

Someone I know has lost a family member or friend to suicide - *What can I do or say?*

Suicide grief may be complex

Losing someone to suicide can result in:

- Intense emotional trauma
- Guilt, shame, anger, and blame
- Feeling of isolation and loneliness
- A need to make sense of the death
- Shock, numbness, disbelief
- Physical ill health
- Difficulty in family relationships
- Fear of stigma and judgment

Reach out to the bereaved

- You may want to give them space out of fear of saying the wrong thing or making the situation worse, however, this silence often reinforces the isolation, stigma and shame that the bereaved person may already feel.
- If you are unsure of what to say, express concern and explain that you don't know what to say, rather than avoiding the person.
 - "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 sending a private message online or a text could be enough to let them know you are thinking of them.
 - "I just wanted to let you know that I'm thinking about you and I'm here for you if you need anything or want to talk."
- Offer to perform practical tasks like cooking a meal, or doing cleaning or washing, or picking up groceries
- Sometimes your offers to talk or help may be refused, but try again at a later time.

Be prepared for different responses

People's grief is different - responses include:

- Some people may be feeling shock and numbness, which may make communication hard
- Others may focus on practical matters, or "getting jobs done", to cope with their grief
- Others may express their loss through emotions and sharing their feelings
- Different aspects, such as beliefs, gender, age or culture, may influence their how a person experiences and expresses their grief

Listen without judgment

- You may not be able to change the pain that the person is feeling, but listening and just being there is often helpful
- Allow the person to talk freely and openly, listen without judging, or offering advice or minimising their feelings with clichés
 - Respond in a way that reflects what they are saying: "This must be hard for you."
 - Avoid minimising their feelings: "I know how you feel", or using clichés: "Life goes on" or "Time heals all wounds".
- You may hear the same story many times
- The person may not say very much or may not respond in a way that makes sense
- Avoid judgemental language: "She took the easy way out" or "He was selfish"
- Avoid language that glamourises suicide or makes it sound like a good outcome: "He was too good for this world" or "She is happy now".

Body language is important

- Make yourself comfortable but ensure you looked interested in what the other person is saying
- Maintain eye contact. If not culturally appropriate or makes the person uncomfortable, sit alongside them
- Show you are listening e.g. nodding
- Gestures and tone of voice is important

Let them explore their feelings

- 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 upon reflection.
- The questions of "what if" and "why" can feel endless.
- Allow the person to talk about their feelings, but steer away from giving 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 the death or possible warning signs that they missed.
- Remember that suicide is a very complex response to a range of issues. Changes in behaviour can be gradual and sometimes the person can go to great lengths to cover up the plans.

Allow open communication

- Be open to talking freely about the person who died - share good memories of the person and what they meant to you
- Do not change the subject when they talk about the person who died
- While suicide should not be kept secret, it is up to the family and friends to decide what they would like to say and when they want to do so. Assume that the person would like to keep their conversation confidential and do not discuss the details of the death with others without checking with them first

Encourage them to seek help

- Remember that people who have lost loved ones to suicide are themselves more vulnerable to problems with mental health, including suicidal behaviour, so they will require access to ongoing support
- Encourage the person to seek support from other people close to them, bereavement support services or other health professionals
- Specialist bereavement services (or "postvention" services) may be available to those impacted by a suicide of a loved one
- Talking to your doctor, or another health professional, or accessing a telephone/online counselling service may be a good start.
- After some time, the person may benefit from sharing their experiences with others via a suicide bereavement support group. Listing of support groups can be found at: postventionaustralia.org/finding-support/local-support-groups/

Keep in touch

- Keep in touch on a regular basis, and offer to be someone they can talk to, or ask if there is someone else they trust that they can talk to.
- Your offer to help may be refused, but try again later.
- Give the person time to come to terms with the death. There is no set timeframe - it may take months or years for them to find a way to live with the loss.
- Anniversaries, birthdays and other special days may be particularly difficult, so the person may need support well into the future.

Look after yourself

- Remember to be kind to yourself. Sharing another person's loss can be draining. You may also become affected by it and need to speak to someone or access support services yourself.
- Monitor your own response and seek help if you need support.

