

If you are having suicidal thoughts or are concerned about a friend or relative who may be at-risk for suicide, call 1-800-273-TALK (8255).

## Talking of suicide

"I'm so sorry to hear that your friend (or father or sister) died. What happened?"

"He killed himself."

(Silence)

Suicide often leaves us speechless. What do we say? How can we make sense of it? We look for clues—Was there a note, and if there was, did it make any sense? Were there signs? Should we have seen them? Did we see them and not know what we were looking at? How did he do it? Oh no, not like that. How could she? Didn't they know how much we loved them—how much we would have done to help? She must have felt such pain, such despair to do such a thing. I really miss him. But how could he...?

And so it can go with suicide. Around and around with stubborn questions, elusive answers and a stew of confusion, hurt, sadness, guilt, fear and anger. Such a mess, in many ways, is left behind.

Those left behind can feel alone—like this has not happened to anyone else before—but unfortunately this is not true. Because a suicide death is an especially hard death to talk about, the impression that it happens rarely can be magnified. When people do find a way to talk about it, however, we can learn a little about how many lives have been touched by suicide, its many forms and how difficult it is to understand.

One of the burdens of suicide survivors—those left behind after a suicide—is the impression that the person who died by suicide made a choice to die and leave us alone without them. Those who have studied suicide, however, raise questions about how free a choice it is for the person who dies by suicide. The following comes from *Never the Same: Coming to Terms with the Death of a Parent* by Donna Schuurman:

## Suicide

"Edwin Schneidman, a prominent suicidologist who studied the subject for over forty-five years writes...that ultimately a suicide occurs when three factors collide: The first is when a person reaches the limit of their threshold for psychological pain, resulting in their inability to envision any escape from pain other than death. The second is when they have ready access to instruments of suicide—guns, knives, pills. And the third is what he calls "perturbation," an agitated state when they perceive that their discomfort and anxiety is intolerable. If all three conditions coincide, a suicide attempt is inevitable—not necessarily unpreventable, but inevitable. To reduce the threat, at least one of the three conditions has to be reduced..."

You may notice that I have not used the common terminology "committed suicide." It's because I believe that this phrase incorrectly and unfairly accuses the suicide victim of an act over which they had no control. (If they had control, they would not have suicided. If they had been in their right mind, they would not have taken their life.)...I strongly believe that because the suicidal person's mind is not working properly, there is a moment where suicide is no longer a choice—when all three contributing factors collide at a heightened level. If at that moment the person has access to the means to die, the suicide will happen. If at that moment the person is prevented from suiciding because he or she does not have the means, the suicide can be prevented. People refer to suicide as an "easy way out," but if you think about it, would it be easy for someone who is thinking clearly to slit their wrist, jump off a bridge, or pull the trigger of a gun?"

When a person dies by suicide, we can be tempted to give this last act ultimate meaning in the story of the person's life. If we do this, we say that killing oneself expressed the person's most true self and was the most significant act of the person's life. If we do this, we make an unfortunate mistake. A person's last act no more defines one's life than other acts that occur throughout one's lifetime. The last act is important, but it does not negate the importance of other acts—a drug dealer is not absolved when losing his life to save others and the acts of a real world saint are not erased because of a final act of cruelty or hubris. People and their lives are too complex to simplify into a single act.

Although there will remain more questions than answers when dealing with suicide, there is a life-affirming act that we can take. We can reject the silence that has been

# Suicide

part of suicide in our culture. When one is expressing thoughts of suicide, we can ask for help and refuse to be silent. When one tells us of a suicide, we can find a way to listen and bear with them the telling of the story. The silence that comes with suicide is not just death-denying; it is also life-denying. Rejecting this silence means that we see the whole picture—what happened at the end of life and all the life that came before. In doing so, we say "Yes" to life and "No" to suicide.

## Ideas for explaining suicide to a child

A death by suicide is one of the most difficult deaths to talk about for many people and to explain to a child. Understanding the mystery of the motivations for taking one's own life is difficult for adults and can be even more confusing for a child. We know, however, that if children are not given explanations they will often create their own explanations which can be far from reality and complicate adjustment in the present and future. Giving no explanation to a child's questions—"He just died"—leaves too much to the child's imagination and presents an unduly mysterious and unpredictable world.

