

A RESOURCE
FROM
NACG
MEMBERS



SUPPORTING CHILDREN GRIEVING A DEATH BY SUICIDE



INTRODUCTION

Grief is a natural response to the death of someone significant in a child or teen's life. When the death is by suicide, it can make the grief experience more complex. Suicide, by nature, is stigmatizing and isolating. This guide explores ways we can stabilize and strengthen children as they integrate losses from suicide into their lives.

As children and teens grieve death by suicide, they may struggle to make sense of the loss. The wide range of emotions can include shock, hurt, relief, self-blame, guilt, anger, torment, regret, confusion, etc. There is no incorrect way to grieve.

In speaking to a child about a death by suicide it is important to be honest and share the news in a developmentally appropriate way. You are starting a conversation that will be ongoing and honesty in this moment creates a basis of trust for conversations about the death in the future. The phrase 'committed suicide' can add to the stigma around the death for some families. Instead, consider saying 'died from/by suicide' or 'suicide death'. When offering support, follow the family's lead with their word choice.

If you are reading this resource as a community support person, such as a coach, youth leader, or family friend, you may be considering, "What is my role in helping a child or teen after a suicide death?". It is common to worry about what to say, when to say it, and how your interactions may impact them. This resource will provide you with some practical information on how you can support a child or teen after a suicide death.

Some of the information and ideas presented throughout this guide may be new to you. As you review this information, extend grace to yourself for doing your best with the knowledge and tools you had before, and give yourself permission to do things differently than you have seen or done in the past. We extend appreciation and respect for your efforts to gather tools and resources, as we all invest in the important work of supporting the young people in our lives. These conversations are difficult but you are not alone. Reach out to grief professionals, therapists and others who are equipped to support you, if needed.

When to seek additional support

After any death, it is important to monitor changes in frequency, intensity, and duration of family members' behaviors. Noticeable changes may require additional support from an experienced, trained professional. Below are some examples of changes to look for:

- Inability to go to work or school
- Difficulties in relationships
- Sleep problems or nightmares
- Disproportionate anger or irritability
- Increased health issues
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Social withdrawal
- Self-harm, suicidal thoughts, or suicidal ideation

These changes can have an impact on the griever and the other family members. When changes in behavior go unnoticed and unaddressed, this can create an imbalance within the family. Addressing these changes will help create a supportive and safe environment for each member of the family.

Sometimes grievors may want to connect with others for additional support. Connecting to peer support groups, bereavement centers, counselors, camps or even another person with a similar loss can help provide an added layer of support. These outside connections provide the griever with an opportunity to learn new perspectives on grief, coping, and healing.

Connecting with others allows the griever to share their story, understand they are not alone, and validate and normalize their experience. It is important to acknowledge a family member's readiness, as well as the type of support needed. Needs may vary among family members throughout their grief journey. You can find additional support in your area by visiting <https://nacg.org/find-support/>.

If you believe someone is thinking about suicide, assume you are the only one who will reach out. Visit the [American Foundation for Suicide Prevention](https://www.afsp.org/) website for more resources and information.



INFORMATION FOR FAMILY MEMBERS

Conversations about suicide loss can feel difficult when talking to children. What we know is no one thing causes suicide. As we try to understand the “whys” in the aftermath of a suicide, it is important to remain clear on what we do know to be true – suicide is a result of a collection of factors, circumstances, and access to means at one moment in time. No one interaction, missed connection, mental health challenge, life circumstance, substance, or person caused a death by suicide.

What makes this type of grief different from other types of grief?

The grief experience of each person is based on, among other things, their age and developmental stage, the nature of the death, their relationship with the person who died and what meaning they make of the death.

- A death by suicide can feel premature, sudden, unexpected, and stigmatized.
- The grieving process after suicide can be challenging and complicated for those left behind.
- Many loss survivors describe this loss as traumatic and as an overwhelming time of crisis.
- Children and teens of all ages may feel shattered and at a loss as to how to restore their sense of wellbeing.
- Emotions related to suicide bereavement include the many and varied emotions that come with other types of losses.
- With suicide bereavement, shame can be experienced by the child and the family. A sense of responsibility and guilt can also be present.
- Hindsight bias. Children often feel they could have changed the outcome of the suicide death by doing something differently.
- After someone dies by suicide, it is not unusual to feel as though someone is to blame. This could be the person who died by suicide, someone else in the family, or sometimes, the child or teen might feel as though they are to blame.

