

Helping a Friend Who Has Lost a Loved One to Suicide

It is often hard to know what to say to a friend who has lost a loved one to suicide. Though you cannot make the pain go away, your support can be key to helping your friend through this difficult loss. There are many ways to help.

Listed below are a few strategies that may be useful when supporting your friend:

What to Say

Often, what a grieving person needs most is a willing friend who can be there. For a friend, this often means being able to sit with the grieving person and listen to his/her feelings in a nonjudgmental way, without trying to problem-solve. Though it can be awkward or uncomfortable when you don't know what to say, in most cases what is needed is just a pair of ears that is willing to hear a friend's story. Below are some strategies for talking with a friend:

- **Acknowledge the situation.** Talking directly can be important; this can show that you are not afraid to have a real conversation about the loss they have experienced.
Example: "I heard that _____ died by suicide." Using the word "suicide" can be scary, but showing that you are able to talk more openly about what happened can be a way of showing that you are willing to discuss the full extent of the loss. Always make sure you choose an appropriate time and place to have a conversation like this, so your friend can feel safe talking to you about their loss.
- **Express your concern.** Show your friend that you are aware that this has affected them and that you are there when they need help. Example: "I'm sorry to hear that this happened. I am here when you need me."
- **Reflect on their emotions.** One way of demonstrating to your friend that you are able to hear their story is by reflecting back to them what they are saying. Ex: "You're sad and confused about why this happened."
- **Be genuine in your communication, and don't hide your feelings.** It is OK to show that you are also saddened by the loss and that you do not have all the answers.
Example: "I'm not sure what to say, but I want you to know I care."
- **Offer your support.** Sometimes the most powerful thing you can do for someone is just letting them know that you are there for them when they need you. Example: "I want you to know I'm here for you. Tell me what I can do."
- **Ask how he or she feels.** Don't assume you know how the bereaved person feels on any given day. Sometimes just asking a friend how they feel allows the opportunity for your friend to express their feelings.

LISTEN: Be an active listener. Though it can be difficult to know what to say to your friend, being able to listen effectively is most important. **Often finding the right words is less important than letting your friend express him/herself and share with you the nature of the loss.** It's not unusual for well-meaning people to avoid talking about suicide or mentioning the deceased person, thinking this is helping. However, the grieving person often needs to feel that others are willing to acknowledge the truth of the situation.

Some strategies to be an active listener include:

- **Accept and acknowledge all feelings.** Let the grieving person know that it's OK to cry in front of you, to become angry, or to break down. Don't try to reason with someone over how s/he should or shouldn't feel. Your friend should feel free to express feelings knowing that you are willing to listen without judgment, argument, or criticism.
- **Be willing to sit in silence.** It's not your job to get your friend to start talking. Instead, be willing to be present and show you are ready to listen when s/he is ready to speak. If you can't think of something to say, you can show your support through eye contact or a hug.
- **Let your friend talk about the suicide.** Your friend may need to tell the story over and over again, sometimes in great detail. Be patient. Repeating the story is a way of processing and accepting the death. With each retelling, the pain lessens.
- **Offer comfort without minimizing the loss.** Let your friend know that what he or she is feeling is OK. If you've gone through a similar loss, share your own experience, if you think it would help. However, don't give unsolicited advice, claim to "know" what the person is feeling, or compare your grief to his or hers.

Comments to avoid when comforting a friend:

- "I know how you feel." We can never know how another may feel. Instead, it may be more helpful to ask your friend how he or she feels.
- "Look at what you have to be thankful for." Your friend knows s/he has things to be thankful for, but part of grieving is being able to experience the feelings of sadness and loss.
- "They are in a better place now." Your friend may or may not share your religious beliefs. It's best to keep your personal spiritual beliefs to yourself unless asked.
- "This is behind you; it's time to get on with your life." Moving on is easier said than done. Grief has a mind of its own and works at its own pace. Giving room to grieve is important in the recovery process.
- Saying, "You should..." or "You will..." Advice-giving, especially when unsolicited, is rarely helpful. Instead, you could begin your comments with: "Have you thought about..."

WATCH FOR WARNING SIGNS:

It is not uncommon for a grieving person to feel depressed, confused, angry, or disconnected from others. If the intensity of these emotions does not ease in time, professional mental health resources can help. Sometimes someone who has experienced a loss by suicide will have suicidal thoughts him/herself. It is important to know the warning signs of suicide and, should you feel concerned, to ask your friend directly about thoughts of suicide.

If you notice any of the following warning signs after the initial loss, especially if they continue for more than two months, encourage your friend to seek professional help.

- Extreme focus on the death
- Talking about feeling the need to escape the pain
- Persistent bitterness, anger, or guilt
- Difficulty making it to class and declining grades
- A lack of concern for his/her personal welfare
- Neglecting personal hygiene
- Increase in alcohol or drug use
- Inability to enjoy life
- Withdrawal from others
- Constant feelings of hopelessness
- Talking about dying or attempting suicide

It can be hard to know how to bring up your concerns with your friend. If you're worried about being perceived as invasive, use the following approach. Instead of telling your friend what to do, try stating your own feelings: "I am worried that you aren't sleeping. There are resources and support services in the community that can help you." Visit www.oyenfcss.ca for a comprehensive list of available local and regional support services.

If you continue to be concerned about your friend in distress, contact the Distress Center at: 1800-784-2433

If a friend is considering suicide, get professional help right away. If s/he is in a life-threatening emergency, or if you're concerned that a friend may act soon on his/her suicide plan, call 911.

Local Resources for Emotional Support

Another helpful way to support a friend is to suggest resources for counseling and suicide survivor support group resources. Sometimes it can be helpful for survivors of suicide to connect to others who have experienced the same type of loss as they have. As a friend, you may also need additional support. The following emotional support resources are available to help you and your friend.

- REAL Project: 664-3733 (ext. 3014) or Jolene.haag@prrd.ab.ca
- Family School Liaison Worker: Marie Pedersen- 664-0230
- Oyen FCSS: 664-2255
- AHS Mental Health Therapist: 403-529-3500
- Kindersley West Central Crisis Centre: 306-463-6655
- Ministerial Association: 403-664-9266

Remember:

- Grief after losing someone to suicide can feel like a rollercoaster, full of intense ups and downs and everything in between.
- There are healthy ways to cope loss.
- Resources are available in the community to help your friend's mental health and emotional needs. Encourage your friend to reach out to other friends, family, and supportive others when they want to talk or need distraction.
- If the intensity of your friend's grief does not ease in time, encourage him/her to seek professional help. People will never "get over" their loss. But over time they can begin to heal.