

STAGES OF GRIEF

GRIEF OCCURS WHEN SOMEONE CLOSE TO US PASSES AWAY OR WE EXPERIENCE ANY KIND OF LOSS.



DENIAL

It is really hard for you to imagine that this person is really gone. You find it hard to believe that it's true.

ANGER

You start to feel angry because this person is not in your life anymore. You may feel angry toward them or others.

BARGAINING

You try to figure out if there's anything that you can do or change that could make this person come back.

DEPRESSION

You feel really sad because you understand that this person is gone and will not come back.

ACCEPTANCE

You understand that this person is gone, and you try to continue to get things back to normal the best that you can.



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NOW WHAT?

TIPS FOR GRIEVING TEENS



We're guessing you're here because someone in your life has died. Whether it was a parent, sibling, grandparent, close friend, boyfriend/girlfriend, or other family member, we're glad you found your way to this tip sheet.

The information here comes directly from the grieving teens we've worked with in our peer support groups, because they get it more than anyone.

Grief can get messy. When someone dies, most of us don't know what to do, how to talk about it, or even how we're supposed to feel. It's confusing and strange. It can be awkward to try to connect with other people about grief. Have you ever told someone that your person died and they give you a weird look or ask if you're joking? Not great, right?

THE LOW DOWN ON GRIEF

One thing we've learned from other teens who have had someone die is grief usually does what it wants — it doesn't follow any rules or keep to a schedule. There's no recipe and there isn't a right or wrong way to grieve. What matters most is figuring out what really helps you deal with all that comes with grief and what doesn't help at all. It's totally up to you.



ALL ABOUT CHANGES

When someone dies, your whole world can radically change. Some teens describe it as a hurricane or a tornado, taking out everything in its path. You're left to pick up the pieces and figure out what life will be like without that person. Who will you be? How will your family react? What will you remember and what will you miss? There are no expectations for how you might think and feel about the person or the loss (although people might be throwing lots of "shoulds" at you). Grief can be intense and loud or quiet and barely there. Some people aren't sure what they feel. It's all okay.

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FEELINGS AND OTHER STRANGE THINGS

While no one can ever know exactly how you feel, there are some things grieving teens seem to have in common. Sometimes your sleep gets messed up — can't fall asleep, waking up early and having weird dreams. Food might not taste the same or your stomach could feel tied up in knots. Maybe your memory isn't working as well as it used to — "How did I forget my friend's birthday? Where is my phone?!" Maybe you find yourself frustrated with people talking about their day to day dramas.

A lot of teens notice they get really worried if someone is a few minutes late or doesn't answer a text right away. You might wonder if you're grieving the right way, or if you're grieving at all because you feel numb. You could come up against feelings of guilt, fear, anger, and sometimes shame. And then there is school...a lot of grieving teens say it's rough because it's harder to concentrate or finish homework.




FRIENDS
AKA: ANYONE OUT
THERE GET IT??

Lots of teens find it's hard to relate with friends and family in the same way when they're grieving. Friends, no matter how much they care, don't always know what to do and their attempts to make you feel better might not work very well. Honestly, when you're grieving sometimes nothing feels good or right — even things you loved before the death. It can be easy to take that frustration out on the people you're closest with — maybe you're a little quicker to get irritated these days? If so, you're not alone.

SPEAKING OF GUILT—AND REGRET

We'd venture a guess that 99.9% of people grieving feel guilt or regret about something they did and said or didn't do or say. We aren't expected to be perfect in our relationships because we are human and we all say and do things that looking back we wish we hadn't. When someone dies, this very natural experience can feel extra intense because we can't apologize to the person — in person. Many teens start by acknowledging these feelings, without rushing to push them aside. Sometimes just sitting with guilt and regret can lessen their intensity.

You can also try one of the suggestions in the 10 Things section of this tip sheet. If you're feeling guilty or worried that you had something to do with the person's death, it can be helpful to talk with a trusted adult who knows the situation and can answer questions. This might be a medical professional, family friend, caregiver, teacher, coach, pastor, or someone else who will be able to say more than "don't feel that way" and "you know that's not right." The regret you feel might inspire you to act differently in the future towards people you care about.



Joaquin's mom died in a car crash after she dropped him off at school. He was late that morning and didn't have time to say, "thanks mom, I love you," so now he tries to always tell close friends and family that he loves them when he says goodbye.



FAMILY: GOING THROUGH IT TOGETHER & SEPARATELY

Grief can change a lot of things in your world, including how you and your family connect. You might be really comfortable being open about your grief with family members. You might also find talking and showing emotions with them to be more intense than with friends or even strangers. How people grieve might look different depending on their age, where they grew up, cultural expectations (maybe your parents and Tias expect you to act a certain way, but it's not how you feel), religion/spirituality, gender norms (family members expecting you to cry or not cry depending on your gender), and what your family expects or needs from you in terms of helping with chores and caring for other people. You might see families in movies or on TV shows grieving very differently than yours, and start to wonder "Are we doing it wrong?"

