

# **Supporting Youth in Grief after a Suicide or Traumatic Loss; *Opening up the Conversation***

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## **All deaths are not the same**

We all will face loss in our lives; repeatedly and from a range of causes. Loss happens, grief follows. Grief is the natural process after a loss of any kind. For children, grief from the loss of a living thing often begins with the loss of a beloved pet. The grief is real, it is immediate and the child reacts from the hurt; the pain of the loss. In their distress they need support as they seek to understand why this has happened and to understand the feelings.

The human loss first experienced may be the death of a grandparent or great grandparent, passing at the end of a well-lived life. This is deeply felt; the seemingly sudden removal of well-loved and stable figure in their life. These are losses that a parent expects to happen, even if the loss is dreaded and the conversation and the support of the child is challenging. No parent wants to see their child in distress.

If the death is sudden, unexpected and traumatic, there is shock and distress and a range of questions needing answers in order to understand what happened and why. There is also no opportunity to say good-bye or to prepare for the loss. The grief emotions are stronger and the range of feelings more complicated. This is the grief after a sudden accident or a traumatic unexpected medical event. Healing from a sudden unexpected loss takes more time.

If the death is sudden, unexpected, and self-inflicted; a suicide or an overdose death, then added to the shock and the emotional pain, the strong emotional reactions and the questions about why, we must add the torment of guilt and questions about what might have been done to prevent the tragedy. The stigma surrounding suicide can make the grief even more difficult to talk about and to work through; it is a hard loss to be open about. Your child will take their cues from you; your comfort in talking about the loss will help them to let their feelings out.

The good news is parents can help children process their grief. No one knows your children better than you. The challenging news is that grief is complicated, and the grief reaction to suicide or other unexpected traumatic death, even more so. And often, the parent is also grieving the loss.

It's not uncommon for parents and care givers to feel uncomfortable about talking to their child about a traumatic death or suicide loss. The death of a peer or a close family member by suicide could be challenging for your child to process because of the nature of suicide. Some things to consider as you speak with your child or children about a suicide or other traumatic loss:

- You may grapple with the question of whether or not to even tell your children about the loss. One question to ask yourself is, “If I do not tell them, who will?” And to understand that if they learn of the loss from another, you have lost the ability to control the story and also, you may lose some of their trust. Kids need to know the truth, delivered in an age-appropriate manner.
- Choose the time and setting to allow for both a range of emotions and the time needed to process both emotions and questions. This is a conversation best done face-to-face and not over the phone or through social media. Consider a time when you have several unstructured hours if needed. An evening when nothing is planned or a weekend day in the morning.
- Let your child know you will be having a serious conversation and assure them that they are in no way, in trouble.
- If you are informing them of the loss, try to appreciate what the person meant to them; if in doubt, ask them. If you are supporting them about a loss they are already aware of, ask what the loss of this person means to them; make no assumptions.
- Give them time to hear, to feel, to react, and to process their reactions and their many questions. Do not be surprised if a teen or older child needs to step away and to feel their feelings alone before returning with a fresh wave of questions and responses.
- Remain aware of your own range of emotions, thoughts and reactions in response to this loss. Consider owning those reactions with your children.
  - You are a powerful model for appropriate reactions. Especially for adolescent children, let them know what you are feeling and the conflicts you feel. Consider and acknowledge your reaction as a parent yourself.
  - While you may be experiencing an array of emotions associated with grief, the number one thing is to be honest, try not to sugarcoat or hide it.
- Use language and terms accessible to the age and emotional maturity of your child and recognize the differences in stages of maturation for multiple children.
- Share the known facts without too much detail to begin with. Keep it simple and descriptive. Use clear language (eg. It looks like it was a suicide or they ended their life) rather than a vague euphemism (it was an unexpected death or they died of a broken heart).
- Be prepared for a range of responses and a range of feelings. Almost all feelings are within the expected range in suicide grief; they are legitimate feelings, let your kids feel sad, feel

angry, feel bewildered and do not understand.... They may seek someone or something to blame; gently deflect it.

### **Common Grief Reactions in children and teens**

- A youth's emotional reaction can range from hysteria to numbness. If they appear numb or unresponsive, know that it may be from initial shock and can be a way to allow their psyche time to accept what has happened. The feelings often come out over time, and as their psyche allows them to integrate this deeply traumatic event. Some typical and expected reactions might include:
  - Anger, tears, fear, and often, confusion. These are BIG emotions.
  - Disturbed sleep or even regressed behavior around sleep, including fear of sleeping alone.
  - Intrusive thoughts or images of the person and/or the death. Especially if they know about the means used, it can be an image difficult to get out of their head.
  - Heightened concern or fears about the safety of others in their life, including their parents or siblings.
- Reassure the child that whatever emotions they feel are OK and right. These can feel scary. They may need repeated reassurance.
- As a youth works through their response to a suicide or other traumatic death, they often wonder if there is anything they missed that might have helped to prevent the loss. They will seek to understand what was happening for the person in the time leading up to the death. Feelings of guilt are common and sometimes, seeking someone else to blame; work to normalize these responses and help the youth come to understand what they reasonably could have known and done.
- Be prepared to listen more than talk. Ask them what their understanding is of the death and allow them time to share that with you without needing to quickly rescue them from their feelings. As a caring parent, this will feel difficult.
- Be prepared for many many questions as they try to understand what happened and that this level of tragic death is even possible, especially involving someone they know and love. You will have some answers, and you will find yourself faced with questions that have no clear answer. Be ready to say, "I do not know". Share with them the struggle of trying to understand the enormity of this loss. We all seek to make sense of a traumatic loss by trying to answer "why".
  - Acknowledge that sometimes people can make poor choices when they feel lost and cannot see a path out of their distress. They needed help and did not know how to ask for it. Their thinking and ability to find other solutions was not working. They

could see no way out of their pain and their hopelessness. (These messages will change depending on the age of the youth.)