Questions children and teens may ask after a suicide death

Was it my fault?

Did they love me? Did I love them enough? Why wasn't my love enough?

Will I be blamed or shamed?
Will they be blamed or shamed?

What will others think of me?
What will others think of them?

Will I be like them?

Can I still love them?

Four factors that can complicate the natural grieving process when grieving a death by suicide

Ambiguity around the death - was it intentional? accidental?

Preventability - feelings of blame, guilt, responsibility

Trauma: - death experienced as shocking, frightening, overwhelming

Stigma - feelings of shame and fear of "what others will think"

Common themes are:

Why? They may ask questions like "why?" and "what if".

Responsibility. They may feel they should have prevented the death; may have magical thinking which leads them to think something they said or did has caused the death.

Trauma and Helplessness. They may experience the death as shocking, frightening, horrific; may feel overwhelmed by a lack of control.

Range of Emotions. They may experience:

- **Sadness:** They may feel intense grief and yearning to have the person back.
- **Anger:** They may feel a sense of rejection and abandonment. It is common the anger may also be directed toward someone else or a group.
- **Relief:** In some circumstances, the death may be viewed as the end of suffering.
- **Shame:** They may feel a sense of stigma and worry about how others will view person who died and/or how others will view them.
- **Social ambiguity.** They may experience a sense of isolation, feeling they will be judged, or “no one will understand.”

DEVELOPMENTAL UNDERSTANDINGS AND RESPONSES TO DEATH

Having a conversation with a child about a suicide death

- Take a minute of reflection and check in with your body before starting the conversation.
- **Make sure the space you are having the conversation in is free of distraction.** You may want to have some comfort items available or items your child(ren) can use to express themselves like a sandbox, stuffed animals, or crayons and paper. Choose a private space. Offer your child(ren) the opportunity to leave and come back to the conversation over the course of hours, days, and years, and avoid making them talk about this news longer than they are comfortable.
- **Be honest.** Honesty is critical in conversations with children and teens about death by suicide. In telling the truth, you are creating a space for an open conversation and building long-term trust. The scripts on the next few pages will help you with having these honest conversations with children and teens in developmentally appropriate ways.
- **It is ok not to have all the answers.** We can reassure children, “I am not sure, *but we can ask someone together,*” and “*I feel sad, too. Sometimes when I feel sad, I appreciate a hug. Would you like a hug?*”
- **Reassure the child by naming the people who care for them and what to expect.**
- **Offer your child(ren) choices where both options are acceptable to help them feel some control over what is happening in the moment.** Perhaps give them something to do with their energy. Options may be to write a card or create a piece of art for someone else. They may find meaning in an opportunity to write or draw about a special memory to share at a memorial or to honor a significant event.
- **Ask if they want to talk (now or later).** Provide the space for conversations and a place to process the information they are taking in. Maintain an open dialogue about this over time and creating space for your child to share their feelings.

Understanding of death and grief for children is linked to developmental understandings. The information in this section is part of an expanded document. [To learn more about how best to support the child please review our dedicated Developmental Understandings resource.](#)

VERY YOUNG CHILDREN

Birth to 5 years old

- Awareness of death is directly influenced and limited by young children's ability to understand their world.
- Death is viewed as the absence of a parent or caregiver.
- Children may be preoccupied with who will take care of them.
- Children may see themselves as responsible in some way, for a death, and they do not yet recognize time and irreversibility of death.
- Children may want to "die" to be with the person who died.

Example of How to Share the News of a Suicide Death

WHERE TO SHARE

At their home, or at a place the child feels safe

WHEN TO SHARE

When the child is not hungry or tired

START BY SHARING

"(Person's name) made their body stop working and that means they died."

Follow your child(ren)'s lead by specifically answering their direct questions. It is okay to take a break from the conversation and follow up later.

How did they die?

"They made their body stop working."

Why did they do it?

"I am not sure. I wish understood."

Help your child identify helpful adult figures that can talk to about this death.

