

Common Reactions to Suicide and Recommended Responses

Everyone grieves differently. Personal and family experiences with death, religious beliefs, community exposures and cultural traditions all play a role. Below are some of the more or less predictable adolescent reactions to a suicide and suggested responses.

- **Shock and Denial**- At first there may be remarkably little response. The reality of the death has yet to be absorbed. *"You are kidding, right?"* or *"This is just a joke - it can't be true."*
Suggested Response- Acknowledge the shock, anticipate the reaction to come, demonstrate a willingness to talk when students are ready.
- **Anger and Protection**- Generally speaking, *"black and white"* thinking sets in. Students want someone to blame for this and may openly express/direct anger at the deceased's parents/teachers/boy/girlfriend. *"Why did you let this happen?"* or *"It is all your fault that this happened!"*
Suggested Response- Listen and the listen some more. Gently explain that it is natural to want to find a reason for things we don't understand. Suggest that suicide is a very complicated human behavior and that there are always multiple reasons...and that blaming another individual may put that person at risk of suicide also.
- **Guilt**- Students close to the deceased may blame themselves. *"If only I had called him/her back last night."* or *"I should have known...I shouldn't have teased him..."*
Suggested Response- Remind Students that only the person who kills him/herself is responsible for having made that decision.
- **Anger at the Deceased**- This is surprisingly common, among close friends as well as those who were not close to the deceased. *"How could he/she do something so stupid?"*
Suggested Response- Allowing and acknowledging some expression of anger is helpful. Explain that this is a normal stage of grieving. Acknowledgement of anger often lessens its intensity.
- **Anxiety**- Students sometimes start to worry about themselves and/or other friends. *"If he/she could get upset enough to kill him/herself, then maybe the same thing will happen to me or one of my friends..."*
Suggested Response- Help students differentiate between themselves and the dead person. Remind them that help is always available. Discuss other options and resources. Practice problem solving.

- **Loneliness**- Those closest to the deceased may find it almost impossible to return to a normal routine, and may even resent those who appear to be having fun. They may feel empty, lost, totally disconnected. They may become obsessed with keeping the memory of their friend alive.
Suggested Response- Encourage students to help each other move forward in positive ways. Notice anyone who seems to be isolating from others and reach out to them, offering resources to help grieving process.
- **Hope and Relief**- Once the reality of death has been accepted, and the acute pain of the loss subsides, students find that life resumes a large degree of normalcy and they come to understand that over time, they feel much better. They can remember their friend without extreme pain.
Suggested Response- Simply remain open to listening to students' feelings, especially on anniversaries (two weeks, months, years, etc.). Recognize the importance of both mourning and remembering.

How to Support Grieving Youth

Avoid:

- Arguing over trivial matters
- Giving a lot of advice
- Making moralistic statements about the person who died
- Minimizing the loss
- Discouraging the grieving process
- Assigning new responsibilities right away

Do-

- Learn about the grief process
- Be genuinely truthful
- Demonstrate love and respect
- Encourage talking about feelings and talking about the deceased friend
- LISTEN, not matter what
- Offer to attend the funeral/service with a youth
- Allow crying
- Expect laughter too
- Follow the lead of the "survivor" with patience and kindness
- Offer opportunity for remembering
- Expect that your presence may be important, while talking may be limited
- Share some experience with listen, but keep the focus on the person you are supporting
- Help identify other to talk to
- Understand that memorials can be comforting
- Believe in healing and growth