinary for the person
- Hopelessness—expresses no reason for living, no sense of purpose in life
- Rage, anger, seeking revenge
- Recklessness or risky behavior, seemingly without thinking
- Expressions of feeling trapped—like there's no way out
- Increased alcohol or drug use
- Withdrawal from friends, family, or society
- Anxiety, agitation, inability to sleep, or constant sleep
- Dramatic mood changes
- No reason for living, no sense of purpose in life