CHILDREN

6 to 12 years old

- Awareness of death is influenced and limited by the school-agers' ability to think about their world.
- Many emotions and grief can be explained and understood.
- Explain grief is a combination of reactions one can have after someone has died—thinking about the person, feelings of sadness or anger, physical reactions such as tiredness, or upset stomach. These reactions can come or go.
- Anger can be attributed to a number of causes. It may not be the anger children feel because the person has died, but the anger that results when no one listens or talks to them or includes them in activities. Do not assume what prompts feelings, ask them.
- Children have a better understanding they are not responsible for the death logically at this age but may still have some magical thinking that they did something to attribute to the death. It is important to validate those feelings while also making sure they understand the facts of the death.
- Children recognize death is irreversible.
- Children will be able to appreciate how the loss of a person in their lives will affect them over time, weeks, or months but may not understand the long-term, life-long impact of a death.

Example of How to Share the News of a Suicide Death

WHERE TO SHARE

At their home, or at a place the child feels safe

WHEN TO SHARE

When the child is not hungry or tired

START BY SHARING

“(Person’s name) made their body stop working and that means they died.”

Follow your child(ren)’s lead by specifically answering their direct questions. It is okay to take a break from the conversation and follow up later.

How did they die?

“They used _____ to make their body stop working.”

Why did they do it?

“I am not sure. I wish understood.”

Help your child identify helpful adult figures that can talk to about this death.

TEENS

13 years old to adulthood

- The teen's awareness and understanding of death are similar to adults. They can incorporate multiple causes and consequences of a death.
- Many complex emotions and grief can be explained and understood.
- Support them in understanding grief is a combination of reactions one can have after someone has died such as thoughts about the person, feelings like sadness or anger, and physical reactions such as tiredness or an upset stomach. They can also experience more subtle emotions such as regret, ambivalence, or relief. These reactions can come or go and change over time
- Anger can be attributed to a number of causes. It may not be the anger a teen feels because an important person has died but the anger they feel when no one listens or talks to them or has excluded them from activities. Do not assume what prompts feelings, ask.
- Teens do not inherently see themselves as responsible for a death but are apt to analyze information to determine who or what is responsible.

Example of How to Share the News of a Suicide Death

WHERE TO SHARE

At their home, or at a place the teen feels safe

WHEN TO SHARE

When the teen is not hungry or tired

START BY SHARING

"(Person's name) ended their life and died by suicide."

Lead with open-ended questions, invite them to share what they think, and then work through what they think/know about suicide in general and this death specifically. Share what you know and what is sharable information.

How did they die?

"They used _____."

Why did they do it?

"I am not sure. I wish understood."

Help your teen identify helpful adult figures that can talk to about this death.



INFORMATION FOR COMMUNITY MEMBERS

As a coach, youth leader, family friend, or another supportive community member, you may be wondering, “What is my role in helping a child or teen after a suicide death?” It is common to worry about what to say, when to say it, and how your interactions may impact them. This resource will provide you with some practical information on how you can support a child or teen after a suicide death.

Factors To Consider Before Offering Support

Before we talk about ways you can support a child or teen who is grieving a suicide loss, it is important to understand some of the factors that make grieving a suicide death complex. Being informed of the complexities surrounding suicide can help guide the way you offer your support.

- Because suicide is a highly stigmatized death, people often do not know what to say or do, so they end up saying and doing nothing. This can contribute to children and teens feeling isolated and unsupported.
- A child or teen may not have accurate information about the death. It is not your responsibility to contradict what the child shares with you or give additional information.
- Not being ready to share or talk about how someone died by suicide is a personal right needing to be honored and respected.
- Children and teens grieving a death by suicide may experience intense feelings of guilt, regret, anger, relief, shame, and self-blame.
- Different cultural, religious, personal, and political views can influence the way a child or teen acknowledges and shares about a death by suicide.
- There are often many unanswered questions surrounding a suicide death. This can leave children and teens not knowing how to respond to questions or how to process the death.
- Not all children and teens who experience the death or suicide of someone significant are traumatized. Trauma is very subjective so it is important not to assume a certain cause of death was traumatic for that person.
- Children and teens do better when surrounded by adults equipped to support them.

How to be a Support Person

As a support person in this child's or teen's life, you play a critical role in their grief and healing journey. Here are some ways to be a supportive person and create a safe space for children and teens who have experienced a suicide loss.

Show up and be yourself. The aftermath of a suicide death can create an avalanche of change and chaos for children and teens to navigate. Children and teens need safe, consistent, and predictable people and places that they can count on. They need you to show up fully, as yourself, each time they see you.

Talk openly, honestly, and without judgment. Being a safe adult requires you to be a trustworthy adult. Find an opportunity to check in and acknowledge their loss and communicate to them you are a safe person to talk to who will not judge them.

