Tips for Caregivers: How to support your teen after the death by suicide of a friend or loved one

When your teen experiences the suicide death of a peer or loved one, they can have a range of reactions that include both grief and trauma. It can be difficult to witness your teen navigating this unique grief experience and parents/caregivers have an important role in supporting teens and promoting healthy grieving which is a top priority for reducing suicide risk/contagion. Grief is different for everyone, and the tips below will help you understand your teen's grief experience as it relates to a death by suicide and identify ways to remain supportive.

Common and expected reactions to a death by suicide include:

1. **Wanting to know "why."** There is never just one reason why someone dies by suicide. It's complicated by many things in a person's life that we may not know about, and it is common to think that if we know the reason why it might make us feel a little better. Gently let your teen know that there were things that they couldn't know about and ask them to talk about how they are feeling about the loss. Say something like, "We can't know the reason for sure, but I am sorry that I couldn't be there to help your friend and I am really sad. How are you feeling right now?"
2. **Increased use of social media and information seeking.** Media searches about what is happening is a normal part of the human stress response and can also increase the chance that your teen may get unwanted or harmful information because of computer algorithms in the search engines/social media designed to track information seeking. Help your young person by coming up with trusted sources for information, getting the facts verified about what happened, and encouraging media breaks.
3. **Wanting to be with peers even more than usual.** Adolescent development wires teenagers to focus on social concerns and peers. When a friend dies, teens take comfort in being together and learn about grieving from each other. Caregivers can support teens by creating safe meeting places AND giving your young person "permission" to take a break from teen activities. Sometimes teens need caregivers to set boundaries to help them rest and recharge during a high stress time. Let your teen know they can count on you to help them figure out when it's time to take a break. Say something like, "I notice that you have been with your friends a lot lately, which makes sense since you are all grieving, and I am wondering if we could give you some time to recharge your batteries without the group." Or, "What is it like spending so much time with your friends since your friend died? Could you use some time to recharge and rest?"
4. **Anniversary reactions are common for teens.** These reactions can be emotions, behaviors, or physical responses similar to what was happening for the teen at the time they got the news about the death. The date of the month, a **monthiversary** is meaningful to teens (if the death happened on the 5th, every month on the 5th is a reminder) along with other important dates

including shared special events such as beginning of a sport season. Support from caregivers can be a simple acknowledgement or developing a plan for support prior to anniversary dates.

5. **Physical complaints** like lack of energy, headaches, stomachaches and sleep complaints are common. You can help by encouraging hydration, oxygenation/exercise, and nourishing food.

Other ways caregivers can help:

- **Ask how they are doing and then ask again**. Let them know that you know this can be an overwhelming time and that you will be there to talk about their friend and how they are feeling whenever it makes sense. Showing openness to talking helps your teen feel connected and supported.
- **Manage your own reactions**. When you take time to reflect and become aware of how you are feeling and gently care for yourself, you have capacity to be present for your teen.
- **Assist your teen in how they can talk about and remember how their friend lived** and not how they died. For some teens mobilizing around an organization on behalf of their friend is helpful.
- **Provide access to support if you or your teen** think they need it. Access to care is a protective factor that can promote healthy grieving and reduce risk. This can mean a faith leader, school counselor, coach or therapist.
- **Advocate for school-based support.** Your teen may have trouble concentrating, finishing or keeping track of schoolwork as a part of their grief. Let the school know what happened and how they can help support your teen.
- **Return to routine with flexibility.** Encourage sticking with a schedule as much as possible. It helps restore a sense of control and predictability. And, at times your teen may need to take breaks or have partial participation.
- **Talk about what suicide means to your teen.** You will not put the idea in their head, but you will open a potentially lifesaving dialogue.
- **Ask what they need and don't make assumptions**. Offer choices to help rebuild safety and control.
- **Normalize developmental "regression."** Changes like not wanting to be alone at home or difficulty sleeping alone are common. Come up with a plan to get back on a more typical track after you find out how they are feeling and what's happening.
- **When your teen is having an intense reaction** you can help them by staying calm yourself and assisting them to regulate before you ask them to do a task or make a decision. Things like taking a complete breath or a walk can help a teen and caregiver to regulate. Once regulated, reconnect with them; then you are better able to do some thinking or acting together.

Dial **988** for immediate mental health support

This tip sheet was created in collaboration with Marlene Kenney, MA, LICSWMarlene is a former Wendt Center clinician who now specializes in traumatic grief and suicide loss in Arlington, MA. Marlene is an EMDRIA certified clinician and consultant and centers EMDR Therapy in her trauma focused practice. She is available for organizational consultation and critical incident response following suicide loss or other critical incidents.

©2026 Wendt Center Wendt Center for Loss and Healing is the Greater Washington region's premier resource for restoring hope and healthy functioning to adults, teens, and children who are coping with grief, loss, and trauma.