

Supporting a person bereaved by suicide



what to do

Caring for and supporting someone who has lost a loved one to suicide can be difficult. Many feel unable to provide adequate support and struggle to understand the depth of distress. Some have difficulty in knowing what to say or do and feel awkward, uncomfortable and concerned about saying the wrong thing. Others worry about what the bereaved person is saying or doing and whether it is normal. The stigma attached to suicide can make this even harder. It is helpful to gather information and learn what you can about grief and bereavement following suicide.

Many people bereaved by suicide feel alone and isolated. The silence that surrounds the issue of suicide can complicate the experience. Because of the social stigma surrounding suicide, people feel the pain of the loss, yet may not believe they are allowed to express it.

We know that the support of friends and family can make a real difference to the bereaved person's capacity to manage the experience. Maintaining a strong social support network is important. Grief is challenging and a network of friends and family can make it much easier.

Don't be surprised or alarmed by the intensity of their feelings. They may be overwhelmed by intense feelings of grief often when they least expect it. Intense feelings can come in waves and knowing that each wave will subside can make it easier to provide support.

Accept that they may be struggling with troubling emotions (such as guilt, fear, anger and shame), well beyond what they will have experienced previously.

What we have learned from bereaved people is that they need compassion,

recognition and validation of their experience.

In summary, they need:

- to be really listened to, heard and understood
- non-judgemental support
- an opportunity to tell the story over and over again
- a safe and supportive environment
- to be able to express their grief in their own way
- to have no time limits imposed.

Many people feel awkward and nervous when first spending time with a suicide bereaved person. It will take some time to learn how to respond. It is okay to feel awkward but you don't need to let it prevent you showing support.

What to say

Knowing what to say to the bereaved can be the biggest challenge. A few guidelines are listed below:

- try not to say 'committed' suicide. This harks back to a time when suicide was a crime and some bereaved people find it distressing. You can say 'died by suicide, suicided, took their life, completed suicide'
- avoid the use of clichés and platitudes to try and comfort by saying things like 'you're so strong', 'time will heal', 'he's at peace now', 'you have other children', 'you'll get married again' or 'I know how you feel.' While well-intentioned, they rarely comfort and can leave the bereaved person feeling misunderstood and more isolated
- don't avoid the subject of suicide. This can create a barrier making it hard for them to discuss personal issues later

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- avoid judgments about the person who suicided such as saying they were selfish, cowardly or weak, or even brave or strong. People need to come to their own understanding of the person and what has happened
- avoid simplistic explanations for the suicide. Suicide is very complex and there are usually many contributing factors.
- listen and hear their experience
- be truthful, honest and aware of your limitations: acknowledge if you don't understand or know how to react to what they are going through
- say the name of the person who has died and talk about them. Not saying their name can leave the bereaved feeling as though the one who died is being forgotten or dismissed
- be aware of those who are grieving who may be forgotten, such as children, grandparents, friends
- ask "How are you getting along?" and then really listen to the response. Stay and hear and try to understand. Allow the person to say whatever they need however difficult and complex it is.

What to do

There are varying types of support that can be provided during this time, practical and emotional.

Practical support

Remember that this type of bereavement is long-term and you will not be able to 'fix' it or make it go away. People need assistance and support, usually for a long period of time, as they come to terms with what has happened.

Try to help attend to the things that might get left behind during this difficult period. For example, helping to look after children or cook meals occasionally.

Offer to do something specific, for example, 'I could come and mow the lawn', or just bring some food or a meal. Many bereaved people will find it difficult to ask for assistance and they may also have difficulty making decisions or identifying ways you can assist.

Emotional support

Be aware that your friend is having a hard time. Respect their right to grieve and accept the intensity of the grief. Allow them to grieve in the way that is most comfortable for them and provide support that is helpful.

Some other suggestions

- contact the person when you hear of the death. Tell them you are sorry to hear of their loss, or send a card or flowers
- maintain contact personally or by telephone, notes, cards. Visits need not be long
- LISTEN: This is possibly the most important thing you can do
- invite them to talk about the person who has died, mention the person's name, ask to see photos, share stories
- accept their behaviour – crying, being quiet, laughing. Allow expressions of anger, guilt and blame
- offer specific practical help, such as bringing in a cooked meal, taking care of the children, cutting the grass, shopping
- really try to understand and accept the person. Everyone is different and a range of responses are normal
- be patient. People may need to tell their story over and over again without interruption or judgement
- include children and young people in the grieving process and be aware that they may have particular need for support
- be aware of and acknowledge special times that might be significant, and particularly difficult, for the bereaved person such as Christmas, anniversaries, birthdays, Father's Day, Mother's Day etc.
- realise your feelings of awkwardness and helplessness are normal. Listening and 'being with' the person who is grieving can be a wonderful support
- look after yourself. Set limits as you need. To support a grieving person you need to maintain your own wellbeing.