

Losing a Loved One to Suicide



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If you or a friend have lost a loved one to Suicide, the following information will help in understanding the onset of grief and offer ways to self-care and respond to those around you.



Losing a Loved One to Suicide



The loss of a loved one by suicide is often shocking, painful and unexpected. Your reactions may be intense and different from anything you have ever been through. You probably have nothing you can compare this experience to, and that can be scary.

~De Castro, S., & Guterman, J. T. (2008). Solution-focused therapy for families coping with suicide. *Journal of Marital and Family therapy*, 34(1), 93-106.

Perhaps you can relate to some of the following experiences:

- *Be intensely preoccupied with the event, needing to tell and retell what you saw or experienced.* If this is the case for you, identify one or two people you feel safe with who will listen when you need to talk. Talking about it is your way of trying to understand and believe this really occurred.
- *Review of conversations or signs that this was going to happen, asking “why?” and desperately searching for reasons.* Almost everyone who knew someone who died by suicide will revisit the last time they talked with the person and question why they didn’t suspect the possibility of suicide. As you repeatedly do this you will eventually learn how to live with the questions rather than finding all the answers.
- *Being angry at the person who died or blaming yourself or others for not being able to prevent the suicide.* If this is you, try looking at the situation from someone else’s viewpoint. Would the person who died or someone not personally involved see it the way you do? If you are open to looking at it differently, it may help you ‘let go’ of some of the intensity of these feelings. Admit your anger and look for healthy ways to express it.

Perhaps you can relate to some of the following experiences:

- *Feeling guilty either for not doing more, or for what you did.* Be gentle with yourself, give up self-criticism. Talk to and be as forgiving with yourself as you would a close friend.
- *Feeling shame, embarrassment, perhaps rejection.* If you are feeling the stigma of your loved one's actions, remember their death is a statement about the pain they were experiencing and a desire to end that pain, not a reflection on you.
- *Having mood changes- sadness, anxiety, irritability, crying spells.* Realize there is no right or wrong way to feel, allow yourself to cry or talk things through as you need to. Keep a journal, listen to or create music or artwork. Find your mode of expressing feelings. If your mood changes seriously impact on your ability to function over a period of time seek professional help.
- *Difficulty concentrating, forgetfulness, fear you are "going crazy."* Initially your loss may be the only thing you can think about. Nothing else seems important. Eventually you will find your concentration will improve and you will be able to focus on other things.

Perhaps you can relate to some of the following experiences:

- *Difficulty sleeping, having intense dreams, intrusive thoughts or flashbacks about the deceased or the incident.* Know that these may occur, similar to aftershocks of an earthquake as your mind tries to make sense of what has happened. These are temporary and should lessen over time. Try to identify what your “triggers” are so you can be more prepared to deal with them or perhaps avoid them. If these become unmanageable, discuss them with your doctor.
- *Unsure what to tell others about the death, especially children.* Secrecy about the suicide will usually cause further complications. Provide basic facts and answer children’s questions honestly with age-appropriate responses. Ask a counselor, friend or clergy to help if needed.
- *Concerns about the “afterlife” of the person who died.* Many who have experienced a suicide loss raise such questions. Seek out a trusted clergy or spiritual mentor who can explore beliefs with you. Remember all of your loved one’s life- not just the end.

Perhaps you can relate to some of the following experiences:

- *Fear that the suicide will overshadow other memories.* Consider meaningful ways to honor your loved one's memory- create a memory collage or book, share stories, plant a tree or garden.
- *Feelings of hopelessness or despair.* If you are feeling this way for any length of time, and particularly if you have had thoughts of harming yourself, it is very important to reach out, talk with someone, and get the help you need.

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Though a natural process, grief can be unpredictable. Because of the nature of the loss you may feel different and isolated from others. Your relationship with your loved one was unique, so don't compare your grief with others. Talking with a bereavement counselor or meeting with others who have had similar experiences can be helpful as you realize that others share many of the reactions, questions, and feelings you have. This provides you with the affirmation and encouragement you need as you learn what has worked for others.

~De Castro, S., & Guterman, J. T. (2008). Solution-focused therapy for families coping with suicide. *Journal of Marital and Family therapy*, 34(1), 93-10

Talking to School Age Children about a Suicide Attempt



Friends & Supporters

If you or someone you know needs help please call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255. You are important!

It is important to talk to your child about the suicide attempt to help her understand what has happened. Without support of family/friends, children may try to make sense of this confusing situation themselves.

Sometimes children blame themselves for something they may or may not have done.

When stressed, a child may exhibit changes in behavior, such as acting out, trouble sleeping, or becoming more attached due to insecure, anxious or tearful feelings. It is important to instill a sense of hope, that their parent/relative can get help and get well.