Remembering that various cultures, generations, families, and even neighborhoods have different ideas about the "right" way to grieve, might help with feeling okay with your own grief experience. Sometimes expectations and individual ways of grieving can create tension or misunderstandings within families and communities. It can be helpful to talk with a friend or trusted adult to get clear on what you need and even ask for help with talking to your family about those needs.



CIRCLE THE THINGS PEOPLE SAY AND DO THAT GET UNDER YOUR SKIN:

Say "I'm sorry for your loss"

Come up and hug me when we aren't even friends

Say things like "This class is killing me" "I wish my mom would die"

Say "I know how you feel...my hamster/cat/great great great grandfather died."

Ask "Aren't you over it yet?"

Write in your own _____ (it's okay if your list is longer than ours)



WHAT IF I FORGET?

As you make your way into grief, you might find yourself worrying you'll forget certain things about the person who died. Consider asking family and friends to share their memories and stories about the person. *Warning: they might cry, it's okay!* Who could you ask to find out more? Who would know what your dad was like as a teenager or where your grandmother most wanted to go on a trip? We also know that not everyone was super close to their person who died. No matter what your relationship was like, or if you didn't really have one, you can still get hit with grief.

10 THINGS TO TRY WHEN THE GRIEF TIDE ROLLS IN

1. Remember to breathe. When we get tense we tend to hold our breath or have short, shallow breaths. First, notice that you are breathing and then try slowing it down, breathing more into your belly, and exhaling a little longer than you inhale.

2. Move your body. This doesn't have to be a sport (but it can be) — take a walk, do a push up, dance, or just jump up and down.

3. Call or text a friend. Pick ones who know how to show up and listen — or will at least send you a cute animal video.

4. Write it out. Forget spelling and grammar, there are no grades in grief.

5. Get messy — draw, paint, collage. Sometimes grief doesn't have words and art can be a great way to get out the feelings that don't always make sense. It's not art class, so don't worry about making it look a certain way.

6. Make room for whatever feelings are coming up. If you try to push them away, they will probably just push back harder. Feelings change and they won't last forever. Grief has no timeline, but it really does change over time.

7. Be kind — to yourself. You know that voice that sometimes gives you a really hard time? It might sound strange, but you can talk to that criticizing voice and ask it to tone it down. "Hey, I hear you, you're worried I'm doing this wrong, but really, I'm not. I'm doing the best I can right now, but thanks for your input."

8. Be a good friend — to yourself. Experiment with telling yourself you can do this, even if you don't know what you're doing! You might be feeling emotions you've never had before or doing things for the first time and all of it is happening without the

person who died. Take a moment to acknowledge how new and different this is and tell yourself, "Even if I'm overwhelmed right now, I will figure this out." And then...

9. Ask for help. We know, this one can be really hard and scary to do. Keep it simple and remember that people usually want to help, they are just waiting to be asked.

10. Take time to celebrate whatever is going well. When you're grieving it can be hard to make space for feeling good. You might feel guilty if you find yourself laughing or having a good time. Taking a break from grief doesn't mean you love or miss the person any less.

SOS (GETTING MORE HELP)

One last (but important) thing. Grief can be really hard — and it can make other things that were already hard seem impossible. Sometimes, grieving teens need more help. If you are struggling with school, eating, or sleeping, or if you're thinking about hurting yourself or others, talking to a real human person can be one of the best ways to get help. You can start with a friend, a family member, a trusted teacher or counselor, or a crisis line such as Youthline, a peer-to-peer crisis line for teens. You can call them at 877-968-8491, text them by sending teen2teen to 839863 between 4pm and 10pm, or chat online at OregonYouthLine.org. One more option: the Crisis Text Line can be reached by texting HELLO to 741741. Whether you connect with a crisis line or a person in your life, please do reach out to someone when you're struggling — you matter, and you deserve help and support!



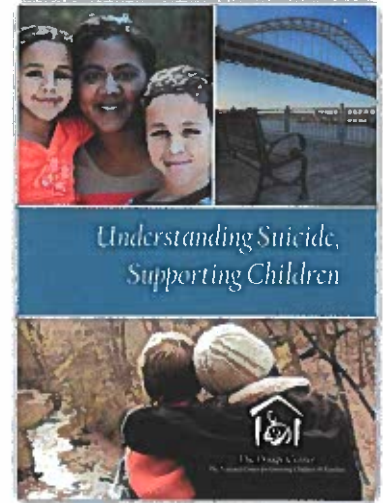
The National Grief Center
for Children & Families

Suicide Resources

Understanding Suicide, Supporting Children

The *Understanding Suicide, Supporting Children* video (24 minutes) provides a deeper look into the emotions and experiences of children, teens, and families, and offers ways to help. The video and 12-page companion guide are a must-have resource for parents, as well as therapists, counselors, teachers, school administrators, members of the clergy, and anyone wishing to understand and support children, teens, and families affected by suicide.

The video also includes bonus material on how language contributes to the stigma of suicide, helpful things to say and do for someone affected by a suicide death, and suggestions for schools. \$19.95.



After a Suicide Death: An Activity Book for Grieving Kids

In this hands-on, interactive [activity book](#), children who have had someone in their lives die of suicide can learn from other grieving kids. The activity book includes drawing activities, puzzles, stories, advice from other kids, and helpful suggestions for navigating grief after a suicide death. \$15.95.



