

Let's Talk About It: A Primer for When Someone You Love has Died by Suicide

By Miki Tesh, LCSW

Talking about someone who died is very hard to do. It can be even more difficult when the person died from suicide. Others may be reacting in similar or very different ways, but all feelings and reactions are normal, no matter what they are. It's so important to find supportive and caring people we trust to talk about how we feel.

When someone dies from suicide, one of the most difficult hurdles to overcome is stigma. Stigma is an undeserving and negative label that others put on someone, and it is very unfair to those who experience it. We might feel like we must hide the truth because we worry that others will judge us. Because many people are not educated about what it feels like to be someone grieving from suicide, we might be embarrassed, afraid others will treat us differently, or look down on us.

Some people may avoid talking about the person who died because they are afraid of saying the wrong thing. They might even be afraid that suicide could happen in their family, to them, or to a friend. Other people might be upset because suicide has already happened in their family. It may surprise you to know that there are others out there who have experienced suicide, even though we often do not know who they are.

You have total control over whether or not you tell people what happens in your life. It is your decision completely. You should feel comfortable with the people you want to talk with, and you can choose to share as little or as much as you wish. Remember, whether you choose to tell someone everything or nothing at all, that choice is your right.

Take some time to think about how you want to respond to people's questions. You will want to be prepared so you are not caught off guard. For many of us, it is hard to describe what happened. We can simply say, "It was because of suicide." If you do not want to let people know how the person died, you could say that you, "do not want to talk about it right now." You can tell people, "because it is too sad to talk about it." You could say that the person died "suddenly, and for unknown reasons" because, truly, we often do not know exactly why a person chooses suicide. It is your decision. You need to feel comfortable in how you address others. There is no right or wrong way to talk about what happened.

We may never know why someone died by suicide. Most likely, the person was not himself or herself when he or she died. It is very reassuring and comforting for us to remember that the person loved us very much. When we remember them for their good loving qualities, we celebrate them in ways that are helpful for us and others who knew them. Find different ways to celebrate that person's life, whether through pictures, stories, music, art, personal memories, funny stories, or objects that have memories.

When we remember how much we love a person, it also is very common to feel like we could have done something to prevent the death. We usually have some feelings of guilt, as if we were somehow responsible for what happened. Sometimes people blame others for the suicide. But, when someone dies from suicide, it is no one's fault. We can never know why someone chose to harm him or herself.

Most likely, the person had been experiencing problems and could not think clearly. They forgot to ask for help or talk about their feelings to feel better when life was difficult. They forgot that all problems get better over time. And they forgot that they are very important to others. Always remember, nothing you said, did, or thought could have caused this to happen.

Because it is normal to worry that we could have prevented someone from harming his or herself, one of our biggest fears is that suicide might happen again. We may even worry that the child of the person who died might do the same thing. Although there is sometimes a family connection, most all people who have a family history of suicide do not go on to do the same thing. We always can learn from every situation.

Keep in mind that everyone in life has, at some point, experienced desperation or vulnerability. Always tell people you trust how you are doing and feeling, and talk about problems freely in safe environments. Continue to search for ways to make the situation better. People die by suicide because they did not talk about their feelings in ways that would help them. This is why it is so important to be open and honest while looking for ways to improve how we feel about ourselves.

When grieving, one of the more normal feelings is isolation. At times, we may feel especially isolated when someone is insensitive about suicide or about the person who died. When people are insensitive, they probably mean well but they are misinformed about grief and suicide. Most people struggle with what to say. Unfortunately, our society does not educate others about how to talk about grief and suicide. As a result, when people avoid talking about it, or make insensitive remarks, we tend to feel alone and different.

We may also isolate ourselves and avoid talking about it with others. This can feel very lonely. Bear in mind that there are many families nearby who have experienced suicide, but you just haven't always heard about them. We are never alone, and all families go through difficulties. It helps us realize we are normal and connected when we find thoughtful caring people to talk to.

Feelings of embarrassment, guilt, and isolation are not the only common feelings. Anger also is often mixed up with other emotions. We may be angry with other people. For some, it is spiritually comforting to believe that we all grow emotionally and spiritually, even after we die.

Our thoughts and feelings are always changing, and although the person decided to end his or her life during that very small window of time, logically, we can assume that that person's thoughts and feelings do not stay the same. In order to understand ourselves and develop as spiritual people, we have to experience deep feelings. This is also a normal part of grieving. Painful emotions get better over time, but it is a slow process that needs to happen gradually over time.

After a while, you may notice that you will feel and talk differently about what happened. As we become comfortable sharing and trusting others, we open up about our feelings in ways that can be very positive for us. As we talk through grief feelings, other unexpected feelings will emerge. This is very normal, and it helps in the long run when new thoughts and feelings inevitably come up. It is a positive experience when we become comfortable with our feelings, stronger as an individual, and hopefully are able to help others in the long run.

We can not change what happened, but we can learn from our own and other's experiences. Our loved one had and continues to have a lot to offer us in life and after he or she has died. We can learn to live in positive ways, help ourselves when needed, and appreciate the good times we had with that person.

Remember, always talk about feelings in ways that help you feel better and understand situations better. We always can improve how we feel about every situation that happens. All problems change and improve over time, especially when we seek out help from others. Every situation in life is an opportunity to learn about who we are and how we want to live every day.

About the Author

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