Questions Children Ask

The most common question when someone dies by suicide is “Why?” It is a question that rarely has a simple answer. The only person who really knew why was the person who died.



There is no single answer that helps children understand what would lead to a parent's suicide. Even when the parent leaves a note, suicide is often very hard to understand.

- Try to keep your answers short and simple. Use words that match the child's age and development. For example, a six- to eight-year-old child will understand things differently than a nine- to 11-year-old.
- Don't give the child more information than he or she wants. The child will likely want to know more as time goes on.

Questions Children Ask



You can tell the child:

- When people die by suicide, they are not healthy and are very unhappy. It's not the same kind of sadness that kids might often feel when they experience an everyday disappointment. It's a deep kind of sadness that goes on for a long time.
- The parent was in a lot of emotional pain. When someone ends their life, it is because they felt that living was just too hard. They didn't believe anyone could help them or didn't know how to get help. They felt very sad and couldn't see any other way to make the sadness stop.

Questions Children Ask



What is suicide?

- With young children, explain suicide with simple, concrete terms and explanations. For example, “Suicide is when a person is so very, very sad that she ends her life.”
- Be honest, but keep your answers to children’s questions simple and short. Do not give more information than the child wants. Children may ask if suicide was the cause of their parent’s death. The answer is “Yes.” It may be hard to say this, but it’s the truth. It’s much better for the child to hear the truth from you than from someone else.

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Questions Children Ask



Did I do something to make this happen? Is it my fault?

- Suicide is never anyone's fault. This message needs to be repeated over and over again.
- Children often feel guilty when a parent dies by suicide, or worry that they did something to cause the suicide. They may say, "If only I'd done what Mom asked me to do," "If only I'd done all my chores" or "If only I hadn't fought with my brothers so much." Make sure children know they did nothing wrong. The suicide was definitely not their fault. It had nothing to do with anything they said or did.

Questions Children Ask



Could I have prevented my parent's suicide?

What could I have done differently?

Children often think there is something they could have done, or done differently, to prevent the suicide. They may think that if dad had told them how sad he was, they could have stopped him from dying. If they had gotten better grades at school, perhaps mommy would have been happier and would still be alive. If they had been nicer to their brothers and sisters, things would have been easier at home and their parent would not have died by suicide.

- Make sure the child knows the suicide is not anyone's fault. There is nothing the child could have done to change what happened. Also make sure the child knows that the parent who died loved him or her very much.
- Feelings are not rational. Even though you have told the child that the suicide was not his or her fault, the child may still feel guilty. Guilt feelings can last a long time. The child needs to be able to express guilt and have it accepted. Eventually these feelings will be less intense.

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Questions Children Ask



Will I die by suicide too?

Suicide is scary for children. Sometimes children think that if their parent died by suicide, they might end up dying in the same way—that it runs in the family.

You can tell the child:

- Suicide is not something you can “catch” from someone else, like a cold. And it is not inherited from your parents.

Questions Children Ask



Are you going to die too? Will I be left alone?

When a parent dies, many children become afraid of being left alone or abandoned. Some children fear that if one parent can leave them, the other could go too. Children may become very anxious or clingy. They may worry if the remaining parent is away for a time.

- Let the child know that you are here now and that you love him or her very much. Tell the child that you do your best to lead a healthy life, and that you know how to get help when you need it. Depending on their age, you might also tell children who would take care of them if necessary.
- Children need time to process the trauma of suicide and to rebuild trust—trust in the people they love and in the world they thought was safe and secure.

Questions Children Ask



What do I tell kids at school? Will they think bad things about my family?

- Many people have negative attitudes about suicide and mental health problems. Some people look down on a family that has experienced a suicide (or other mental illnesses). Sometimes kids will make mean jokes and pick on others because of this. They might say something cruel like, “Ha ha, your mom killed herself.” Some children have no idea how hurtful this can be. Others know it hurts, but still say mean things. The important thing is to help children deal with these comments. They can choose to ignore them. Children can also practise saying something like “Mommy was sick and was very, very sad.” They can also tell an adult right away.

Questions Children Ask



What do I tell kids at school? Will they think bad things about my family?

- Help children decide how much information to share. Sometimes, it might be easier for a child to say something simple, like “My mother died suddenly” or “My dad was sick and he died.” Older kids can also say, “Dad died by suicide.” Some children may want to share more details. It’s a personal choice and it is up to the child. Make sure the child knows that he or she does not have to share details. You can teach children how to stop conversations when they get uncomfortable. For example, they can say, “Thanks for asking, but I don’t want to talk about this any more.”

Questions Children Ask



It's hard for children to deal with intense grief all the time. Instead, they mourn in small chunks of time over a long period.

They might be crying one minute, and playing with friends the next. This up-and-down part of grief is often confusing to adults as well as to children.



