

Support After Suicide

How to Support Someone Who Is Grieving

Knowing how to support someone after a death is difficult, and suicide loss can make this even more challenging because of the shock and stigma. However, having support is critical for people to be able to cope so we hope that some of these tips will help you to feel comfortable reaching out.

Reach out and stay connected. Families often feel stigmatized after a suicide and when the people who are part of their support system avoid reaching out, they can end up feeling judged, blamed and can become isolated. So reach out even if you are not sure what to say. Let them know you are thinking of them and offer support. Those who have lost a loved one will likely be grateful for your support and compassion even if it is awkward.

Check in with your own stuff first. We invite you to be aware of what thoughts, beliefs, biases or discomfort you bring to a suicide loss. Whether these are ideas or assumptions related to suicide or mental health in general, this can influence how you provide support in good ways but can also be a barrier to being compassionate and present. The way that you are making meaning of the suicide may not be the way that the bereaved is experiencing the loss. Stay open and receptive to what the person you are supporting needs in that moment.

Don't just say something to say something. Avoid using assurances that are well meaning but may not be meaningful for those bereaved such as "at least he's no longer suffering" or "everything will be okay." Everything is likely not okay for them and what they need is acknowledgement as they express their grief and pain.

Don't ask for an explanation. You are there to support and listen. People bereaved by suicide can feel like they are being grilled. Avoid asking questions like, "Did they leave a note? Did you see this coming?" The bereaved will be going through their own process of searching for answers and asking "why" but your role is to provide support and listen.

Remember their life. In the shock of a suicide loss, a helpful reminder is to remember that the suicide is not the most important thing about the person who died. Share memories and stories; use the person's name "I always really appreciated how Susan could make us all laugh" or "I remember how you would tell me about how much Bob loved fishing." Also, be aware, sometimes suicide comes at the end of a longer struggle with mental or physical illness, and the family may want to recognize the ongoing illness as the true cause of death and again your role is to support and listen.

We are here for you. You are not alone.

Here4Hope

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Canadian Mental
Health Association
Waterloo Wellington
Mental health for all

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Acknowledge uncertainty and be as comfortable as you can with it. There is a lot of uncertainty in a suicide loss for those bereaved as well as for you as a supporter. It is okay to acknowledge that you are not sure how they feel or what you can do to help. You are just being honest. Follow the lead of the bereaved, especially around sensitive topics. Don't be afraid to ask them, "would you like to talk more about that?" Or "would it be helpful to talk about that?" If you are able to provide a listening ear, find a way to stay grounded and present while listen with compassion. However, don't ask if you really don't feel you can deal with the details.

Help with the practical things. If you have had this experience of a supporter who jump in and help with the practical things, you will know how appreciated it can be. Offer to watch children, get groceries, walk the dog or cut the grass. Sometimes this is the best way to manage your own discomfort around the loss that has happened and not being sure what to say or do. Ask directly, "What can I do to help?" or "Can I go and pick up those groceries?"

Be there for the long haul. After the initial shock and then the funeral, memorial or celebration of life, those bereaved often feel at a loss. Grief is generally recognized as a difficult experience but then there is this expectation that it is also something that we "get over", "find closure" from and "move on." This often means that once the bereaved are back at work or school and socializing once again, they receive messages that they shouldn't talk about their grief. However, suicide loss and the grief that follows is a long slow process. Acknowledgement can go a long way and it is okay and even important to continue to check in and ask those bereaved how they are coping with the loss. Be ready to listen and not feel the need to provide solutions and, alternatively, respect if they don't want to talk. To be a compassionate supporter, you must be willing to hear the same stories, over and over. Another way to show that you care is to acknowledge special occasions or holidays that can leave the bereaved with a void. Call or send a card to let them know that you are thinking of them.

Be mindful of what you share with others in general and through social media. Before communicating with others, take a mindful moment to reflect on dignity, privacy, respect, and safety. Whether talking with others, texting or posting on social media, conversations and language really matter for the bereaved, for individuals impacted and for those who may be at risk of suicidal behaviours. Be a part of maintaining the dignity of the person who has died and honour their life while respecting the family's needs for privacy. Avoid details that have the potential to cause a lot of distress and can contribute to risk of suicide.

Think about whether it is your story to tell and check in with the bereaved before you share. Just ask, is it okay if I share the news with...other friends, work colleagues etc.

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