

# After a Suicide: Answering Questions and Assisting Youth

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## **Overview:**

The aftermath of a youth suicide is a sad and challenging time for a school or a community. The major tasks for suicide postvention are to help youth manage the understandable feelings of shock, grief and confusion and to prevent further suicides.

The research literature estimates that once a suicide happens the chances of another death by suicide increases dramatically in the adolescent and young adult population. The following suggestions are intended to guide teachers, parents, and others working with youth during this difficult time.

- It is important to balance being truthful and honest without violating the privacy of the suicide victim and his/her family and to take care not to romanticize their actions.
- It is important to have the facts of the incident, not spread rumors and erroneous information or share graphic details of the method of death.
- Center for Disease Control research has found teenagers and young adults to be the most susceptible to suicide contagion. Those believed to be most at risk include the following:
  - Students who had a problematic relationship or a recent negative interaction with the decedent
  - Students who now feel they missed warning signs
  - Students with their own set of adversities or previous suicidal thoughts or behaviors
- Numerous professional associations caution that memorials not be dramatic. This can inadvertently encourage a young person already thinking about suicide to act on their thoughts to gain notoriety or love.
- National research has found that talking with youth about suicide does not implant the idea of suicide, and in fact provides an opportunity for youth who are thinking about suicide to unburden themselves and get help.
- Protective factors identified by the World Health Organization are the following:
  - Positive connections at home, school, and with other youth
  - Religious involvement
  - Removal of means for suicide (lock up guns, remove pills, etc)
  - Access to mental health care and awareness of crisis hotline resources

- It is important to let parents and youth know that everyone (including youth) can play a key role in suicide prevention

## How to Talk to Youth After a Peer Dies by Suicide

Do not be afraid to bring up the topic. Research has shown that talking about suicide does not implant thoughts of suicide.

*I heard about the suicide of your classmate. I am so sorry that this has happened. Teenagers shouldn't have to say goodbye to a friend and not this way.*

- *How are your friends dealing with this? How are you dealing with this*
- *Suicide is very complicated and can feel very confusing.*
- *I know that people can have lots of feelings after someone takes their life. We can feel confusion, anger, anxiety, sadness, guilt, or even just feel numb. We can have trouble getting our mind off of the person and we may not be able to stop thinking about the way they died. Sometimes our bodies express our feelings and we could have trouble sleeping or have nightmares, or not feel like eating, have headaches or stomachaches or just feel tired all the time. We can have trouble concentrating and focusing and we may not feel like being with anyone or doing the things we usually like to do. After a suicide we can even begin to worry that someone else we care about will take their life. These thoughts and experiences are normal right after the death and even for some weeks. However, if these feelings don't begin to lessen as time goes on or they feel even worse it is time to tell someone that can help you.*
- *Since the suicide, have you or any of your friends had any of these experiences that I have described?*
- *I want to ask you if you or anyone of your friends have ever had thoughts of suicide? What kinds of thoughts have you had?*
- *If you ever did begin to have those kinds of thoughts it would be important to tell me or another adult that you trust about them so you can get help. Depression can trick people into believing that the bad way they feel now will never go away and that the only way to stop the pain is to kill yourself. That is so untrue. Depression and thoughts of suicide can be treated like any other medical illnesses and the person can get better.*
- *I want you to always remember that there is no problem that we can't solve. There are people that love you and can help you. Suicide is never, ever an option. We love you too much to let you kill yourself.*
- *Life is sometimes hard and it's important to have an "A" team walking though it with us. Let's figure out who your "A" team is. If you were struggling with depression or thoughts of suicide or any other serious problem, who would you go to for help?*

## Commonly Asked Questions by Youth and Appropriate Responses:

**Why did he/she die by suicide?** We are never going to know the answer to that question as the answer has died with him/her. What we do know is that 90% of people that die by suicide have a mental health disorder at the time of the death. Things like depression or anxiety or substance abuse are examples of mental health disorders. These disorders can feel very overwhelming and can make a person believe that they will never go away and the only way to stop the pain is to kill yourself. The truth is these disorders are very treatable and people get well and feel better. The focus now needs to be on helping you with your thoughts and feelings.

**What method did they use to end their life?** Answer specifically with information as to the method such as he/she died by hanging or they used a gun. Do not go into explicit details such as what was the type of gun or rope used or the condition of the body, etc.

**Why didn't God stop him/her?** There are varying religious beliefs about suicide and you are all free to have your own beliefs. However, many religious leaders have used the expression "God sounded the alarm but could not stop him/her. God has embraced them yes, and he/she is in whatever afterlife you believe in, but God is actually saddened that he/she did not stay on this earth and do God's work over their natural lifetime."

**Didn't he/she make a poor choice and is it okay to be angry with them?** They did make a very poor choice. The suicide was a very big mistake and the person could have solved their problems in a better way, but the mental illness prevented them from thinking clearly about how to get through the hard time. It is very normal to have feelings of anger and many other feelings in the aftermath of suicide. You can care about someone very much but still be angry about something they did.

**Isn't someone or something to blame for this suicide?** The suicide victim made a very poor choice and there is no one to blame. The suicide of a young person has been compared to throwing a rock into a pond with ripple effects in the school, church, and community. There is often a search for a simple explanation. Suicide is a complicated event and psychological, biological, and physiological elements were all present to some degree. Suicide is no one's fault.

**How can I cope with this suicide?** It is important to remember what or who has helped you cope when you have had to deal with sad things in your life before. Please turn to the important adults in your life for help and share your feelings with them. It is important to maintain normal routines, proper sleeping and eating habits and to engage in regular exercise. Please avoid drugs and alcohol. They may seem to help in the short run but can make grief and even depression worse. Everyone copes best when surrounded by friends and family who care about us and by viewing the future in a positive manner.

**What is an appropriate memorial to a suicide victim?** The most appropriate memorial is a living one such as becoming involved in suicide prevention efforts. The American Association of Suicidology cautions that permanent markers or memorials such as plaques or trees (outside of the cemetery), dedications of sporting events or buildings dramatize and glorify their actions.

Reaching out to the victim's family and funeral attendance are also appropriate in coping with grief reactions.

**What are the warning signs of suicide?** The most common signs are : making a suicide attempt, verbal and written statements about death and suicide, fascination and preoccupation with death, giving away prized possessions, saying goodbye to friends and family, making out wills, and dramatic changes in behavior and personality.

**What should I do if I believe someone to be suicidal?** Listen to them, support them and let them know that they are not the first person to feel this way. There is help available. Mental health professionals such as counselors and psychologists have special training to help young people who are suicidal. Do not keep a secret about suicidal behavior even if your friend asks you to do so. Please get an adult to help you. This is too big a responsibility and keeping a secret about suicide is not a fair request of a friend.

**How can I make a difference in suicide prevention?** Know the warning signs, listen to your friend carefully, and do not hesitate to get adult help for yourself or someone you know.

### **Resources**

Toll-free, 24/7 Access Line for information, referrals and crisis response – 1-888-868-1649

Santa Barbara Response Network 24/7 Line – 805-699-5608. [www.sbresponsenetwork.org](http://www.sbresponsenetwork.org)

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline – 1-800-273-TALK. [www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org)