

Talking To Children About Suicide

By Margo Requarth, MFT

As the director of a hospice children's bereavement program and a facilitator for adult survivors of suicide support groups, I have talked with many children, teens and adults who are coping with the trauma of losing a loved one to suicide.

I am not a stranger to suicide loss. Just before I turned four years old, my mother killed herself with a gun. That was in 1951 when people believed that talking to children about the subject of death, and particularly suicide, should be avoided. My younger brother and I were told that she had "gone on vacation." All of her personal belongs, all pictures of her, were put away. She just disappeared.

Later, when I overheard my dad tell someone on the phone that he was taking my brother and me "on vacation" to Lake Tahoe, I was terrified, thinking "vacation" was a place you went and never came back. I didn't learn the truth of her death until I was eighteen, but the isolation and mystery surrounding her death troubled me throughout my childhood.

As a psychotherapist and grief counselor, I understand that imparting such information is very painful. Telling your child about the suicide of a special person may seem like an impossible task, especially because you may be so undone yourself that you wonder if you can even get the words out. Maybe there is a part of you that clings to the hope that the death was an accident. You may wonder if you should say the word suicide or if there is a "right" way to tell your child.

I have learned that children who experience the suicide death of a loved one do best when they get honest information about what has happened—in doses suitable for their age. It is best for a child to get this information from a parent or someone else he trusts, in language he can understand, in an environment that is familiar and comforting.

Sharing rather than hiding grief allows for children to learn about feelings. A caring adult who explains that he is "very, very sad, and when we are sad, sometimes we cry", gives children words to describe what is happening. Given that children often mimic the behavior of others, if they are able to observe healthy grieving responses, they often respond similarly and are able to learn important lessons about expressing themselves. They can also learn that death is a part of life, and that the feelings we have around the loss of someone special can be expressed and managed. Take time for yourself before talking with your child, if possible. Give yourself the opportunity to talk with someone who understands the dynamics of suicide and who can help you sort out what you want to say to your child. You may want to ask a trusted family member, friend or professional mental health counselor to be with you as you tell your child. That person can support both of you as you try to cope with the initial response to this traumatic news.

Finding the words to impart the grim news of a loved one's suicide is very hard. You may be tempted to "protect" her from such traumatic information by telling her "white lies" or half-truths. However, without a truthful account, children tend to make up their own stories. Such self-explanations can create even more confusion, fear and isolation. Your honesty is also critical because a suicide often leaves a child feeling betrayed and vulnerable. While shielding a child from the truth may seem like a kindly act, deception may interfere with the trust bond.

When you are ready to talk with your youngster about the death, place her on your lap (or next to you) and start with a simple statement that "Daddy (or whoever) has died." This will be very hard, and it is okay if you cry. If your child is

very young, you may need to explain in concrete terms what “died” means by using examples a child this age can understand. (“When a person dies, his body stops working, his heart stops beating and he no longer breathes. He can’t eat or talk or move. He can’t hear or see anymore because he is no longer alive. He is dead”) Avoid using euphemisms such as “passed away,” “expired” or “transitioned.” Such explanations, while intended to help, often only confuse children, who know something terrible has happened.

A young child whose pet has died or who has experienced the death of a grandparent may have some idea of what “dead” means, but since the notion of suicide will not be in his realm of understanding, you will not want to include that piece in the initial statement. Most young children will not ask how, but may ask “Why?” or “Who will take care of me?” or “Are you going to die, too?” Such questions need to be addressed in a straightforward manner.

If a child asks a direct question, such as, “How did he die?” answer it simply. “Daddy died by suicide, which means he killed himself.” This will be confusing to a young child, and your continued dialogue will depend on her response to that statement. She may just say, “Oh,” and change the subject. If she asks Why (older children who have more understanding of death and suicide will want more information), you can tell her you aren’t sure yet, but that he was probably suffering from an illness in his brain that made him confused, and he didn’t know he could get help.

In addition to a truthful explanation, children need reassurance that the suicide was not their fault, and that they could not have done anything to prevent it. Like adults, children wrestle with concerns that their thoughts or behaviors may have contributed to the death. Because children often have unrealistic views of themselves as being all-powerful and able to control situations or other people through wishes or rituals, they may feel they did not behave well enough or had unkind thoughts and therefore, “caused” the death.

If your child feels he is somehow responsible for the death, hear him out as he attempts to explain how his actions or thoughts contributed to the suicide listen without interrupting, and then gently go over his beliefs with him. This is a conversation you may need to have many times. Let him know that sometimes mental illnesses occur which change the chemistry of people’s brains. These illnesses can cloud a person’s judgment and cause them to feel hopeless and unable to improve their lives. Educate your child that brain illnesses, just like other severe illnesses such as heart disease or cancer, can cause some people to die. In many situations, people who have these serious medical conditions can get treatment and medicine that helps, but sometimes attempted remedies do not work.

It is important to help a child understand that no one lives a life without emotional pain. We all experience anxiety, sadness and conflict, but there are ways to cope with life’s difficult times. We need to communicate to children that talking with others is a way of dealing with painful situations. Sharing our worries and concerns helps us feel better and may allow us to find a solution. Often, we learn that time changes our perspective or our situation.

Talking about suicide with our children is indeed difficult, but not impossible. Because every child is unique, each child’s response--emotional, cognitive, physical, behavioral and spiritual--will be different. Our task is to recognize each individual spirit and personality. We must give our children every opportunity to have their grief acknowledged, along with the encouragement to express their feelings. If we are willing to be patient, listen well and observe our children’s actions, they will teach us how best to support them.

Although talking to children about suicide is a formidable task, what we can offer them is the support and love they will need as they work toward coming to terms with their loss.