

HIGHMARK

CARING PLACE 

finding hope in grief

Talking about suicide

Guiding
each other
through
darkness



Finding the strength to go on

The death of a loved one by suicide causes confrontations with unexpected loss and devastating grief. While all deaths bring pain and difficulty, survivors of suicide loss often face additional and complex emotions. These might include shock, disbelief, denial, guilt, shame, anger, regret, confusion, relief, hopelessness, self-blame, isolation, and stigma.

With support, you can gather the strength to keep dialogue open with the children close to you, now and as they get older.

Talking with your child builds a foundation of trust and safety while giving them the opportunity to ask questions. It's important to start conversations and then listen. A child may need direct answers to their questions, but not all the information at once. These conversations will develop over a lifetime, and your approach may change too.





Discussing suicide death with children

As you talk with your child, it can be helpful to:

- Choose a safe and comfortable place.
- Give truthful information using simple, age-appropriate language.
- Avoid graphic details.
- Listen without judgment.
- Follow the child's lead.

Lifelong questions

It's natural to feel unprepared and not have all the answers. If you're unsure how to answer a question, let your child know. Explain you need more time or information. Assure them that you'll provide a more complete answer in another conversation. Give yourself time and grace. This will be an unfolding dialogue.



Addressing kids based on age

Finding the right words to tell your child about a loved one's death can feel impossible. It helps to think about what's most appropriate for their level of development. As children grow, they'll ask new questions and revisit questions you've already answered.

Infants won't understand the situation but will be aware that something has changed.

Provide physical and emotional comfort. Reassure them that they'll continue to be cared for even though a loved one has died.



Toddlers and preschoolers may worry that past behavior or angry feelings caused their loved one's death. Reassure them that it wasn't and couldn't have been their fault. Use basic information.

You might simply say, "I need to tell you some sad news. Your dad died last night. That means that his body stopped working."



Elementary school children are likely to have many questions about death as they try to understand what it means. When a death is the result of suicide, help the child understand that, just as people can die from illnesses like cancer or heart disease, they can also die from illnesses that affect their brain.

You might explain, “Mommy’s brain wasn’t working the way it used to. It caused her to see things very differently and to do something that made her body stop working.”



Not their fault

Reassure them that their loved one did not choose to leave them. The loved one suffered from a type of illness that affected their feelings and behaviors.

Sharing details

If a child asks for more specific information, it’s a sign that they’re ready to hear more. Provide details depending on their maturity level.

You might elaborate, “Daddy used a gun.” Or, “Mommy took too many pills and they caused her body to stop working.”



Teenagers understand the permanence of death and may have many questions about how and why the death happened. Give truthful and direct information.

You might share, "I need to talk with you about some difficult news. Your cousin's body was found this morning and it looks like she died by suicide."

Middle schoolers begin to grasp the finality of death. They often have strong feelings but lack words. Although they may not say it, they continue to need the supportive presence of adults inside and outside the family. Use direct language.

You might tell them, "I have something very hard to tell you. Your brother died by suicide. Suicide means that he ended his own life."

Big changes now

In addition to their feelings about the death, teens will be sensitive to accompanying changes in relationships, finances, and living arrangements. They may also have spiritual questions and need a safe place to discuss them.

It's important for teens to remember that they're not alone in these feelings and questions. Encourage them to reach out to trusted adults, mental health professionals, or support groups to help them navigate this difficult time and process lingering questions.



Helping kids express themselves

Your child may get questions from people outside the home. Guide them toward straightforward responses like, “They died by suicide,” or, “They died but I don’t want to talk about details now.” Over time, children will identify supportive people they can be open with.

Create space for your children to share their feelings, thoughts, and fears.

Show your own emotions too. It shows them that a range of feelings, including sad, angry, and confused, are normal parts of grieving a death.

Join the child in remembering and talking about their loved one’s life.

Provide opportunities for play, physical activity, and alone time as needed. Help them come to know that no one’s life is defined by the moment of their death. Your ongoing willingness to listen helps them know they’re safe.

Resources

American Association of Suicidology
suicidology.org

American Foundation for
Suicide Prevention
afsp.org

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
988lifeline.org

Suicide Prevention Resource Center
(SPRC)
www.sprc.org

Alliance of Hope for suicide
loss survivors
allianceofhope.org

If you're thinking about suicide, are worried about a friend or loved one, or would like emotional support, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline network is available 24/7 across the United States by calling 988.



When there's been a suicide death, see our conversation guide to suicide loss:



Helping grieving children and families heal over a lifetime

Our mission is to create a world of compassionate communities where all people can find hope and healing after the death of a loved one. We provide grief support for families and individuals of all ages through peer groups, education, and advocacy.

Where to find us

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