

# PATHWAYS CENTER for GRIEF & LOSS

## SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND TEENS COPING WITH THE DEATH OF A LOVED ONE BY SUICIDE

Suicide survivors are always left wondering “why” this happened and “what” they could have said or done to prevent the suicide. Many adults fear telling their child or teen about the suicide death because of the pain it may cause and how difficult it can be to explain. Adults may also fear that by talking about the suicide it will increase the probability that children and teens will attempt suicide. However, it is more helpful when adults acknowledge the suicide and help children and teens begin to grieve the loss. The following suggestions provide ways to address this difficult topic.

- Understand it is normal if initial reactions of shock and disbelief last three months or more because of the sudden nature of the death.
- Provide a clear and honest explanation of what occurred, keeping in mind the child or teen’s age and developmental level.
- Follow their lead as to how much information to provide. It may not be necessary to provide a lot of details.
- Understand that many people who die by suicide almost always have a psychiatric disorder such as depression.
- Explain that the decision to die by suicide is often an impulsive decision. It’s less about wanting to die and more about how, in the moment, they can no longer tolerate the pain.
- Focus on *how their loved ones lived* rather than primarily on how they died. How their loved one died is but a small part of their life.
- Allow discussions about the questions that remain, rather than avoiding or dismissing their questions.
- Explain it is normal to feel angry or guilty and that loving a person is not enough to prevent depression or suicide.
- Encourage regular physical expressions of anger or guilt through activities they enjoy such as running, boxing, or other sports.
- Understand mourning is a process and with support and education they are more resilient than they realize.
- Helpful explanations of suicide:
  - “The person’s depression affected their ability to make a good choice.”
  - “In the moment, their pain felt like it was too much to manage.”
- Avoid the following explanations:
  - “We’ll never know why.” This statement is too vague and may leave them with a sense of fear. They may wonder if it could happen to them.
  - “It is because of \_\_\_\_\_.” (e.g. money problems, break up). This simplifies what happened and most likely was the ‘last straw,’ but not the only reason.

## FACTS

- Suicide is the 3<sup>rd</sup> leading cause of death among 10-24 year olds (after auto accidents and homicide).
- 90% of people who die by suicide have a psychiatric disorder at the time of their death. (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention: *Facts and Figures*, [afsp.org](http://afsp.org))
- Risk factors for someone dying by suicide include a mental health history, a previous attempt, a history of substance abuse and impulsive behaviors.
- In 1999 *The Compassionate Friends* officially adopted the terms ‘died by suicide’ or ‘died of suicide’ to replace the commonly used ‘committed suicide’ or ‘completed suicide.’ The previous terms perpetuate a stigma dating back to when suicide was considered both illegal and sinful.
- Every high school in the country on any given day has suicidal students. (Poland, 2012)
- The suicide rate in Pennsylvania climbed nearly 24% from 2003 to 2013. (Associated Press, 2013)
- Women attempt suicide three times more often; men die from suicide four times more often. (Center for Disease Control, 2012, [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov))
- Research has shown if a gun is available it is five times more likely that there will be a suicide in that home than in a home without a gun. (American Association of Suicidology, 2006).

Most of this information was adapted from the video *Understanding Suicide, Supporting Children* and the webinar *Responding to Suicide in the School Setting*, The Dougy Center, [www.dougy.org](http://www.dougy.org)



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