



WHAT DO I SAY? WHAT DO I DO?

How to understand and support someone bereaved by suicide

Suicide is a tragedy. People are often prepared for the deaths of elderly parents, friends or relatives who have a serious illness, but we are rarely prepared for the impact of a sudden death. We are usually even less prepared for the suicide of someone we know.

Suicide leaves behind a large group of people who often find themselves asking “why?” or “what could I have done?” Whilst death is a natural part of life, suicide is not. Those left behind by suicide may experience emotions including alarm, disbelief, denial, regret, anger, shame, sadness, rejection, yearning, despair, blaming, detachment, loss of confidence and guilt. This range of reactions emphasises the quite dramatic personal effect that an unexpected loss through suicide can have on each and every one of us. It also emphasises the important and sometimes difficult task we all have when we want to help someone who is bereaved by suicide.

Finding a source of comfort and eventually discovering a way to live with the loss caused by suicide become important goals for those left behind. People bereaved by suicide experience a very complicated form of bereavement, partly due to the combination of the sudden shock, the unanswered questions of “Why?”, and the sense of rejection and possibly the trauma of discovering or witnessing the suicide. Unfortunately, the grief reactions of those bereaved by suicide can be made worse by insensitive responses from their friends, the community and the media.

When a person loses someone to an accident or illness, well-meaning family and friends often spend time with the bereaved just listening to them and comforting them. However, if the death is by suicide, people tend to draw back from the bereaved. Frequently we don't know how to begin a conversation or know what to do or say. People bereaved by suicide often tell of how they felt stigmatised by some of their best friends not speaking to them. When their friends have finally spoken, they very often say “I didn't know what to say” or “I didn't know what to do”.

THREE STEPS TO UNDERSTANDING

The ripple effects of a suicide (or any death) are far reaching. We often take our range and extent of relationships and influence for granted. We are all involved in networks of friendships, families, work mates, neighbours, colleagues, sports clubs and social groups. We all meet the same passers-by in the street, the supermarket, the local coffee shop, the sports club or at the local pub. Inevitably, a death by suicide can impact in different ways on all of these people – from casual acquaintances to close friends and family.

The tragedy of a suicide shows us just how many lives an individual life can touch and reminds us that even if we do have our differences, we share one common humanity. Everyone who has been affected by suicide needs to be reminded and reassured that they are not alone.

Follow these three steps:-

- Be respectful of the bereaved, their loved ones and the experience they are going through. It is a normal human reaction to grieve for a lost loved one and someone lost to suicide creates a distinctly different and often more intense sense of grief;
- Understand the individual experience of grief associated with suicide – emotions can fluctuate from surprise and not understanding through guilt and anger to deep sadness, feelings of loss, confusion and depression;
- Help and support the person to grieve without guilt. The role of the helper is to support and enhance the normal experience of grieving, not to “cure”.



This letter was written to a Canadian newspaper in 1993.

After a recent suicide in our family I would like to let your readers know what helps a survivor of this tragedy

- Call immediately after the tragedy, but do not drop by unannounced.
- Telephone first; some may not want visitors
- Do not ask for details or jump to any conclusions.
- If your initial call seems unwelcome, be forgiving and call later.
- What is important to the survivors is that you acknowledge the situation and let it be known that you care.
- Tell the survivors what the person meant to you.
- Recalling a good (and happy) story will be appreciated.
- Don't tell the survivor how the tragedy could have been prevented as it makes the survivor feel at fault.
- Do not place the blame on anyone.
- Let the survivor talk and be an attentive listener.
- Tell the survivor you are sorry that this has happened, that life is sometimes very unfair – but never say, "It's probably all for the best." The family members of a suicide victim will not be comforted by these words.
- If you can't make a personal call, send a note.
- If you aren't sure what to say, "thinking of you" will convey your message adequately.
- Do not hesitate to send a belated sympathy card or note if you failed to do so immediately. The survivor will appreciate being remembered even though your message was quite late.

The hurt of being ignored is very difficult to forget, I know. A Survivor

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Do No Harm – What You Should Not Do

- Don't keep asking for details of the suicide.
- Don't blame or give reasons for the suicide.
- Don't avoid talking about the deceased person. It may seem that you are denying they ever existed which can be very hurtful to those left behind.
- Don't use clichés that make judgements or assumptions about the deceased person – such as "They've gone to a better place" or "It was the best thing for them".
- Don't use clichés when talking to the bereaved person such as "You must be strong" and "Life goes on".



HOW YOU CAN BEST HELP A PERSON BEREAVED BY SUICIDE

Listen to the story – over and over again. Or, alternatively sit with them in their pain - sometimes this may be a time of silence.

Listen without judging. Those who are bereaved will have intense feelings that are likely to include anger, sadness, fear and guilt. You cannot change this or take their pain away but you can help them by being there, caring and listening.

Be prepared for any and all reactions. **Be particularly aware** of the needs of children.

Remember that there are some very important things that people want to know.

Offer to find out about resources and information they may assist them in their grieving. Support them in accessing specialist care if they need more help or have no 'good' days.

Keep in touch on a regular basis. Don't abandon those mourning this loss. There may be times when your offers of help are refused. Try again later. If you feel awkward because you don't know what to do or say, be honest – "I don't know what to say...is there anything I can do?"

Offer to do something practical such as making a meal, paying bills or doing the shopping or washing.

Send a note. If you don't know what to say, you can just write 'thinking of you'. Share good memories of the person who died and what they meant to you.

Give people bereaved by suicide time to begin their healing process. Don't expect that they will be 'over it' in a few weeks or months. It can take many months or years to find a way to live with the loss. Try to remember birthdays and other special days. Be aware that these may be particularly difficult times.

Be kind to yourself. It can be draining to share another's loss. You may also be affected by this loss and have your own grief to deal with. Take time to do some special things for yourself.