After a Suicide Death: Ten Tips for Helping Children & Teens

This [brochure](#) provides advice for helping children and teens who are dealing with the impact of a suicide death. **Available in English & Spanish, \$1.50 (discounts for quantities over 50).**



These resources and more are available from Dougy Center at .dougy.org, or 503.775.5683.

After a Suicide Death: Ten Tips for Helping Children & Teens*

1. Tell the truth

It's important to be honest with children and teens. They don't necessarily need to know every single fact about a death, but they do need to hear truthful answers and information. Start with a short explanation of what has happened, and let their questions guide how much detail you provide.

2. Expect and allow for different emotions and feelings

Feelings and grief reactions are influenced by many factors, including the age, personality and developmental level of the child. You may see a broad spectrum of emotions in children and teens, including anger, frustration, guilt, numbness, shock, sadness, relief, confusion, shame, fear, loneliness and embarrassment.

3. Talk openly about suicide

Our society continues to stigmatize suicide, as well as the families of those left behind. It is often an uncomfortable and shocking topic that can leave people unsure of what to say. In light of this challenge, it is critical that kids have safe places where they can talk openly about the death without judgement and awkwardness.

4. Hold a memorial service

No matter how difficult or painful the deceased person's life or death may have been, grieving children and teens deserve the opportunity to say goodbye and to honor the person's life.

5. Talk about and remember the person who died

Don't be afraid to talk about and remember the person who died. Remembering is part of grieving.

6. Share information about depression and mental illness

Suicide is not usually a random act — it occurs in a

context. Although no one knows what causes suicide, most people who die of suicide have experienced some form of depression or mental illness. It helps children to know that the person who died was in fact suffering from a kind of illness in his or her thinking.

7. Be prepared for fears

After a suicide death, children have many fears. During these times, it is helpful for trusted adults to stay connected and listen to their questions and concerns. Offer reassurance without making promises such as, "This will never happen again."

8. Inform the child's school about the death

Children spend a lot of time in school and a death affects not only family life but school life. That is why it's important to inform a child's teacher, counselor, coaches, and any adult support person in the school setting about the death. Talk with your child about what they would like in terms of sharing the news with their classmates and others in the school.

9. Provide outlets for grieving: Play, physical activity, art...

Play is a natural outlet of expression for children. While adults tend to talk out (or hold in) their grief, children are more likely to express it through play. This is one way you can validate their experiences and help them regain a sense of balance and control.

10. Respect differences in grieving styles.

Children's grieving styles — even in the same family — can be very different. Some kids want to talk about the death, while others want to be left alone. Recognizing and respecting that each person grieves in his or her own way is essential.

**Excerpts from the "After a Suicide Death: Ten Tips for Helping Children & Teens" brochure. Full version available for purchase at www.dougy.org or by calling 503.775.5683.*



The National Grief Center
for Children & Families

Our Mission

Dougy Center provides grief support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families can share their experiences before and after a death. We provide support and training locally, nationally, and internationally to individuals and organizations seeking to assist children in grief.

Dougy Center Bookstore/Resources

Dougy Center has been helping children, teens, young adults and their parents cope with death since 1982. Our practical, easy-to-use materials are based on what we have learned from more than 55,000 Dougy Center participants. To order online, visit dougy.org or dougybookstore.org, or call 503.775.5683.

10 Ways to Help a Grieving Child

1. **Take care of you** -- Exercise, eat well-balanced meals, stick to regular routines and reach out to others for support. These activities might be difficult when you are grieving, but taking care of yourself is still important. Grieving children do better when they have a healthy adult providing support and understanding to them.

2. **Be honest with your child** -- Discuss the tragic event with your child in a simple, direct and age appropriate manner. Be honest and share clear, accurate information about what happened. Children need to hear the truth from someone they love.

3. **Listen** -- Listen to your child share his or her story about what happened. Let them ask you questions and answer their questions as best as you can. Do not be afraid to say, "I don't know."



4. **Acknowledge your child's grief** -- recognize that your child is grieving. Be careful not to impose your grief on your child, but allow him or her to grieve in his or her own way. It is normal for children to feel an array of emotions, including sadness, anger, frustration and fear. It is also normal for children to move in and out of grief reactions, at times being very upset or getting angry easily and at other times playing as if nothing has happened. If you are not sure how grief is impacting your child, spend time with them playing, coloring, drawing or sharing stories. Quite often children will give you clues to their grief through these activities.

5. **Share** -- Tell your child stories about your own life. Times you were afraid, sad or angry. Tell them how you dealt with these situations and what you learned. Children love to hear stories about the adults in their lives and when those adults were children. Sharing stories helps a child normalize what he or she is experiencing.

6. **Be creative** -- Give your child a creative outlet to express feelings. This can be done through drawing, writing, doing crafts, listening to music, or playing games.

7. **Maintain clear expectations** -- Keep rules and boundaries consistent. Children gain security when they know what is expected from them. Children will often use their pain as an excuse for inappropriate behavior. While you should always acknowledge the grief your child is experiencing, you should also teach them to be accountable for their choices, no matter how they feel.