- Our brains seek to make sense of big events by developing a whole story with a beginning, a middle and an end. Suicide or another traumatic death cuts the story off abruptly, and we may not have the answers that complete the story and help to make sense of the loss. A child can slip into blame, self-blame or guilt. Gently reassure them that this loss is not their fault in any way, and repeat that as needed.
- Working through grief takes lots of energy; expect your child to be tired, fatigued and distracted. They may need more sleep. They will need more hugs, you too.
- Their reactions, their questions and their need to understand will come in waves over time (as it has in you as an adult). The grief after a significant loss will take a long time and come back up at future developmental stages as they age.
- The strength of the emotional reaction to a loss is based on the child's emotional and actual closeness to the person who died or to the actual death. A strong reaction can also come for someone who, in any way identifies with the person who died or to their situation. An example would be a suicide that comes after a relationship breakup, even if your youth was not involved, but had been through a difficult break-up.

For adolescent or young adult children, depending on your current relationship with them, they may feel uncomfortable processing a significant traumatic loss with you. They may seek to protect you from their strong reactions. If not you, then who? If they seem deeply affected by the death, let the youth know that Not talking about this loss is Not an option, but offer several alternatives of people who are acceptable and accessible to you and to your child (another relative, a connected counselor, or school counselor, a pastor, or mentor...).

A suicide loss of someone close in their life or of a peer can leave a young person feeling shaken and that their world is less safe. It can shake the foundation of invincibility for an adolescent. Reassure them that they will always have support at home, and that you will help them work through this difficult time.

It's also possible, and even likely, that parents and your children are experiencing different emotions. Make no assumptions about what your child will feel or how they will react. They will also be looking to you to help guide what is appropriate and what is "normal".

There is no specific timeline for grief and the grief reaction, but know that a complex and traumatic loss takes a long time to process, to accept and to heal. Think of their grief as the

layers of an onion; their feelings, their reactions and their questions will come up in waves over time. Allow for time, and expect questions and feeling to keep bubbling up. It's important that parents and children keep a dialogue open.

It's possible that a youth might feel fine in the first few days, but as time progresses, routines may "make the loss real." Sometimes these conversations about grief may "feel yucky," but parents can be role models with how to deal with that grief.

It's also possible that this incident could bring up memories from other deaths or losses the child might be aware of or has experienced. Each person will process grief differently and always at their own timeline. *Grief is a process, not an event.*

**Handling the questions or comments of others:** Help your youth to understand that their grief is unique and their own. Prepare them to handle the questions and comments of others who may learn of the loss.

- Assure them that they can choose when and who to talk with about what happened and their resulting grief. It is their right and their choice about when to discuss their loss. Know that if the questions come from an adult, it will be harder for the child to set limits.
- Prepare them for the possible questions and statements from others; consider role-playing situations that might arise. Offer them phrases or words to use when:
  - An adult or a peer who asks for details about the death or the cause of death,
  - A peer makes hurtful comments about the loss,
  - Someone pressures them to talk about the loss when they are not ready.
  - When their feelings make normal functioning difficult, and they need a break.

## **Sometimes Help is Needed**

An intrusive and powerful emotions of grief should begin to lessen over time, usually over a month or so. If not, there are times it makes sense to ask for extra help for your child:

- Parents should keep an eye out for red flags in their children's behavior; behavior changes that concern you as a caregiver and do not relent over time. Look at your children and their behavior through the "whole picture."
  - One example of this could be a child withdrawing, isolating, or otherwise not engaging in activities they typically like doing.

- Another example could be a child who becomes more reactive and hyper-anxious, or a teen who begins to act out with high risk behaviors.
- Look also for signs of significant anxiety or depression.
- If you notice a behavior that's uncommon for your child and concerns you, it might be a good time to seek help. If your child already gets help for mental health, let their counselor know what has happened in their life and that they may need some additional support. Consider seeking out a counselor as needed, and look for a professional who specializes in grief or who is comfortable working with a child in grief. Consider letting their school counselor and/or PCP know about the complex loss in their life.

Remember to take care of yourself as you care for your youth. Model the same good self care you urge them to practice. A traumatic loss is a form of trauma, and there is a natural reaction in our bodies and in our psyche. Self care after a traumatic loss helps us all to come back to balance. Self care includes:

- Ensure adequate sleep to help your body and your emotions heal.
- Eat regular and healthy meals; a little binging on carbs. and sweets is normal,
- Avoid escaping into alcohol or other substances
- Get regular exercise. Walk, run, yoga, cardio...
- Seek light and humorous distracting shows or movies
- Acknowledge your feelings and find someone to share them with
- If you feel a need to cry, find a safe place for your tears
- Watch for the red flags in yourself and if needed, seek support.

## **Resources:**

***Maine Crisis Line: Call or Text 1-888-568-1112*** Available 24/7 if you are concerned about safety or possible significant mental health issues.

***A guide to Children's Grief, Loss and Healing:*** With tips on addressing grief by a child's age.

<https://www.everystep.org/filesimages/Grief%20and%20Loss/ATP%20Childrens%20Guide%20to%20Grief.pdf>

***When Someone Dies: A Child-Caregiver Activity Book*** from the National Alliance for Grieving Children. An excellent activity book for parent and child. <https://childrengrieve.org/resources/nagc-activity-book> . Available for order.

***GriefTalk: Talking to a Child or Teen to Let Them Know Someone Has Died*** from the National Alliance for Grieving Children. A free PDF guide for caregivers. <https://indd.adobe.com/view/ee744984-5445-4dd5-a0d3-a01da6e18b08>