

when a parent dies by suicide... what kids want to know



CHILDREN HAVE A LOT OF QUESTIONS when someone in their family dies. When a parent dies by suicide, those questions can be even harder to answer. Suicide often becomes a secret that nobody talks about. When children don't have answers to their questions, they tend to come up with their own, which can be incorrect and scary!

Each parent and child's first conversations about death and suicide will be different. How you address the subject will depend on the child's age and ability to handle the information. But children can often understand more than you might think.

This brochure will help prepare you to take the first step. It lists common questions children have when a parent dies by suicide, and suggestions for answering them. It is important to answer even the smallest questions. This information may also help you explain the suicide of other family members or friends.

Bereavement is complex, and suicide is even more complex. This brochure is not intended to replace professional help. *Please get help from a professional.*

Questions kids have

Why?

"Why?", plain and simple, is the most common question when someone dies by suicide. Unfortunately, it's also the hardest question to answer. The only person who really knew why was the person who died.

There is no single answer that helps children understand why a parent would kill himself or herself. Even when the parent leaves a note, suicide is often very hard to understand.

- Try to keep your answers short and simple. Use words that match the child's age and development. For example, a six- to eight-year-old child will understand things differently from a nine- to 11-year-old.
- Don't give the child more information than he or she wants. The child will likely want to know more as time goes on.
- When people kill themselves, they are not happy or healthy. They are very unhappy. It's not the same kind of sadness that kids might feel when they can't watch their favourite TV show or eat their favourite chocolate bar. It's a kind of sadness that goes on for a long time and makes people really unhappy.
- The parent was in a lot of emotional pain. When people choose to end their life, it is because in their mind, living was just too hard. They didn't know how to get help or didn't choose to get help. They felt very sad and they made the wrong decision.

What is suicide?

- With young children, explain suicide with simple, concrete terms and explanations. For example, “Suicide is when a person is so very, very sad that she chooses to make her body stop working.”
- Be honest, but keep your answers to children’s questions simple and short. Do not give more information than the child wants. Children may want to know if their parent actually killed himself or herself. The answer is “Yes.” It may be hard to say this, but it’s the truth. It’s much better for the child to hear the truth from you than from someone else.

Did I do something to make this happen?

Is it my fault?

- Suicide is never anyone’s fault. This message needs to be repeated over and over again.
- Children often feel guilty when a parent dies by suicide. Many children think they could or should have prevented the suicide. Children often worry that they did something to cause the suicide. They may say, “If only I’d done what Mom asked me to do,” “If only I’d done all my chores” or “If only I hadn’t fought with my brothers so much.” Make sure children know they did nothing wrong. The suicide was definitely not their fault. It had nothing to do with anything they said or did.

Could I have prevented my parent’s suicide?

What could I have done differently?

Children often think there is something they could have done, or done differently, to prevent the suicide. They may think that if dad had told them how sad he was, they could have stopped him from ending his life. If they had gotten better grades at school, perhaps mommy would have been happier and wanted to live. If they had been nicer to their brothers and sisters, things would have been easier at home and their parent would not have chosen to die.

- Make sure the child knows the suicide is not anyone’s fault. There is nothing the child could have done to change what happened. Also make sure the child knows that the parent who died loved him or her very much.
- Feelings are not rational. Even though you have told the child that the suicide was not his or her fault, the child may still feel guilty. Guilt feelings can last a long time. The child needs to be able to express guilt and have it accepted. Eventually these feelings will get less intense.

Will I die by suicide too?

Suicide is scary for children. Sometimes children think that if their parent died by suicide, they might end up killing themselves too—that it runs in the family.

- Suicide is not something you “catch” from someone else. You can’t catch it like a cold. And it is not inherited from your parents.
- Suicide is like other illnesses: if there is suicide in your family, you might be at greater risk of suicide yourself. But it is still a very small chance—there is a much, much bigger chance that you won’t kill yourself.

Are you going to die too? Will I be left alone?

When a parent dies, many children become afraid of being left alone or abandoned. Some children fear that if one parent can leave them, the other could go too. Children may become very anxious or clingy. They may worry if the remaining parent is away for a time.

- Let the child know that you are here now and that you love him or her very much. Tell the child that you do your best to lead a healthy life, and that you know how to get help when you need it. Depending on their age, you might also tell children who would take care of them if necessary.
- Children need time to process the trauma of suicide and to rebuild trust—trust in the people they love and in the world they thought was safe and secure.

If I kill myself too, will I see my parent again?

Young children may say to the remaining parent, “I want to die to be with Mommy or Daddy.”

Depending on their age, children may not understand that death is permanent. They may think they can visit the parent who has died and then come back to the living parent.

Unfortunately, some kids think that suicide might not be such a bad idea. The sadness they feel after their parent’s death is so intense that they think nothing could be worse—not even their own death.

- Suicide is never an answer to a problem. There are other ways to solve problems.
- If the child ever becomes very sad, he or she should get help. An adult can make sure children get the help they need.

What do I tell kids at school?

Will they think bad things about my family?