8. **Reassure your child** -- Remind your child that he or she is loved and that you are there for him or her. Following the death of a person in his or her life, a child's sense of safety can be shaken. Children often fear that you or other people in their life might die. While you cannot promise that you or others will not die, you can let your child know the plan if such an event occurs.

9. **Create rituals and new family traditions** -- Rituals can give your family tangible ways to acknowledge your grief and honor the memory of those who have died. Lighting candles, recognizing special occasions, sharing stories about those who have died or volunteering with a local charity as a family are some of the ways you can incorporate new traditions or rituals.

10. **Be patient** -- You and your child are grieving and the most intense parts of grief often take longer than we might want. Grief also changes us in many ways. So, be patient as you and your child experience your grief. Be patient with your child with repetition. A child often has to come back to the same details and questions. Patiently spend time with your child as they (and you) grow, change and continue to construct their (your) life story.

Written by Pamela Gabbay, EdD, FT

 [Download a PDF Version \(/images/website/Resources/Tip_Sheet-10_Ways_to_Help_a_Grieving_Child.pdf\)](#)

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[Frequently Asked Questions from Parents/Caregivers \(/resources/frequently-asked-questions\)](#)

[NAGC Holiday Toolkit \(/resources/holiday-toolkit\)](#)

[Be a Hero to Grieving Children- Toolkit \(https://indd.adobe.com/view/5229bd5d-3bbe-460d-9558-e3fcdd327194\)](#)

["When Someone Dies" NAGC's Activity Book \(/resources/nagc-activity-book\)](#)

[NAGC's Activity Cards for Young Children \(/resources/activity-cards-for-young-children\)](#)

[10 Ways to Help a Grieving Child \(/resources/10-ways-to-help-a-grieving-child\)](#)

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[Family Resource Portal \(/resources/family-resource-portal\)](#)

[Supporting Children of All Abilities who are Grieving \(/resources/supporting-children-of-all-abilities-who-are-grieving\)](#)

In Memory Robin Williams: How to Talk With Kids About Suicide

/ SUPPORTING A GRIEVER : LITSA WILLIAMS

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Until earlier this week I couldn't imagine that a celebrity death could hit me as hard as the death of Philip Seymour Hoffman did earlier this year. And then Robin Williams died. When I heard (i.e. read on Twitter), I had that feeling that it must have been a mistake, a misreport. As a friend said today, for people of our generation Robin Williams felt like our funny uncle. It didn't seem real that he had died, and certainly not by suicide. I feel like Robin Williams was a part of my childhood, from my days watching Mork and Mindy as a kid, to his first movies that made me think, like *Dead Poet's Society* and *The Fisher King*. I saw his standup as a teenager at Constitution Hall in DC. Though I barely remember the blur that was my father's funeral, I have a vivid memory of watching Robin Williams in *What Dreams May Come* the day after my dad died. Certain celebrities are woven in to the fabric of our lives, and based on the outpouring of love and grief from around the country, Robin Williams was clearly one of those celebrities for so many people.

Robin Williams dying by suicide makes the feelings of the country even more complex. This may bring up the pain of previous losses or may be a trigger for our own issues with depression or suicide. Even if neither of these is the case, we still struggle as a society to understand mental illness and make sense of a suicide death. As we each try to make personal sense of his death, many have kids who may be asking questions about the death. It can be stressful and difficult to talk to a child about suicide when we aren't sure what to say, or are ourselves grieving. So today, in memory of Robin Williams, we have invited one of

our favorite grief friends, Sarah Montgomery LCSW-C, to share with us her expertise on talking to children about suicide. Her tips may be helpful in discussing Robin Williams' death, and also in helping a child who has lost a friend, teacher, or family member to suicide. Without further ado, meet Sarah . . .

WYG: We're lucky enough to know you in person, but for the benefit of our readers, can you introduce yourself and tell us a little about your background?

Sarah: I am currently the Coordinator of Children and Family Programs at the [Chesapeake Life Center of the Hospice of the Chesapeake](https://www.chesapeakelifecenter.org/) (<https://www.chesapeakelifecenter.org/>), a program for grieving families and children in Maryland. I have worked in school based settings and outpatient mental health settings but have focused my career for the past several years on supporting families during grief and traumatic loss. My co-worker, Susan Coale, and I are currently finishing up a handbook on talking with children about suicide loss. I am also the parent of three wonderful daughters and aunt to a bunch of fabulous nieces and nephews.

WYG: It is hard to know where to begin when talking with a child about suicide. How do you recommend opening up the conversation?

Sarah: Yes, it is hard to begin to talk with kids about suicide—it is normal to be nervous or uncomfortable. If you are able, do take some time to take a breath and process your own feelings first. The analogy of needing to put on our own oxygen mask before we put on our child's is an apt one here. In this age of social media, children often find out about a death prior to their parents so they may bring up questions anywhere at any time—in the car, bathroom or while reading a book together. We as parents may not have yet processed the news ourselves, and we may not be in a comfortable emotional place to explain it to our kids. We may find ourselves swiftly processing new information while simultaneously being asked to explain the same event to a child. I know that in my family, I heard about Robin Williams' death from my youngest daughter who called me at work to chat about her day and then added, "Did you know that Robin Williams died?" She had heard about it from her older sister who had seen it on her Instagram account.