One way of explaining suicide to a child is to explain that the person's brain was not working properly so the person made a bad decision and killed him or herself. Sometimes people die because their heart is not working properly, and people can also die if their brain is not working properly. If a person's brain is not working properly the person can't think straight and the person may make bad decisions. Suicide is when people kill themselves, and they decide to do that because they are very upset and their brain isn't working right. If a person's brain was working right, the person would understand that there are better choices to make than killing oneself. If a child asks how the person killed themselves, a simple explanation can be given that is true and that the child can understand. In all cases, it will be important to assure the child that he or she was not responsible for what happened.

Children will look to follow the lead of adults, and it is helpful if we can give the message that this is very sad and upsetting, but it is still something we can talk about and get through together:

## Suicide

"So, there are no books that will do it for us and there are no magic "right" words to say. It's the trying, the sharing, and the caring—the wanting to help and the willingness to listen—that says "I care about you." When we know that we do care about each other, then, together, we can talk about even the most difficult things and cope with even the most difficult times."

Hedda Bluestone Sharapan

*Talking with Children about Death*

### **Should a school memorialize a student who dies by suicide?**

When a young person dies by suicide, adults get scared to death. Or more accurately, adults get scared of another suicide death (and another and another). Suicide deaths by adolescents are disturbing and attention-getting in varieties of ways. Even though the elderly have higher suicide rates, teen suicides gather more attention and concern as caring adults feel more responsible for teens than for older adults and the death of an adolescent for any reason feels particularly tragic. So when a school is confronted with the suicide of one of its students, school staff is faced with the challenge of responding in a way which will not contribute to or be seen to contribute to any additional suicide attempts or deaths. In such a situation, should a school memorialize the student who has died by suicide?

Schools are asked to do and be many things and rightfully feel overwhelmed with all that is demanded of them. Fundamentally, schools are caring communities for learning. They are caring not just for idealistic reasons but for practical reasons—can we imagine that teaching will be productive and learning maximized in an uncaring community? In a caring community, every student is valued which is why schools often do some type of memorial activities when a student dies. There were those who cared for the student and the student's death impacts both students and staff. Memorial activities have several purposes—to remember and honor someone's life, to affirm the impact and importance of that life, to confirm the reality of the person's death and to offer support and comfort to those left behind. These

## Suicide

purposes are relevant no matter the manner of the person's death. Memorializing a person's death need not glorify the nature of the person's death whether that death is a result of reckless behavior, illness, murder, drug overdose or suicide. It is the life that is being memorialized more than the death—the fact that someone lived is ultimately more important than the reality that the person died.

Whenever a student dies, there is an opportunity for a teaching moment related to the causes or circumstances of the death—drunk driving, depression, drug use, suicide, and, unfortunately, many others. There is also the opportunity to teach about coping with grief and loss and these opportunities fit well into the mission of a school as a caring community for learning. The opportunity to better identify and intentionally support at-risk students is also present. Memorializing the student who dies by suicide is part of the teaching opportunity—the lesson that in our community, everyone is valued and important.

Donna Schuurman, Executive Director of the Dougy Center, has had a special interest in this issue and has researched what is available in the professional literature. After an extensive search, she found no research that suggests that memorializing a student who died by suicide contributes to additional suicides. It can even be argued that not providing a constructive venue for expressions of grief and remembrance increases the risks for greater emotional difficulties for surviving friends as their grief could more likely go underground and be acted in destructive ways.

There are helpful guidelines and tips for talking about a suicide death in ways which are sensitive to concerns about glamorizing or glorifying the manner of dying. To learn more, visit suicide-related websites found in the Resources: Grief Websites section of the Center for Good Mourning website, [www.goodmourningcenter.org](http://www.goodmourningcenter.org).

*Thanks to Donna Schuurman for her work, education and advocacy efforts on this issue—all of which contributed significantly to the answer to the information above.*