

Conversations Matter to those bereaved by suicide

I know someone whose family member or friend has died by suicide: What do I say? What do I do?

When a suicide occurs, it can have a devastating effect on family members, friends and others who knew the person. You might not know what to say or what to do when this happens.

While everyone is different, and will grieve differently, there are some things you can do and say to support someone you know who is bereaved by suicide.

You might think it is best to stay away for fear of saying the wrong thing or making the situation worse. The silence of other people though can reinforce the isolation, stigma and shame they may already be feeling.

You may be thinking...

"I feel so sorry for them"

"I will give them some space"

"I don't want to make it worse"

"I feel awkward, useless, unprepared ..."

They may be thinking...

"They are avoiding me"

"No one understands"

"They think I am to blame"

"I feel numb, lost, guilty, sad, angry, alone..."

This resource provides some basic tips for talking to someone who may have lost a family member, friend or colleague to suicide. If you need further advice or support, you can contact the services listed at the end of this factsheet.

Things to remember:

- ✓ It is better to reach out than avoid the person
- ✓ Be prepared for different responses
- ✓ Listen without judging
- ✓ Let them explore their feelings
- ✓ Allow open conversation
- ✓ Avoid judgemental language
- ✓ Encourage them to seek help
- ✓ Keep in touch
- ✓ Look after yourself
- ✓ Learn about other supports and services that are available

It is better to reach out than avoid the person

It can be hard for friends and family members to reach out to those bereaved by suicide, but the silence of others can reinforce the stigma and shame the person may already be feeling.

- If you are afraid of saying the wrong thing, show concern and explain that you do not know what to say rather than avoid the person altogether.

✓ For example:

“I can’t imagine what you’re going through. I don’t really know what to say, but I’m here for you if you need someone to listen.”

- It is usually best to make contact in person – but even sending a private message online or a text could be enough to let the person know you are thinking of them.

✓ For example:

“I just wanted you to know I’m thinking about you and I’m here for you if you need anything or want to talk.”

- There may be times when your offers to talk or to help are refused. Rather than cutting off contact, try again later.
- Be careful about contacting someone in a public forum (e.g. a post on their Facebook page) until you know how the person feels about others knowing of the death.

Be prepared for different responses

People are different, so the way they grieve and communicate will also be different.

- The person may be experiencing, shock, numbness and disbelief that may make it hard for them to talk with you.
- Some people may deal with their grief by focusing on practical matters – or ‘getting jobs done.’
- Others may be more likely to express their loss through emotions and sharing their feelings.
- People’s beliefs, their gender, age or culture may influence what they say and how they express themselves.

Regardless of how the person responds to you, it is likely that they are experiencing intense grief.

While many of us will know what it is like to experience the death of a loved one, the grief associated with suicide is often described as ‘different’.

The experience is not the same for everybody, but people bereaved by suicide may experience:

- Emotional distress
- Physical health problems and an inability to sleep
- Thoughts of guilt, shame, anger and blame
- Difficulty in family relationships
- Loneliness and a sense of isolation
- Fear of social stigma and perceived judgment
- A need to make sense of the death
- Difficulty talking about their experience.

Listen without judging

You may not be able to change the way the person is feeling, but you can assist by listening and just being there.

- Allow the person to talk freely and openly and listen without judging, without offering advice or trying to gloss over their feelings with clichés.

✓ Respond in a way that reflects what they are saying:

e.g. *"This must be hard for you."*

✗ Avoid statements that might minimise their feelings:

e.g. *"I know how you feel."*

✗ Avoid using clichés:

e.g. *"Life goes on."*

"Time heals all wounds."

- Accept that the person may not say much at all, or may respond in a way that does not make sense.
- Be ready to hear the same story many times. The person may need to hear out loud what is going on inside their head.
- Remember that non-verbal communication (e.g. your gestures and tone of voice) can be really important in making the person feel at ease.

Let them explore their feelings

It is normal for a person bereaved by suicide to experience feelings of confusion, guilt, blame and anger.

