Coping with Loss – Grieving – What do I say?

American Psychology Association (APA)

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How to cope when a friend or loved one dies by suicide

Accept your emotions. You might expect to feel grief and despair, but other common feelings include shock, denial, guilt, shame, anger, confusion, anxiety, loneliness, and even, in some cases, relief. Not necessary in order either. Sometimes, we jump from one emotion to another, then feel numb. This is normal and can vary throughout the healing process.

Don't worry about what you "should" feel or do. There's no standard timeline for grieving and no single right way to cope. Focus on what you need and accept that others' paths might be different from yours.

Care for yourself. Do your best to get enough sleep and eat regular, healthy meals. Taking care of your physical self can improve your mood and give you the strength to cope. It is normal for some to self-medicate. *Trust your instincts, question your habits*.

Draw on existing support systems. Accept help from those who have been supportive in the past, including your family, or members of your community.

Talk to someone. There is often a stigma around suicide. Many survivors suffer in silence. Speaking about your feelings can help.

Join a group. Support groups can help you process your emotions alongside others who are experiencing similar feelings. People who don't think of themselves as support group types are often surprised by how helpful such groups can be.

Talk to a professional. Psychologists and other mental health professionals can help you express and manage your feelings and find healthy coping tools. Oftentimes, this is more helpful than attempting to talk to or take care of family members and friends who may be too entrenched in coping themselves. It is okay to say, "This isn't helpful – but thank you."

Talking to children and teens about death by suicide: Parents, teachers, school administrators, and other adults in a child's life often feel unprepared to help a young person cope with a death by suicide. These strategies can help you foster open dialogue and offer support. I find these good strategies for adults as well.

Deal with your own feelings first. Pause to reflect on and manage your own emotions so you can speak calmly to the child, children or anyone else in your life.

Be honest. Don't dwell on details of the act itself, but don't hide the truth. Use age-appropriate language to discuss the death with children.

Validate feelings. Help the child put names to her emotions: "It sounds like you're angry," or "I hear you blaming yourself, but this is not your fault." Acknowledge and normalize the feelings. Share your own feelings, too, sharing that while each person's feelings are different, it's okay to experience a range of emotions.

Avoid rumors. Don't gossip or speculate about the reasons for the suicide. Instead, emphasize that the person who died was struggling and thinking differently.

Tailor your support. Everyone grieves at his or her own pace and in his or her own way. Some people might need privacy as they work through their feelings. Respect their privacy but check in regularly to let them know they don't have to grieve alone. Children might want someone to talk to more often. Still others prefer to process their feelings through art, music or pet assisted therapy. Ask the child how they'd like you to help. Let them know it's okay to just be together.

Extend the conversation. Use this opportunity to reach out to others who might be suffering. Ask children: How can you and your peers help support each other? Who else can you reach out to for help? What can you do if you're struggling with difficult emotions?

Tips for schools

Handle the announcement with care. Schools should not report the cause of a death as suicide if the information hasn't been released by the family or reported in the media. When discussing a student's death by suicide, avoid making announcements over the public address system. It's helpful if teachers read the same announcement to each classroom, so that students know everyone is getting the same information.

Identify students who need more support. These can include friends of a student who died by suicide, those who were in clubs or on teams with the deceased, and those who are dealing with life stressors like the stressors experienced by the deceased. Less obviously, peers who had unfriendly relationships with the deceased—including those who teased or bullied the deceased or were bullied by the deceased. These students may also have complicated feelings of guilt and regret that require extra support.

Minimize positive attention. Dedicating special events to the deceased can make him or her seem like a celebrity. Vulnerable children might see such attention and think suicide is a way to be noticed. Instead of memorials, consider acknowledging the death through events such as suicide awareness walks, campaigns like planting trees.

Choose words carefully. To protect peers who may also have suicidal thoughts, avoid phrases such as "S/He's no longer suffering," or "S/He's in a better place." Instead, focus on

positive aspects of the person's life. Avoid the term "committed suicide," and instead use "died by suicide."

Keep the lines of communication open. Help students identify adults they can trust and other resources they can draw on if they struggle with sadness or with their own suicidal feelings. Make sure students know where they can turn for help, not only after this loss, but in the months and years to come.

Choosing to talk about loss despite any uncertainty, helplessness, or discomfort you may feel is an act of love. While every loss is different and there are no lines of dialogue that will apply to everyone, suicide bereavement counselors do have some recommendations for what to say in this awful circumstance.

The following phrases may offer comfort:

1. I'm sorry for your loss.

Suffering from a loss colored with confusion and stress can fog our brains and tie our tongues in knots. "Did I just say that?" OOPS! Choosing a safe sentiment to express when you are shocked, choked up and honestly don't know what to say is not easy. Losing a loved one to suicide can be quite different from other kinds of death.

It is NOT helpful to treat suicide as if it's weird, different or special. Clinical psychologist and grief counselor Jack Jordan, Ph.D. shares, "Treat the individual as you would treat anybody you care about who is grieving and in pain".

Offer your condolences. Acknowledge that something tragic happened.

2. Listen. How can I help? Keep it simple, calm and gentle.

People need to feel safe when sharing tragic and personal events. Suicide is a double whammy. What could I (we) have done? Who knows? Use the deceased person's name.

3. Feeling safe while sharing. Do you want to talk about it?

Many myths about suicide persist, like that it's a "selfish" act that needs to be hidden. Survivors of suicide loss internalize this stigma. People wonder, "What could I have done?

4. Support Systems

This doesn't need to be a group or a human. Oftentimes, one person can make a difference. Walking the dog and sharing it with a stranger in a park can help. Genuinely engaging with someone who isn't attempting to cure the grief matters. "People who have lost someone to suicide are often looking for cues from the people around them," Dr. Jordan explains. Instead of assuming your friend knows they can talk to you, clarify it.

5. Boundaries: t's OK if you don't want to talk about this now. I'm here.

Whether someone is preoccupied with what's on their plate or still in shock, they might not be ready to talk yet. We don't always have time to grieve right away. We need a moment to wrap our heads around what happened. Respect their boundaries and your own.

We all have stories that help us navigate through tragedy. Use them for yourself – calmly and quietly. Do not transfer "your story" onto others. Try not to minimize theirs either.

6. Can I make dinner, do the laundry, walk the dog, any errands I can do for you?

Simple actions are powerful. Taking something off their to-do list can be invaluable.

As time goes by, it's helpful to be proactive instead of just saying, "I'm here if you need anything". This puts the onus *of asking for help* on the person who is grieving. ASK if they need support or to make a list, letting them know your time frames and what you and can't do. Whatever you can do to make their life a tiny bit easier while not stressing yourself out either.

When words are inadequate, actions can be a symbol of nurturing and love. Many prefer time to process alone, but not to be lonely. Honor this. The only way to find out is to ASK.

7. I remember that time when (reflecting)

Take a deep nose-to-navel breath. Wait. Usually, what grieving people want to do, especially after they get past the initial shock, is to remember the person's life (reflection) —not just their death. Grieving is a journey. Timing essential. It can be a relief to get an invitation to express their emotions when the timing is okay openly and safely. Ask!

Finding help

If you or anyone you know is grieving a death by suicide, a psychologist or grief counselor can help you express and manage your feelings and find healthy ways to cope. Clinical professionals are trained to identify mental, emotional, and behavioral problems or challenges and find solutions for managing them.

To find a licensed psychologist in your area:

American Psychology Association

American Counseling Association