The most important element to keep in mind is to speak about the person who died and their family in a caring and honoring manner. At the same time let the child know that if they themselves ever struggle with their feelings, there is always help available.

A suicide death of a family member or close friend will certainly lead to a deeper and more emotional conversation for both of you than a death of someone less familiar. If possible, find a comfortable place to sit and start by letting your child know that you are OK and would like to talk to them about something. For example, "David, I have some very sad news to share with you. First of all, I am all right and you will be all right. I wanted to let you know that your cousin died last night." Talking about

the death of someone less close and familiar will perhaps lead to a different conversation, but children still need the reassurance that they are safe and will have time to process feelings should they arise.

Talking about suicide loss with children is on a “need to know” basis. In the case of Robin Williams’ death, some children will not know him or know of his death. Others will just say off-handedly, “My friend posted a RIP to Robin Williams on Instagram”. However, if a child asks about how Robin Williams died, then there is a need to know and need to talk with your child.

WYG: I know that many of our readers have young children. Should parents wait until their child is a certain age before talking to them about suicide?

Sarah: This again is based on a need to know basis and a child’s questions. Most young children who have heard about a celebrity’s death will mainly be interested in talking about the actor and his life, and that it is sad that they died. Reflecting back their feelings and agreeing that it is very sad when someone dies may be as much as the child needs. However, if a child asks about how he died, that may be an entrée into talking about suicide. For example, “What I read is that Robin Williams died by suicide. Suicide is when someone makes their own body stop working.” Parents can use this as a teachable moment.

But for children of any age, parents can help build resilience and support by asking children about who they would talk with in difficult times. If they had a big feeling that they needed to share, who would they share it with? Parents can also help explore ways to self-calm in a healthy way. Starting very early on, parents can give the message that no question is off limits—we as parents may not know the answer, but we welcome all questions.

WYG: Once you have opened the discussion with your child, what are the most important things to make sure your child understands?

Sarah: This is based on developmental stage, but the most important part is reinforcing that they are safe and that you are safe. No one thing causes suicide, and suicide is a relatively rare event. We do know that usually someone who dies by suicide had a “mental illness,” that their brain was not working properly. Some explain by equating it with a heart attack: “Have you ever heard of a heart attack? Well, in this case it was not a heart attack, but a kind of brain attack. His brain was not working properly, and he chose to make his body stop working. “

Also, refrain from placing blame on one particular person or one particular event. It may suffice to say that due to complications from mental illness and other factors, for reasons not entirely understood, he felt the only way to stop his mental pain was to end his life. We always have choices other than hurting ourselves. Suicide is never a valid option.

WYG: How much information is too much? If a child doesn’t ask about questions, should I say anything at all?

Sarah: Such a great question! Rely on our own parental judgment and use the rule of thumb that younger children need to know less, but as kids mature, they are interested in more information. Follow their lead. If a child for instance does not ask about the means of death, there is no reason to share it. An analogy can be made by looking at another difficult and sensitive topic –the conflict in the Middle East. A child who has heard of this conflict may ask you what is happening. You would share to their interest level, limiting details of the more painful elements. If your child has no active awareness of the Middle East, there is no reason to bring it up.

If you hear an older teen sharing a lot of details with a younger child, you may want to practice “protective interrupting”—gently letting the teen know that though this is an important topic, they may want to continue to share when there are fewer folks around. Check in later with that teen to see if they have anything they want to discuss or process. Also, suggesting to a teen not to share graphic details about a suicide death on social media is another way of protective interrupting—or coaching.

WYG: Robin Williams was such a funny, outwardly happy guy. I imagine it could be scary for a child to think that someone who didn't seem sad or unhappy could die by suicide. How do you address that concern?

Sarah: Gosh, another great question. First, let your child know that their question is a good one. We never know everything that is going on with someone, and many people keep their most private feelings just between them and their closest family and friends. You may want to say that you do believe he loved making movies and making people laugh. How he died does not mean that he was not funny and happy much of his life. It does mean that at the end of his life he struggled with mental illness, his brain was not working well, and he thought there was nothing to do that could help him. Remind them again that we always have a choice to take care of ourselves. Once again, review the folks whom they can talk with and then the things that they can do to help themselves during a tough time.

WYG: I am sure some kids will have a lot of questions about suicide. What are some of the most common questions a parent should be prepared for?

Sarah: Some of the most common questions include: “What is suicide?” “Why did he do suicide?” “Will anyone else I know do suicide?” These questions are a great entrée into reviewing with children what they and you can do if something is bothering you. “When I am feeling sad, I like to talk with your father, my great aunt Charlotte and folks at my church—who are you comfortable talking with?” It is also OK as parents not to know all the answers! Saying, “What a good question” and “When I do know more, we can talk more” allows your child to know that any and all questions are OK.

WYG: You have covered some of the “Dos” in talking to kids about suicide. Are there any “Don'ts” we should be aware of when it comes to discussing suicide with children?