"Hey, (name of child or teen), do you have a minute? I just wanted to let you know that I heard about (name of deceased)'s death. Things like this can be really hard to talk about, but I want you to know you can always talk to me about this. You can also just come let me know if you need a break. I care about you and want to support you."

Be a good listener. Good listeners create safe environments where hard conversations can take place. They clear away any distractions so they can focus their attention on the child or teen. Listeners pay close attention to what the child or teen is saying with their words and body language. They periodically check their understanding of what is being said by asking clarifying questions and empathizing with and validating all feelings in a supportive and nonjudgmental way.

Ask for permission and respect boundaries. When someone dies of suicide, children and teens get asked a lot of questions they may not be ready to answer and might feel pressure to talk about what happened. As a support person, ask the child or teen what and how they would like information shared, if at all. By doing this, you give the child or teen a choice and voice on how this news is shared. If they wish to not have anything shared, respect that too.

Focus on feelings and not details. The details are less important than the child's emotions about them. Allowing space for the child to share how they feel is helpful as they process what has occurred.

Checking in. It is important to remember there is no timeline for grief. Consider the child or teen's grief as they achieve new developmental competencies and major milestones. Checking in during these times shows you understand grief is a process and you care.

*I remember you saying that Halloween was your dad's favorite holiday.
With Halloween being next week, I wanted to check in with you and
see how you're holding up and what plans you have for that day?*

Create a drop-in space. Designate a place – an empty office, a corner with coloring sheets, or a separate room – for a child or teen to use as they want or need, especially if they start to feel overwhelmed or overstimulated. This may give them a sense of security and control without having to explain their feelings.

Limit setting around insensitive comments. Children and teens grieving a suicide loss can experience insensitive and hurtful comments and questioning. In your role, it is important to let others know of the consequences of their comments and questions and set the expectation around being supportive.

*When someone we love dies, it can be really hard to hear certain
things or respond to certain questions. Let's do our best not to ask
probing questions or say any comments that can cause extra pain,
hurt, blame, or shame. Instead, I'd like to see you being supportive
and doing what you can to make (griever) feel cared for.*

Take Care of Yourself, Too! Being a support person to a child or teen who is grieving a suicide death may at times feel emotionally overwhelming and can suddenly call into question your own need for emotional support. When you offer emotional and practical care to someone close to you on an ongoing basis, you run the risk of experiencing compassion fatigue. Compassion fatigue is the emotional and physical exhaustion that occurs when caring for others. Remember, your role is to show up in small, consistent, and manageable ways. No one person can be responsible for solely supporting a child or teen in their grief. It takes a network of adults working together to properly support children and teens after a suicide loss.





Resource List

Resources for professionals

The inclusion of any organization or resource in this Resource List does not imply or constitute an endorsement or recommendation, nor does exclusion imply disapproval.

Online:

- Coalition of Clinician Survivors (CCS): cliniciansurvivor.org. Provides support, education, resources, and consultation to mental health professionals and other professional caregivers who have experienced suicide losses in personal or professional contexts. To join the CCS List-Serve: Please email Info@ClinicianSurvivor.org with "CCS List-Serve" in the subject to receive the membership form.
- National Child Traumatic Stress Network, www.nctsn.org
- Responding to Grief, Trauma, and Distress After a Suicide: U.S. National Guidelines, <https://www.sprc.org/resources-programs/responding-grief-trauma-and-distress-after-suicide-us-national-guidelines>
- Uniting for Suicide Postvention <https://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn19/postvention/>
- Information and podcasts: <https://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn19/postvention/community/content.asp#top>
- <https://theactionalliance.org/resource/responding-grief-trauma-and-distress-after-suicide-us-national-guidelines>

Books:

- McIntosh, J. L. (Eds.). (2011). *Grief after suicide: Understanding the consequences and caring for the survivors*. NY: Routledge
- McNiel, A., & Gabbay, P. (2018) *Understanding and supporting bereaved children: A practical guide for professionals*. Springer Publishing.
- Servaty-Seib, H., & Chapple, H. (2022). *Handbook of thanatology: The essential body of knowledge for the study of death, dying, and bereavement*, 3rd edition. Association for Death Education and Counseling.