- Many people have negative attitudes about suicide and mental health problems. Some people look down on a family that has experienced a suicide (or other mental illnesses). Sometimes kids will make mean jokes and pick on others because of this. They might say something cruel like, “Ha ha, your mom killed herself.” Some children have no idea how hurtful this can be. Others know it hurts, but still say mean things. The important thing is to help children deal with these comments. They can choose to ignore them. Children can also practise saying something like “Mommy was sick and was very, very sad.” They can also tell an adult right away.
- Help children decide how much information to share. Sometimes, it might be easier for a child to say something simple, like “My mother died suddenly” or “My dad was sick and he died.” Older kids can also say, “Dad died by suicide.” Some children may want to share more details. It’s a personal choice and it is up to the child. Make sure the child knows that he or she does not have to share details. You can teach children how stop conversations when they get uncomfortable. For example, they can say, “Thanks for asking, but I don’t want to talk about this any more.”

Why am I so sad? Will I be this sad forever?

Children feel grief in different ways. Their feelings about a suicide are often quite different from how children feel after other kinds of death. Children often feel embarrassed and ashamed if a parent dies by suicide. After the death of a parent, children may also feel:

- abandoned
- shocked
- sad
- angry
- fearful
- guilty
- confused
- depressed
- anxious
- lost or empty.

It’s hard for children to deal with intense grief all the time. Instead, they mourn in small chunks of time over a long period. They might be crying one minute, and playing with friends the next. This up-and-down part of grief is often confusing to adults as well as to children.

Sometimes, other people don’t accept the grief that survivors of suicide feel. This is partly because of the stigma, or negative attitudes, around suicide. This makes grieving harder.

- Make sure kids know they won’t always feel this way. Children need to have a sense of hope.
- Encourage the child to talk about his or her feelings. Some children feel comfortable talking. Others can explore their feelings through drawing and

playing. Listen to what the child says and, even more importantly, what he or she doesn’t say.

- Acknowledge and validate children’s feelings. Say things like, “I see that you’re really sad” and “It’s OK to feel angry.”

When will it stop hurting?

What can I do to start feeling better?

- Children are sometimes confused by how they feel. They may think they are different from other kids. Make sure they know that all children are unique, and so is the way they grieve. There is not a right way or a wrong way to grieve.
- The best thing kids can do to feel better is to talk about the loss. Let the feelings out. This means crying, screaming, yelling and, most importantly, asking questions. All of this is OK.
- Encourage kids to ask questions. Tell them they shouldn’t be afraid of making you more sad by asking questions and talking about the death.
- Make sure children know it’s OK to feel happy as well as sad. Feeling happy (or feeling better) doesn’t mean they’re not still sad about their parent’s death. It doesn’t mean they have forgotten their parent. They will never forget their mom or dad.
- Use storybooks to help get conversations going. See what is available in your local bookstore and library.
- Keep up children’s normal routines as much as possible. It may be hard, but try to keep them going to school, soccer practice, swimming, Girl Guides, play dates with other children, etc.
- See if there is a support group for survivors of suicide in your community. Look in the Yellow Pages under “Bereavement.”
- Sometimes a child may feel really sad and have no one to talk to. Or the child may want someone else to talk to. He or she can call Kids Help Phone at 1 800 668-6868 to talk to an adult (social worker, psychologist, psychotherapist or doctor) who can help.
- If the child is old enough to write, he or she can start a journal to write down thoughts and feelings. Children can use drawings too. Encourage the child to include things he or she would like to say to the person who died. Children might even want to write a letter to the parent who died.
- Remember to take time to do things that make the child feel happy (e.g., play a sport or game, hobbies, go to a movie).
- Give lots of affection and hugs to the child. Tell the child how much you love him or her.
- Other things that you and your child can do:
 - Frame a picture of the parent who died and put it in the child’s room.

- Make a photo album especially for the child.
- Plant a memorial tree or garden.
- Light a memorial candle.
- Make a memory book to remember the person who died.
- Make a worry box. Write down worries about the death (or make drawings) and put them in the worry box. Worries may be shared with trusted adults.

How can I remember my mom better?

How can I make sure I never forget my dad?

- Invite children to the formal commemoration(s) of the parent (the funeral or memorial). Be sensitive if they do not want to go.
- Do something special on the deceased person's birthday and/or the anniversary of his or her death. These informal rituals are important.
- Give the child an object or special possession that belonged to his or her parent.
- Make sure to talk often about the parent who died. Don't avoid saying the person's name around the children. Remember to mention the parent at family ceremonies and holidays.

If a child talks about wanting to die

If a child talks about killing himself or herself or wanting to die, take these comments seriously. Seek professional help. You can't afford to guess wrong by assuming the child doesn't really mean it.

Need more help?

If you want more information about suicide and how it affects children and families, speak to your family doctor or call the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) at 1 800 463-6273 or 416 595-6111 in Toronto. Help is also available at:

Bereaved Families of Ontario

Services include self-help information, support groups, bereavement support via the Internet, educational resources for the bereaved, referrals to professional counsellors and information about other self-help agencies. Note: There are 11 affiliate agencies that serve communities throughout Ontario; you can contact an agency near you. Tel: 416 440-0290 www.bfotoronto.ca

For more information on addiction and mental health issues, or to download a copy of this brochure, please visit our website:

www.camh.ca

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