

**I Never Thought this Would Happen!**  
**How to Help Your Teen Deal with Suicide Grief: A handout for parents**  
*Terri Erbacher, PhD*

**Has your child lost a friend or loved one to suicide?**

Not only is your child grieving the loss of someone close to him/her, but this grief is intensified because the death was a suicide. The healing process may be painful and may seem unnaturally slow as suicide grief is extremely complex. Helping your child understand his or her emotions, as well as learning something about suicide in general, may help to ease some of his/her pain.

**The first question is often *WHY* do some teens complete suicide?**

We don't know for sure because when youth die by suicide, they take the answers with them. But, we do know that many are experiencing a number of stressors and many have a mental disorder, like depression, which is often undiagnosed, untreated, or both. We also know that most teens do not want to die, they just want their emotional pain to end. Help your teen see this and see that there are other ways to deal with this emotional pain, such as by getting help when needed.

**Grief Symptoms/Behaviors your child may experience:**

**Emotional Effects**

Shock & Disbelief  
Anger & Irritability  
Depression/Sadness  
Despair or Helplessness  
Terror/Fear  
Guilt or Self-Blame  
Anxiousness or Worry  
Loss of pleasure in activities  
Confusion

**Physical Effects**

Fatigue  
Insomnia or Disturbed Sleep  
Stomach/Headaches  
Decreased Appetite  
Hyperarousal or Easily Startled

**Cognitive Effects**

Difficulty Concentrating  
Trouble Making Decisions  
Trouble Remembering  
Impaired Self-Esteem  
Intrusive Thoughts or Memories  
Crying Easily  
Change in Daily Patterns  
Nightmares  
Regression in Behavior

**Social/Behavioral Effects**

Social Withdrawal or Isolation  
Increased Relationship Conflict  
Refusal to go to School or Activities  
Risk Taking Behaviors (substance use)  
Aggression or Oppositional Behavior

While the above are common symptoms, help your child understand that there is no RIGHT way to grieve. It is an individualized process and your child must grieve at his or her own pace. This is especially true for complex suicide grief, which leaves many questions unanswered.

**Some things you can do:**

Be available and ask if your child wants to talk, but realize a teen may not come to you  
Listen to your child without judgment and let your teen tell his/her own story freely  
Share your own feelings and concerns honestly  
It is okay to tell your teen that you don't know answers to some difficult questions  
Try to re-establish routine, with appropriate expectations, as soon as possible  
Encourage your child to continue engaging in their typical activities, sports, etc.  
Try not to take anger or irritability personally as it may be directed toward parents  
Let your teen have his/her personal space  
Be careful not to glamorize, thereby positively reinforcing, suicide as an option  
Emphasize the importance of seeking help when needed  
Be aware of depression and/or suicidal ideation in your child (see warning signs)  
Accompany your child to funeral or viewings if they would like to go

**Suicidal Warning Signs:**

A previous suicide attempt  
Current talk of suicide or making a plan  
Strong wish to die or a preoccupation with death  
Signs of depression, such as moodiness, hopelessness, withdrawal  
Increased alcohol and/or drug use  
Hinting at not being around in the future or saying good-bye  
Readily accessible firearms  
Impulsiveness and taking extreme or unnecessary risks  
Lack of connection to family and friends (no one to talk to)

**What is a Suicidal Emergency?**

It may be an emergency if your child expresses any of these:  
Intense feeling of being a burden  
Intense feeling of not belonging  
Intense feelings of hopelessness; that things will not get better  
Intense thoughts of lethal self-harm  
Describing a specific plan  
Seeking means of self-harm

These warning signs are especially noteworthy in light of a recent suicide death or other loss of someone close to your child. If your child mentions suicide, take it seriously. *If there seems to be a suicidal emergency, do not leave your child alone. Get help immediately:*

- *Take them to a local crisis center*
- *Call 911*

***Remember that the NUMBER ONE protective factor in the life of a child is a caring adult who listens to a child without judgment. This is most often a parent!***

Source: Erbacher, T.A. (2013). *Lending a Helping Hand: Suicide in Schools: Empowering School Districts*. Booklet published by the Delaware County Intermediate Unit, Morton, PA.