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suicide. *Journal of Marital and Family therapy*, 34(1),

Questions Children Ask



Sometimes, other people don't accept the grief that survivors of suicide feel. This is partly because of the stigma, or negative attitudes, around suicide. This makes grieving harder. Make sure kids know they won't always feel this way. Children need to have a sense of hope.

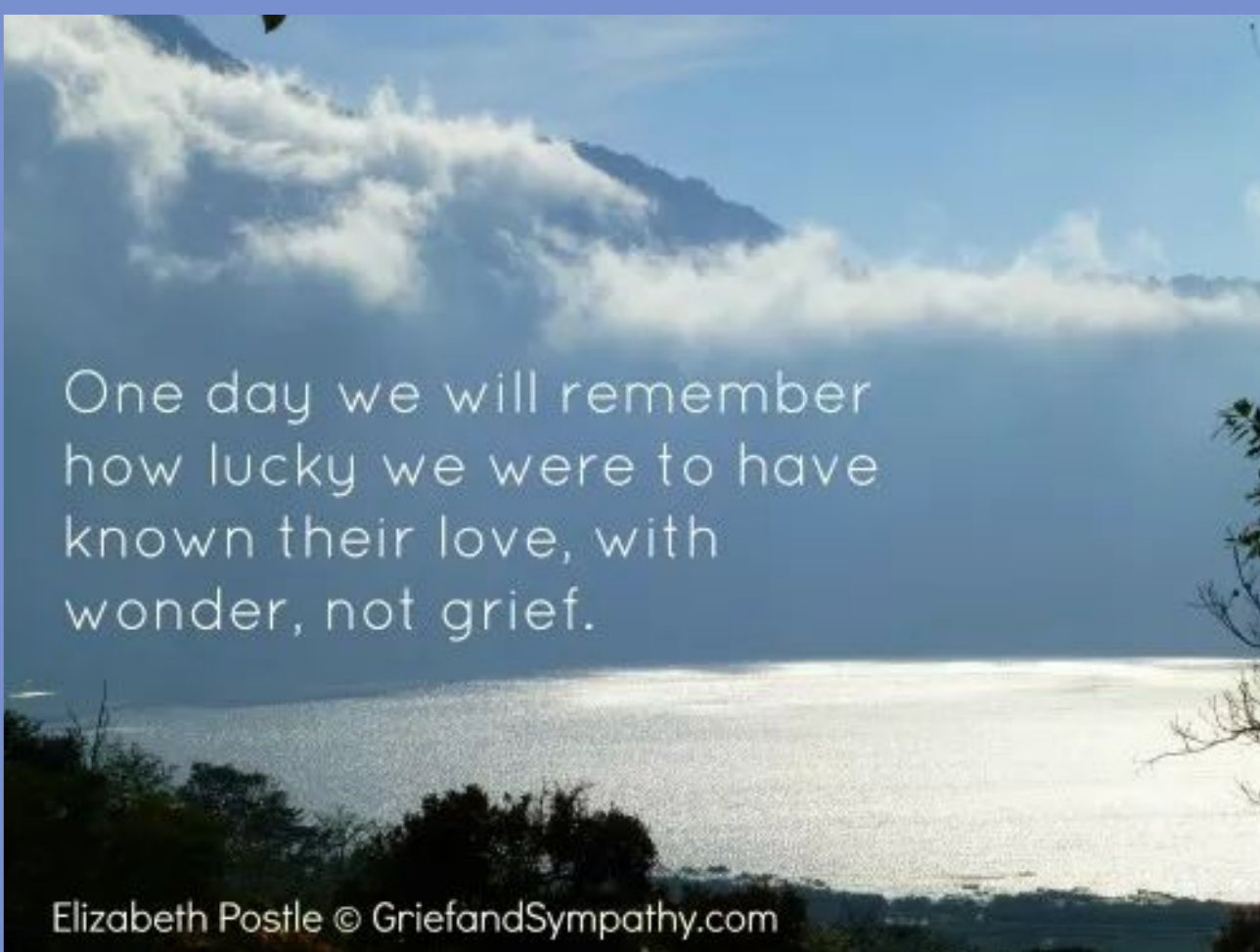
- Encourage the child to talk about his or her feelings. Some children feel comfortable talking. Others can explore their feelings through drawing and playing. Listen to what the child says and, even more importantly, what he or she doesn't say.
- Acknowledge and validate children's feelings. Say things like, "I see that you're really sad" and "It's OK to feel angry."

Parents Explain Suicide



Cut

About Parents Explain:
Sit down. We need to have a talk. Brave parents and their curious kids confront some of life's biggest--and most awkward--lessons.



One day we will remember
how lucky we were to have
known their love, with
wonder, not grief.

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If you or anyone you know is grieving and would like more resources or to talk to someone, please use the contact information below to reach Board Certified Coach [Melissa James](#).



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