

After Suicide: Three Things to Remember

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As you begin to take in the reality of the loss of your loved one by suicide, there are three things to remember:

Take Care of Yourself

Right now, you may not feel like anything matters. You have been psychologically wounded by this death, and as with any injury, you will have to focus for a while on finding ways to cope with the pain and take care of yourself.

No One Can Do This Alone

You will have to find ways of surviving that work for you. They will not necessarily be the same methods of coping used by other members of your family or your friendship network. That's okay. But one thing that every grieving person must do is allow other people to help them with the process.

Ask yourself, "Who is the best person to talk to about this right now: another family member, a friend, a clergy person, a therapist?" Different people can help you in different ways. Some can be there just to listen. Some can do things for you. And some will have helpful suggestions for getting additional help.

But you must be willing to accept the help when it comes – what we do know is that coping with a death by suicide is too big to try to tackle all alone.

You Will Survive This

As the days go by, it will become increasingly clear that you are likely to be forever changed by this trauma. This may well be the most difficult thing you have ever had to face in your life. We have met and worked with hundreds of people after the suicide of a loved one. These people experienced a great deal of grief; but after a lot of hard work, they also found a way to live their life and move beyond the pain. It is a tribute to the human spirit that people can and do survive this loss. And, even though it may be hard to believe right now, you can survive, too.

Children do mourn, but they will typically show their grief differently than adults. These ways reflect the level at which your child is presently able to come to terms with the death. Their understanding will change as they develop through the years. We also want to address again the important question of whether to tell your children the truth about the circumstances of the death. In an attempt to protect children, well-meaning adults may consider hiding the fact that the death was a suicide or the method by which it was carried out.

But even if children do not know the facts of a situation, they are usually keenly aware of the emotional responses of the adults around them. They know something very upsetting has happened, and without knowing the facts, they tend to construct their own (often incorrect) explanation, sometimes attributing the death to something they did or did not do.

When Suicide is the Cause of Death

Maintaining silence or lying about the cause of death teaches children that some things are so awful they just cannot be talked about. At times, you may feel this way yourself about the suicide. But silence and deception leave children feeling alone, confused, and too ashamed or frightened to talk about what is on their mind.

It also creates psychological turmoil for the child as they attempt to reconcile their feelings (“something is very wrong”) with the words that are being said to them (“it’s not that bad”). There is enough pain for everyone in your family right now, and communicating honestly about the suicide allows family members – including children – to be part of the mutual support that family members can give to one another.

The Child Will Find Out Eventually

Finally, it is worth repeating that eventually, your child is likely to figure out that the death was a suicide or else hear it from someone else. When children or adults discover months or years later that a death was a suicide, they then have the additional distress of realizing that they have not been told the truth – which can feel like a betrayal and a good reason to mistrust other information they have been given by adults.

For this reason, it is almost always better for a child to learn the truth about the death from you than from someone else. You can decide how many of the details to divulge by gauging your child’s reactions and listening to the questions he or she asks. Most child therapists agree that it is important for a child to understand that the individual died through suicide. Your child can make better sense of this brutal fact with the help of a trusted adult.