SUPPORT RESOURCES

For emergencies, call **Triple Zero** on **000**

Lifeline 13 11 14 lifeline.org.au

24 hour national telephone crisis counselling, online counselling service and resources

Suicide Call Back Service 1300 659 467 suicidecallbackservice.org.au

24-hour national telephone counselling service and online counselling service for people who are suicidal or bereaved by suicide, and bereavement resources

BeyondBlue 1300 224 636 beyondblue.org.au

24 hour national phone information service and online chat service

Kids Help Line 1800 551 800 kidshelpline.com.au

24 hour national telephone and online counselling service for young people aged 5-25

MensLine Australia 1300 789 978 mensline.org.au

24 hour national telephone and online counselling service for men

Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling Service 1800 011 046

vvc.gov.au

National counselling and support for war and service-related mental health conditions

Postvention Australia

National Association for the Bereaved by Suicide

Contact for bereavement resources and information

Phone 1300 02 4357 | **Email** info@postventionaustralia.org

Web postventionaustralia.org

Facebook facebook.com/postventionaustralia

Twitter @PostventionAus

I have lost someone to suicide

Some advice for the bereaved by suicide

Your grief may be complex

You may be feeling the following:

- Intense emotional trauma
- Shock, numbness, disbelief
- Guilt, shame, anger, and blame
- Physical ill health including trouble sleeping
- Feeling of isolation and loneliness
- Difficulty in your relationships
- A need to make sense of the death, and the never-ending "Why?" question
- Fear of stigma and judgment from others

Know that all of these feelings are normal responses to losing a loved one to suicide. It can be helpful to share these feelings with others who understand.

Some advice

- Know that you can survive. You may not think so, but you can.
- You may feel overwhelmed by how strong your feelings are, but all your feelings are normal.
- Anger, guilt confusion and forgetfulness are normal responses. You are not "crazy", you are in mourning.
- You may feel angry at the person, at the world, at God, at yourself. It's okay to express it in a safe way.
- You may feel guilt for what you think you did or did not do. You can turn your guilt into regret by forgiving yourself.
- You may have suicidal thoughts. Ask for help if you are having these thoughts often, or if you are thinking of acting on them. Talk to your doctor or contacting some of the support resources listed here.
- Accept that it was not your fault.
- Don't be afraid to cry. Tears are healing.
- Take it one day at a time. Try to put off major decisions for the time being.
- Steer clear of people who want to tell you what or how to feel.
- It is normal to have physical reactions to your grief such as headaches, loss of appetite or feeling ill.
- Being able to laugh with others and at yourself is healing.
- Be kind and gentle to yourself.

Adapted from Iris Bolton, "My Son...My Son...A guide to Healing After Death, Loss or Suicide", 1993

Tips that may be helpful

- Look after yourself. By looking after yourself you will be able to also support those around you.
- Talk with someone you trust and who understands. Speak of your pain as often and as long as you need.
- Stay connected and accept support from those around you. This may ease the sense of isolation and loneliness that comes with your grief. Talking, sharing stories, listening to music, and remembering the person you have lost.
- Other times, you may need to be alone.
- Be with your grief - try not to suppress, avoid or postpone your expression of grief. If you are reluctant to express your loss in the presence of others, set aside some private time during the day and a private space to reflect and let yourself cry.
- You may find comfort in your spiritual traditions, such as returning to country, returning to your family/community, visiting your place of worship
- Remember it is okay to laugh and laughter is often healing. Provide opportunity for laughter by being with fun-loving people, watching a comedy movie, etc.
- Make time to do things that help you relax, such as sleeping, listening to music, getting a massage, taking a bath, meditating
- Make time to do things you enjoy - it's okay to give yourself time away from the pain

- Exercise regularly, with activities such as walking, running, swimming
- Eat healthily, and avoid alcohol or drug use.
- Be in touch with nature, such as walking outside, and going to the beach, may help
- Do practical things, such as cooking and cleaning
- Be creative. Writing a letter or a poem, making music, drawing, making art, and journalling may be therapeutic.
- Remember and honor the person you've lost. E.g. planting a tree, carrying a symbol on yourself, having photos, making playlists of their favourite music
- Remember that there is no set timeline for your grief journey - be kind to yourself.
- Ask for assistance with everyday tasks like meals,
- Seek help. From people around you, from suicide bereavement support (postvention) services or other health professionals. Talking to your doctor or another health professional, or accessing telephone/online counselling services listed below may be a good start.
- After some time, a suicide bereavement support group may be beneficial for you to share your experience with others who have gone through similar experiences. It helps to know that you are not alone. Listing of support groups can be found at: postventionaustralia.org/finding-support/local-support-groups/

Adapted from Andy Marriott, One Life WA "When someone takes their own life...What next?", LaRita Archibald "To the Newly Bereaved", and Lifeline "Have you lost someone to suicide?"

If you are thinking about suicide, get help immediately at these free services: **Lifeline** 13 11 14 lifeline.org.au (24 hour national telephone crisis counselling, and online counselling service) OR **Suicide Call Back Service** 1300 659 467 suicidecallbackservice.org.au (24-hour national telephone counselling service and online counselling service for people who are suicidal or bereaved by suicide).

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Twitter @PostventionAus