

Suicide is very difficult for anyone who is impacted by it and gives rise to a range of emotions. There is no right way or wrong way to feel or react when somebody dies by suicide. This will be different for different people, even in the same family.



When a person dies by suicide, this loss will have a different significance for each person and consequently each person's grief will be different. People may feel sadness, anger, guilt, helplessness, shock, relief, loneliness or may just feel numb.

Grief is a normal though painful process, where people experience a wide range of emotions some of which may be conflicting. Sometimes a death through suicide comes out of the blue or it may have been something tried before or talked about – but when the death happens families are left in a state of shock, and it can take time for it to fully sink in for both the adults and children in the family. Families need to be reminded to

- Mind yourself
- Accept support
- Keep talking
- Go at your own pace
- Breathe

Talking to children about suicide

It is understandable to be nervous about starting conversations about death with children, it may feel overwhelming and intimidating.

- It is normal to want to protect them from the pain and distress but it is important to be honest with children
- We can't fix or reverse what has happened, but we can do our best to help children through the reality of this difficult time in an honest and open manner.
- Children will have a different understanding of death depending on their age, so it can be helpful to first check with them what their understanding of death is.

Explaining a death by suicide is best done by a series of steps, each one adding a new level of understanding, building on what the child may already know.

Children seldom just hear news like this once and fully take it in - depending on their ages you are probably going to get questions from them in weeks and months to come when they have processed what they have heard and then start to understand the implications. [Children and Grief by Age & Stage - Irish Childhood Bereavement Network](#)

Why is it important to be open and honest?

Children who are not told the truth often fill in the blanks themselves, the stories children create in their own heads without the facts can make them more confused and anxious.

Another difficulty of not telling children the truth is that they may be told by people outside of the family. For example, children at school may find out and may tell them, or they may find out through the internet or social media.

It is also likely that children may have overheard adults talking and have picked up some of the information or misinterpreted what they have heard, they may feel they are holding information that they should not know and feel guilty about doing so.

Most children want to be told what has happened by those closest to them, people they love and trust. The truth may seem hard but being honest can mean that the child is more likely to talk to you about their worries and feelings. Not just now but in the future too.

You may not have all the answers, but it is okay to tell children that you don't know something.

How to explain suicide to your child

It is normal to be nervous or uncomfortable, so we suggest that you practice what you want to say beforehand. Take some time to take a breath and process your own feelings first.

The following steps will help when talking to a child about the person who has died by suicide:

1. Ask the child what they know
2. Tell the child clearly what has happened; it is best if the child is told by a parent, a relative, or a person the child knows and trusts.
3. Use clear and correct language, which the child understands
4. Give simple details about how the person died.

You can support children by explaining there are many factors that can lead someone to die by suicide.

→ *A suicide death is not usually the result of a single event, it is often a result of someone experiencing unbearable emotional pain, feeling hopeless about it ever getting better, and thinking death is the only way to stop that pain.*

Telling them the truth does not always mean sharing all the details of the death at once, pacing the information as and when they are able to understand. Let their questions guide what else to share - they may ask questions straight away or these questions may come days/weeks/months/years later. A good indicator that they are satisfied with what they are told is when they stop asking questions.

Answering Difficult Questions

A death through suicide can leave people with many unanswered questions. For some questions, such as 'why did the person die?' there may be no easy or quick answers. *It is ok to tell the child you don't know why it happened*

Support families to find the words that work for them – they know their children best and what will be meaningful for them. Try to use phrases like 'died by suicide', or 'ended his/her own life'

- *'People die in lots of ways. They might get sick or have a bad accident, or they might die because they're old and their body stops working. Suicide is when a person is so very ill and so deeply sad that she chooses to make her body stop working.'*
- *'When someone ends their life, it is because they don't think there is any way of feeling better – even when everyone else around them can see there is.'*
- *'Suicide is when somebody ends their life.'*

It is not uncommon for young children to imagine that they caused the person to die. With a death by suicide, they may worry that they could have done something to prevent it. Reassure them that this is not the case.

Not having the answers

The child may be angry and frustrated and have questions you can't answer. You may have to explain that you don't have all the answers. It's OKAY to say you don't have all the answers.

It is normal to search for answers but the only person who really knew why this happened is the person who has died. In the end, it may be a case of accepting that there are things that will never be known.

- *'Only the person who dies knows how all the all the feelings and thoughts and all their own emotional history to make suicide seem the only choice.'*
- *'Often people don't want to die but they just don't know how to feel better. It is not your fault when somebody dies by suicide'*

This search for clues and the need to make sense of the answers is probably one of the biggest challenges to face. Many parents worry that one question a child asks will lead to another, and you may feel ill equipped to provide answers, or feel emotionally fragile.

If you do not have an answer or are worried about saying the wrong thing or they ask at a time that is difficult – then it is okay to say

→ *‘I think that is an important question, let me think about it and I will come back to you later’*

This validates their question and gives you some breathing space to reflect or check things out.

Reactions and emotions

It is also normal for everyone to be upset - some people will cry others go quiet or maybe get angry and lash out - let everyone handle their reaction without judgement (unless they are going to hurt anyone) - don't be afraid to show your own emotions/feelings.

Children can all react differently, there is no right or wrong way to react:

- One minute crying, the next minute playing.
- Withdraw, act out, regress, sleep disturbance, fear of the dark, anger and fear can be displayed.
- Night-time can be very difficult as children are not distracted and feeling alone.

[Developmental Grief Responses - Irish Childhood Bereavement Network](#)

It is okay to share your emotions at times with your child. Sometimes what we show on the outside is very different to what we feel on the inside. It can be helpful for children to see you are upset too rather than pretending everything is normal. Let them know that everyone gets upset when someone special dies.

- Routine for children can help provide a sense of safety. Try to keep to normal activities and routine where you can even though things are different now. Children may need lots of continued reassurance that this was not their fault.
- Children may need to discuss what has happened again and again over time. As they get older it is normal for them to go through different emotions and want to know more. As they grow and develop, their understanding of the world will be changing too – their grief and what has happened is now part of their life story.

A suicide death can affect different people in different ways. Having somebody in your life die by suicide can be a very traumatic experience. That means it can affect not just how you feel but also your body and your mind. You may find that children become more anxious now, particularly when they see other people they care about upset or depressed. They will need your help to feel understood and given reassurance that being sad, or upset is normal.

Remember

Mind yourself ♥Accept support ♥Keep talking ♥Go at your own pace ♥Breathe