Sarah: Yes. In general, limit details about the “Hows” of the suicide. It can be traumatizing to hear about the details of a death scene. The other thing to avoid is “normalizing” suicide. It is never an acceptable choice. Limit adult conversation to adult conversation, because children can become anxious if they are surrounded by this discussion. Equate this if you will to talking about an airplane crash. If a sensitive child keeps hearing details about airplane crashes, they may very well think that airplane crashes are frequent occurrences and worry about travelling by air. Children cannot differentiate between what happens frequently and what happens rarely, and if they hear a lot of conversation about a tragedy, they may become hyper vigilant and develop a fear.

WYG: If my child was a big fan of Robin Williams and seems especially upset about his death, are there any suggestions or activities you can recommend?

Sarah: Yes, you know your child the best. Any activity that your child uses to relax and center is helpful. It may be running around a park, playing Connect Four, throwing a football or drawing together. In general, anything that can help a child bring their feelings from inside their body to outside can be helpful. I often use the metaphor of a helium balloon with children. If you keep filling up a balloon and don't let any of the air out, what will happen? Pop of course! I then assure them that they will not pop, but like a balloon, it is good to let some of the helium out by talking, drawing, dancing or any other outlet. Some children may benefit from an activity such as writing a letter to the family of Robin Williams about their favorite movie or favorite character. Check in with your child periodically and as you see fit.

WYG: The loss of Robin Williams has us pretty sad here at WYG, reminiscing about all the Robin Williams movies we loved. What is your favorite Robin Williams movie?

Sarah: I keep going back to *Mrs. Doubtfire*. I love seeing Robin Williams putting on his mask and becoming an awkward and loveable woman. I think it is a movie about love, hope and family connection. I think Robin would want us to remember him for his life rather than his death. I will remember him as Mrs. Doubtfire.

WYG: Good choice!

We can't thank Sarah enough for joining us today. After reading her great tips, you may be wondering how you can get your hands on her forthcoming handbook on talking with children about suicide loss. Don't you worry, we will let you know as soon as it hits the shelves!

Suicide in the media can bring up a range of complex emotions. If you need support please call the National Suicide Prevention Hotline at 1-800-273-8255 or chat with someone online at [their website](https://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/) (<https://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>).

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Grieving After a Suicide Death

/ UNDERSTANDING GRIEF : ELEANOR HALEY

 1.9K SHARES

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, (<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/suicide/fastfact.html>) in 2018, more than 48,000 died from suicide in the United States. This rate is equal to 1 death every 11 minutes. Surveys have shown (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23871953>) that 40% of adults know at least one person who has died by suicide, and upwards of 20% of adults report their lives have been significantly impacted by suicide.

I won't waste time on introductions because there's a lot to cover. I do realize, though, that some of you won't read this post all the way through. For those of you who know yourselves well enough to know you won't finish, I want to tell you that I will link to additional resources at the end of this post.

Also, I want to invite anyone who has been touched by suicide to share your experiences in the comments below. Although we can offer general thoughts on this subject, it is your insight that adds truth and nuance to this discussion and helps those facing similar circumstances feel less alone.

First things first, our usual disclaimer...

Although commonalities exist amongst people who have experienced a specific type of loss, individual grief is unique (<https://www.whatsyourgrief.com/the-unprecedented-nature-of-individual-grief-trading-answers-for-understanding/>) to the person experiencing it and their relationship with the person who died. We can talk in averages and generalities, but no article, grief theory, or set of symptoms will ever perfectly sum up your grief experience.

Further, although you might relate to aspects of another person's grief (and vice versa), no one can completely understand how anyone else feels. With this in mind, we recommend you learn what you can from your commonalities with other grievers, but take differences with a grain of salt.

How we talk about suicide...

Although we may have a long way to go in understanding suicide and effective suicide prevention, we have thankfully progressed far beyond the dark days when people considered suicide a crime or religious offense. Progress, though, is multifaceted, and while our understanding of suicide has grown more compassionate, our language has not.

For this reason, organizations like the World Health Organization, National Institute for Mental Health, American Association for Suicidology, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, and countless others have been working to shift suicide-related terminology. Although there are many fine points to this conversation, I want to impress the following upon you:

When discussing an individual's death from suicide...

Don't say... *"She committed suicide."*

Do say... *"She died by suicide" or "She took her life"*
(<https://www.datocms-assets.com/12810/1577098744-13763toptennotesreportingonsuicideflyerm1.pdf>)

I know most of you are used to saying *"committed suicide"* and you certainly aren't alone. Many in our society have yet to get this memo, but now *you* have. Please, the time has come for us to choose language around suicide that does not condemn or stigmatize the person who has died or those who love them.

Suicide as a traumatic loss...

When a loved one kills themselves, the death is often experienced as traumatic. We typically use Wortman & Latack (2015) (<https://psycnet.apa.org/psycinfo/2015-34688-001>) definition of traumatic loss...

"A death is considered traumatic if it occurs without warning; if it is untimely; if it involves violence; if there is damage to the loved one's body; if it was caused by a perpetrator with the intent to harm; if the survivor regards the death as preventable; if the survivor believes that the loved one suffered; or if the survivor regards the death, or manner of death, as unfair and unjust."