Resources for parents and caregivers

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Online:

- Dougy Center: Supporting children and teens after a suicide death, https://www.dougy.org/assets/uploads/TDC_Supporting_Children_Teens_After_a_Suicide_Death_2018.pdf
- Alliance of Hope: Video re: the experience of children and families after suicide loss, <https://allianceofhope.org/find-support/children-teens/understanding-suicide-supporting-children/>
- Nancy Rappaport, MD. The Words To Say It: When a Parent Dies by Suicide, <https://www.nancyrappaport.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/The-Words-to-Say-It.pdf>
- Life after Suicide, Podcast with Jennifer Ashton (series of interviews re: suicide loss <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/life-after-suicide/id1460022071>)
- Learning to Heal, Jennifer Ashton's daughter Chloe's interview re: the suicide loss of her father. <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/life-after-suicide/id1460022071?i=1000468732329>
- Grieving a Suicide Death. What's Your Grief? <https://whatsyourgrief.com/grieving-suicide-death/>
- Interview with Thomas Joiner, Ph. D (father died of suicide; author of Why People Die By Suicide (2006) and Myths about Suicide (2011). <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=126365907?storyId=126365907>
- Is Suicide a Choice, Kim Ruocco, MSW, <https://www.taps.org/articles/21-1/suicide>

Books:

- Baugher, Bob & Jordan, John (2016). After Suicide Loss: Coping with your grief.
- Requarth, Margo (2006). After a Parent's Suicide: Helping Children Heal.
- Montgomery, Sarah & Coale, Susan (2015). Supporting Children after a Suicide Loss: A Guide for Parents and Caregivers.
- Sands, Diana (2010). Red Chocolate Elephants: For Children Bereaved by Suicide

Helpful links for additional information from the NACG:

- NACG Resource Library: <https://www.nacg.org/resources>
- NACG Find Support: <https://www.nacg.org/find-support>
- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP): <https://www.afsp.org/>

Resources for children and teens

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Online:

- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (individual and group support) <https://afsp.org/ive-lost-someone>
- Alliance for Hope for Suicide Loss Survivors, <https://www.allianceofhope.org/>. For the Newly Bereaved, <https://www.allianceofhope.org/find-support/for-new-survivors/>
- Friends for Survival: <https://www.friendsforsurvival.org/>
- National Alliance for Children's Grief, <https://www.childrengrieve.org/>
- National Child Traumatic Stress Network, <http://www.nctsn.org/trauma-types/traumatic-grief/parents-caregivers>
- National Alliance on Mental Illness <https://nami.org/>; <https://www.namimaine.org/>
- Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors of Suicide Loss <https://www.taps.org/suicide>
- SAVE: Suicide Awareness, Voices of Education: <https://save.org/what-we-do/grief-support/>
- Survivors of Suicide: www.survivorsofsuicide.com

Books (For Teens):

- Chalifour, Francis (2005). After (novel about a 15-year-old boy, suicide loss of his father)
- Seib Heather Servaty and Faigenbaum, David. C. (2015) We Get It (stories of grieving college students/young adults-includes suicide loss)
- Park, Bridget E. (2013). Growing Young: A memoir of grief (about the death of her brother from suicide)
- Brooke's Place for Grieving Young People (2019). You Are Not Alone: Stories by Young Teens Who Have Experienced the Death of a Sibling

Books (For Children):

- Cammarata, Doreen T. (2009). Someone I Love Died by Suicide: A Story for Child Survivors and Those Who Care for Them (young children)
- Loehr, Carole Ann (2006). My Uncle Keith Died (school age, suicide loss)
- Smid, Emmi (2015). Luna's Red Hat: An Illustrated Storybook to Help Children Cope With Suicide
- For more book recommendations: <https://afsp.org/find-support/ive-lost-someone/resources-loss-survivors/books-loss-survivors/>

General Grief books for children with good themes that can relate to suicide loss (worries, secrets, helpers, continuing bonds):

- Agell, Charlotte (2019). Maybe Tomorrow?
- Jeffers, Oliver (2010). The Heart and the Bottle
- Karst, Patrice (2000). The Invisible String
- Kaplow, Julie & Pincus, Donna (2007). Samantha's Missing Smile
- Paradis, Susan (2012). EDNA



The **National Alliance for Children's Grief (NACG)** is a nonprofit organization raising awareness about the needs of children and teens who are grieving a death and provides education and resources for anyone who supports them. Our Vision is for no child to have to grieve alone. Visit childrengrieve.org to find these and other resources.

Thank you to the the following NACG members who contributed to this toolkit: (listed alphabetically by last name)

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