- It is natural for loved ones to think about things the person said or did before they took their life. Everything can feel painfully obvious when they reflect back and remember some of the situations that occurred.

Questions like 'what if?' and 'why?' can feel endless.

- Do not stop them from talking about their feelings but stay away from trying to give reasons as to why it happened.
- Do not reinforce feelings of guilt and blame by asking too many questions about the person's behaviour prior to their death or possible warning signs that may have been missed.

Suicide is usually a very complex and complicated response to a range of issues. Changes in behaviour can happen very gradually and sometimes the person can go to great lengths to cover up their plans.

Tips for non-verbal communication

- ✓ Make yourself comfortable but ensure you look interested in what the other person is saying
- ✓ Maintain eye contact. Where this is not culturally appropriate or makes the person uncomfortable, sit alongside them
- ✓ Show you are listening – e.g. by nodding.

Allow open communication

Be open to talking freely about the person who died.

- Feel free to share stories about the person who died and what they meant to others.
- Do not change the subject when they talk about the person who died and respond honestly to questions asked by your family member or friend.
- While suicide should not be kept secret, it is up to the family and friends to decide what they want to tell people and when to do so.
- Assume that the person you are talking to would prefer your conversation to be confidential and do not discuss details of the death with others without checking first.

Avoid judgemental language

Choose words that are not judgemental.

X Avoid phrases like:

“She took the easy way out”

“He was selfish”

- Try not to use language that glamorises suicide or makes it sound like a good outcome.

X Avoid phrases like:

“He was too good for this world”

“She is happy now”

Encourage them to seek help

Encourage the person to seek help and support from others close to them, bereavement support services or health professionals.

- Sometimes specialist bereavement services (what professionals call ‘postvention’ services) will be available to family and friends affected by the suicide of a loved one.
- Talking to your doctor, other health professional or accessing a telephone or online counselling service can be a good start.
- Over time, the person may benefit from sharing their experiences with others who have been through the same thing via a bereavement support group.

Keep in touch

Keep in touch and offer to be someone they can talk to when they need it, or ask if they have someone else they can trust to talk to.

- Give them time to come to terms with the death. Do not expect they will be ‘over it’ in a set timeframe.
- Bear in mind that people who have lost someone to suicide are themselves more vulnerable to problems with their mental health, including suicidal behaviour, so they will need access to ongoing support.
- REMEMBER that anniversaries, birthdays and other special days may be difficult so the person may need support and understanding well into the future.

Look after yourself

Do not be afraid of showing your own emotions.

- Be kind to yourself. Sharing another person's loss can be draining. You may be affected by it and need to speak with someone or access support services yourself.
- Make sure you monitor your own response and get help if you need it.

Learn about other services and supports

This resource is a basic introduction to what you can say or do if you know someone who is bereaved by suicide. There are a range of other services and resources that can assist.

Take a look at the links in the column opposite, or on the **Conversations Matter** website, for further information - conversationsmatter.com.au

Services and supports

Lifeline

24-hour national telephone crisis counselling service
13 11 14

Online counselling service, further information and service finder – www.lifeline.org.au

Suicide Call Back Service

24-hour national telephone counselling service for people 18 years and over who are suicidal or bereaved by suicide
1300 659 467

Online counselling service, grief and loss program and resources about bereavement

www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au

StandBy - Support after Suicide

A 24-hour coordinated community response service for families, friends and communities who have been bereaved through suicide - www.standbysupport.com.au

Support After Suicide

Information and resources and group support for those bereaved by suicide – www.supportaftersuicide.org.au

Useful resources

Care and Support Pack for Family and Friends Bereaved by Suicide (NSW) – Resource

www.health.nsw.gov.au/pubs/2007/care_support_pack.html

Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement

The largest provider of grief and bereavement education in Australia – www.grief.org.au

For a more comprehensive list of links refer to the 'Supporting Information' section at:

www.conversationsmatter.com.au



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