This definition touches on many experiences common to a suicide death, including the death being sudden, untimely, violent, regarded as preventable, etc. Additionally, other traumatic loss risk factors are associated with suicide, such as feelings of blame, witnessing death, and finding the body.

It's important to note; it is not the nature of a death that makes it traumatic, but how the event is interpreted and processed by the individual. So, regardless of the circumstances around the death, it is not a given that it will be experienced as traumatic.

Potentially traumatic deaths can result in the compounding and intertwining of trauma and grief responses. These may manifest as the following (these are just a few, so if you'd like more information on grieving a traumatic loss, head here (<https://www.whatsyourgrief.com/traumatic-loss/>)):

- Recurrent intrusive thoughts about the death
 - Shattered assumptions about the world, oneself, and others
 - Feelings of guilt and blame
 - Fear and avoidance of grief and trauma-emotions, thoughts, memories, etc.
-

When grieving a suicide death one may experience the following...

The search for answers:

In the wake of death, people often seek to construct a meaningful narrative that helps them find peace and understand what happened. So it's common to ask questions like "what if?", "why?", and "what's the point?" Until the question of "why" can be answered, grieving family and friends may continue to search and ruminate.

After a suicide death, as with any other type of death, the bereaved may seek to make sense of what happened. However, in this instance, they may find that many of their questions are either unanswerable or lead to distressing conclusions (whether or not these conclusions are true).

It is not uncommon for themes of personal blame to arise as the person questions their role in their loved one's suicide and what they could have done to prevent their death. Unfortunately, the bereaved may vastly overestimate their role and others' role (i.e., what family and friends did or didn't do).

Whether rational or not, grieving family and friends may struggle with distressing thoughts like:

- I never really knew him.
- She didn't feel comfortable confiding in me.
- She was in intense pain.
- I'm to blame. I should have done more to prevent his death.
- I'm to blame. I pushed him into the decision to kill himself.
- She didn't love me enough to live.
- My family members are to blame.

When the death is expected...

Although suicide is often sudden, it is not always unexpected, and so not all who experience the death of a loved one struggle to answer the question of "why?". In many instances, there has been discussion of suicidal thoughts or past suicide attempts. Maple et al (2007) (<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1521/suli.2007.37.2.127/abstract>) found in interviews with suicidally bereaved parents that "preparedness" was linked with an ability to anticipate and explain their child's death. They note,

“Once they had acknowledged the inevitability of suicide they were able to weave this possibility, unwelcome as it was, into their life story to develop a coherent explanation.”

Family Conflict:

Family can be an incredible source of comfort and healing after a death... for some. For others, family can be a source of distressing conflict (<https://www.whatsyourgrief.com/family-fighting-after-a-death/>) and misunderstanding (<https://www.whatsyourgrief.com/family-misunderstanding/>) after a death.

Regardless of the circumstances surrounding the death, things like complicated family dynamics, shifting roles, and different coping styles can test and challenge a family. After a suicide death, conflict may emerge because:

- The deceased's mental illness and suicidal behavior created disruption and placed a strain on the family.
 - Family members disagree about how they want to acknowledge the death publicly.
 - Family members disagree about how they want to discuss the death privately within the family.
 - Different family members come up with varying explanations for why their loved one died by suicide
 - Blame (<https://www.whatsyourgrief.com/seeking-order-in-the-aftermath-of-loss/>)
-

Feelings of rejection and abandonment:

Evidence has shown (<https://eds.b.ebscohost.com.proxy-ub.researchport.umd.edu/eds/detail/detail?vid=4&sid=af81c97f-ae0-4a33-bb75-29a9a3eccf07%40sessionmgr104&hid=111&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWRzLWxpdmU%3d#AN=31446614&db=edb>) that suicidally bereaved individuals experience higher levels of rejection compared with other bereaved groups. In grief, feelings of guilt, blame, regret, and rejection can be logical, but they can also defy all logic and reason. So even when it's evident that the suicide was not an act of intentional abandonment, it still may feel that way to the people who grieve the death.

Worries about developing mental illness:

Approximately 90% (https://depts.washington.edu/mhreport/facts_suicide.php) of those who die by suicide have one or more mental disorders. When the deceased is connected to the bereaved through genetics, especially in the instance of a child grieving a parent's suicide death, the living family member(s) may worry that they too will develop mental illness and someday decide to kill themselves. Indeed, some research has indicated that a family history of suicide increases suicide risk.

If you know a child, or adult for that matter, struggling with these concerns, don't immediately disregard their worries. If you are someone grappling with this concern, know that it is normal, and if you're concerned, then it never hurts to seek out a little support and psycho-education from a therapist or counselor.

Fear of grief reactions:

After a death, mourners often feels like they're losing it (<https://www.whatsyourgrief.com/grief-makes-you-crazy2/>), and, as noted, those who have experienced a traumatic loss often experience intensified and prolonged grief/trauma reactions. If a person interprets their symptoms as dangerous, threatening, or indicative of a larger mental or physical problem, they are more likely to fear their reactions.

