

Explaining Suicide to Children

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One of the most challenging types of loss that a family will face is a death by suicide. Each member of the family will experience their grief differently depending on myriad factors, including the person's relationship to the deceased, the circumstances of the death, previous history of loss, the age of the survivor, as well as personality factors. In addition to the family's intra-personal responses, each family member may encounter environmental changes such as a withdrawal of social support, financial hardships, the "conspiracy of silence" or the reluctance on the part of some family to share the true cause of death..

When death is a result of suicide, the task of telling children may be more difficult than for other types of death because the underlying cause was inside or invisible in the case of depression. The immediate aftermath of the death is a time of confusion and intense emotion for everyone involved, and families often seek guidance on what to tell children and how much to involve children in the mourning rituals.

Regardless of the age of the child, it is always important to offer simple, truthful explanations about the cause of the death. Accurate information is crucial to the grieving process. Without the facts children will have difficulty with the first task of mourning, *accepting the reality of the death* as defined by a leading authority on grief, Dr. J. William Worden (Grief Counseling & Grief Therapy, 2009). As hard as it may seem to be truthful it is always advisable because the children will eventually find out. Additionally, involving children as young as two or three in the funerary rituals will also help them with this task of understanding death and the concept of irreversibility or the finality of death. Children will follow the lead of the adults in their life, and if adequately prepared for the funeral will generally find the support of their community and the rituals to be comforting. Attendance will also allow them to stay in proximity of their closest family members.

The following examples are helpful tools for explaining suicide to children and helping them on their journey toward healing:

For very young children:

- First explain, "Your person who died had been feeling very, very sad and could not think of any other way to end their pain/sadness..."
- Explain what he/she did to end their life, "...so she took a whole bottle of pills which made her body stop working, and then she died" or "He used a gun to make his body stop working, and then he died."
- Next, "The word for ending your own life is 'suicide'."

While most people who are depressed are not suicidal, most suicidal people are clinically depressed (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention Symposium, 2001).

Therefore, *for school-aged children* you can add:

"Mommy had a disease called Depression which made her feel so sad and/or angry. Because of the disease she could not think clearly like people without that disease can, so she could not think of any other way to end her pain except to end her own life."

- We strongly suggest that you conclude by reminding a child there are people and treatments that can help. Ask the child, "Who would you go to for help if you ever felt very depressed and thought about ending your own life?" Caution—make sure they can identify someone they trust and would go to for help.

With all children:

- It's important to be both truthful and thorough in your explanations while remembering to emphasize that they are not to blame.

For adolescents:

- Developmentally, an adolescent is on a course of developing their own identity outside the family. It is important to remember that expecting them to assume parental or adult responsibilities prematurely because of the absence of the deceased could interfere with this natural and crucial developmental outcome.

Children will eventually learn the truth and it is always preferable for a child to hear the truth from the person they trust most in the safest setting possible. To minimize confusion and anger, this conversation should take place before the child returns to school so they will be prepared for the questions and comments of their peers. If children don't learn the truth until adulthood, they may feel betrayed by those they trusted who were not truthful with them.

A child may experience the act of a parental suicide personally. This often affects their sense of self-worth and creates feelings of abandonment. Unexpressed anger, guilt and shame can impair the child's ability to form meaningful relationships in the future. Fortunately, Harvard researcher Phyllis Silverman (*Never Too Young to Know*, 2000) found that most childhood grief survivors are able to remain committed in relationships.

Remind child survivors of suicide that the person who died loved them and that the death is not their fault. In addition, assure them that it is because of their disease that they died and not because of anything they did or did not do. Another way to help children is to guide them to keep memories of happy times alive in conversation, keep photos and personal belongings of the person that died on hand, and by making a memory box or album.

Words to use:

Suicide: When someone ends their own life so their body won't work anymore.. People who die from suicide often do so because they are suffering from a disease that you can't see called Depression. Depression is in the brain so they can't think clearly and feel very, very sad all the time. Sometimes they feel hopeless that things will never get better and that life is not worth living. They may think there is no other way to solve their problems or to end the pain they are feeling.

Death: When a person's body stops working. They can no longer hear, see, smell, taste, or feel. When a person dies, we will never see them alive again.

Depression: Extreme feelings of sadness and hopelessness that last a long time. Medicine and therapy can help.

Guilt: Something we feel when we think we have done something wrong or are the cause of something bad happening.

Grief: Natural feelings and thoughts when someone close to us has died.