Concerns about one's own reactions following a death add to existing emotion by causing additional anxiety, depression, anger, or shame. Those who are fearful of their responses may engage in maladaptive and persistent avoidance of triggers or reminders, which, in some cases, can contribute to the development of psychological disorder and prevent the mourner from finding meaningful ways to continue their bond with their loved one.

Relief:

It is common for a person to feel relieved after a loved one dies (<https://www.whatsyourgrief.com/relief-after-a-death-the-unspoken-emotion/>), when the loved one had been living in pain and suffering. For those who die from illness, the relief comes from knowing they are no longer in physical pain. And when a person dies from something like suicide or overdose, the relief may come from a place of knowing that their loved one is no longer struggling with emotional (and sometimes physical) pain.

This doesn't mean that the person grieving the loss wouldn't trade their relief to have their loved one back for just one moment, or that they don't also feel intense pain and sadness. It just means that relief is one feeling in their big, messy, hurricane of grief.

Feelings of isolation, stigma and/or shame:

Sadly, there is a stigma attached to mental illness and suicide. Some people can't imagine the mental and emotional pain that would cause a person to kill themselves, so they might make assumptions or judge the deceased's actions, calling them weak or selfish.

Stigmatized losses may also be referred to as disenfranchised losses, which you can read more about here.

(<https://www.whatsyourgrief.com/disenfranchised-grief/>) The following are just a few potential causes for isolation, stigma, and shame following a suicide death:

- Isolation and shame may result from the family's decision to keep the suicide a secret. Feeling unable to acknowledge the truth, those

- grieving the loss may feel like they have to lie or live in silence.
- Shame may result from thoughts of personal blame and responsibility.
 - Shame may result from the belief that one can't control or manage their grief reactions.
 - Isolation and shame may result from a lack of social support or because others don't acknowledge the death.
 - Shame, isolation, and stigma may be felt in response to messages from media and broader society about suicide.
 - Isolation may result from perceived rejection and thoughts of worthlessness.
-

If you are grieving a loved one's death from suicide you may find these resources helpful:

Alliance of Hope for Suicide Survivors (<https://www.allianceofhope.org/>)

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (<https://afsp.org/>)

SAVE: Suicide awareness voices of education (<https://www.save.org/>)

To Write Love on Her Arms (<https://twloha.com/>)

Our Posts:

In memory of Robin Williams: How to talk with kids about suicide (<https://www.whatsyourgrief.com/talk-with-kids-about-suicide/>)

Review of the Dougy Center's After a suicide death: An Activity Book for Grieving Kids (<https://www.whatsyourgrief.com/after-a-suicide-death-an-activity-book-for-grieving-kids/>)

Review of Hospice of the Chesapeake's Supporting Children After a Suicide Loss: a guide for parents and caregivers (<https://www.whatsyourgrief.com/supporting-children-after-a-suicide-loss/>)

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Coping After Suicide Loss

Tips for Grieving Adults, Children, and Schools

Death by suicide is always a tragic event. It can trigger a host of complicated and confusing emotions. Whether you are coping with the loss of a loved one, or are helping a child or adult navigate such a loss, these tools can help.

HOW TO COPE WHEN A FRIEND OR LOVED ONE DIES BY SUICIDE

If you've lost a loved one to suicide, consider these strategies to help you cope.

- › **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. Those feelings are 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.
- › **Draw on existing support systems.** Accept help from those who have been supports in the past, including your family, your friends or members of your faith-based community.
- › **Talk to someone.** There is often stigma around suicide, and many loss 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.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

1-800-273-TALK (8255)
suicidepreventionlifeline.org

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

afsp.org

American Association of Suicidology: Directory of Support Groups

[suicidology.org/suicide-survivors/
sos-directory](http://suicidology.org/suicide-survivors/sos-directory)

Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide

sptsusa.org

The American Psychological Association gratefully acknowledges psychologists Mary Alvard, PhD, Nadine Kaslow, PhD, Shane Owens, PhD, and Robin Gurwitsch, PhD, for their help with this fact sheet.

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.

- › **Deal with your own feelings first.** Pause to reflect on and manage your own emotions so you can speak calmly to the child or children 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 child's feelings. Share your own feelings, too, explaining 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, when talking to a child or teen, emphasize that the person who died was struggling and thinking differently from most people.
- › **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. Other children might want someone to talk to more often. Still others prefer to process their feelings through art or music. 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?", and "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 similar to 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.
- › **Prevent imitation.** Researchers have found news stories that use graphic language, sensationalize the death or explicitly describe the method of suicide can increase the risk of additional deaths by suicide. When talking to children, avoid graphic details and focus instead on hope, healing and the value of the person when they were alive.
- › **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 or campaigns.
- › **Choose words carefully.** To protect peers who may also have suicidal thoughts, avoid phrases such as "She's no longer suffering," or "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.

FINDING HELP If you or a child in your life is grieving a death by suicide, a psychologist can help you express and manage your feelings and find healthy ways to cope. Clinical psychologists are professionals trained to identify mental, emotional and behavioral problems or challenges and find solutions for handling them. To find a licensed psychologist in your area, use our Psychologist Locator: at locator.apa.org.

 Learn more about how psychologists help at apa.org/helpcenter