

When a Friend Dies by Suicide

Guidelines for Students

“When I got to school and heard the news, I thought they were kidding. It was too bizarre to believe. Then I realized they couldn’t be so sick to make up a joke that Mike was gone. I believed it—sorta. But I got to tell you, even though I saw his body at the funeral and all, sometimes it still seems not real to me.”

—ZACH, HIGH SCHOOL JUNIOR

Having a friend die suddenly is pretty bad under any circumstances, but when the reason appears to be suicide, it can feel even worse. There is something about having a friend choose to die, especially if the circumstances were violent, that can be really hard to understand. Kids who have gone through this experience say that the shock of what happened can take a long time to wear off. They say the reality of what happened doesn’t really stick for a long, long time.

These kids also admit that they can be pretty confused about what happened. They feel a lot of stuff at the same time and it can be hard to sort out. They usually need to talk about what happened with their friends even more than they need to talk to the adults in their lives. Friends seem to understand better—they knew the kid who died, probably better than most of the adults did. But they also say that adults *can be* helpful, especially the ones they trust, the people in their lives who know how to listen to kids.

So how do you help yourselves and your friends at a time like this? Here is a list of suggestions from kids and from experts in the field that may make it just a little bit easier for you to get through the next few days:

- The first, last, and middle thing to remember is that you are not alone. Sometimes you can feel really lost, alone, and isolated in the tough feelings that often stun you when you learn someone has died. Despite feeling like no one else shares what you’re experiencing, other kids—and, believe it or not, adults—often do. Take a minute to look around at the faces you see. Most of them will look as shocked as you. Realizing that you’re not alone is the first step in being able to reach out for help.
- One of the ways to help yourself is to talk about how you feel. It doesn’t have to be one of those heart-to-heart conversations that gets real emotional way too quickly. It can be as simple as saying to another kid, “Wow! I’m blown away by this. What’s going on with you?” Psychologists point out that talking about feelings can be really helpful in making them a bit less intense. Sure, in a situation like this you may not feel like talking for a while, but you’ve got to start somewhere. And the sooner you do, the sooner your healing will begin.

- Reach out to the people who know you. Maybe they knew your friend, too, so they will really understand some of what you're feeling without you even having to say a word. But even if they didn't know your friend, they know you. They know how to listen and support you. Because what you're looking for now is not someone to tell you anything to make this better. The truth is, that would be impossible. Nothing can make it better right now. What you're looking for is someone who simply understands what this death means to you. That's a whole lot easier to come by.
- You will probably spend a lot of time trying to figure out what happened—why your friend did this. You may even think you know, and you'll probably hear a lot of gossip and rumors from other people who think they know, too. Try to remember that the truth behind every suicide is pretty complicated—there's always more than one reason a person chooses to take his or her life. And even if a lot of what you know and hear turns out to be true, all the facts that drive someone to make this desperate decision are like one of those equations in algebra with a mysterious X. In the suicide equation, the only person who knows what that X really means is the person who died. No one will ever be able to totally figure out the real answer. Tough, but true.

"I was waiting in line at the movie theater when I heard the kids behind me say something about Joe's death. Like he was a wacked-out druggie—something like that. Nothing could be further from the truth! I was ready to turn around and punch them, but my girlfriend stopped me. She turned around and told them that she'd heard those rumors, too, but they were totally not true. He was a really cool kid and maybe they could tell that to other people, too."

—SENIOR BOY

- Kids say that when someone they know dies by suicide, they sometimes feel responsible, like there was something they should have done to prevent what happened. And feeling responsible can lead to feeling guilty—this crazy belief that you really *are* responsible for the death. It may be hard to accept the fact that the only person any of us is responsible for is ourselves. Your friend made a choice—a bad choice—probably not really understanding what the consequences would be. But your friend's life wasn't yours to take away. It belonged to him or her.
- Let's say that maybe you *were* mean to the kid who died. Maybe you teased or bullied or ignored him or her. You can't take back what you did, but you can learn from it. It's

a pretty intense lesson, but it's incredibly important. You never want to do anything to another person that you'll regret. Period. End of sentence.

- You may hear other people saying mean things about your friend. Or maybe they'll joke about the fact that he or she died by suicide. These kinds of responses might get you really mad. It may help to remember that a lot of people are so uncomfortable when someone dies by suicide that they say stupid, untrue, and unkind things. People can be pretty ignorant about things they don't understand. Getting angry when you hear something like this is a natural reaction, but it isn't necessarily a helpful one. Staying calm and reasonable is a better way to try to get people to listen to the truth.
- Sometimes, when someone we know dies by suicide, we may find ourselves thinking about suicide, too. It's kinda like "If he could do it, maybe I will too . . ." Again, normal reaction, but scary reaction. If you find yourself having these kinds of thoughts, it is really important to talk with an adult you trust. Not another kid. An adult. You wouldn't go to a friend to fix a broken arm. You'd go to a doctor—someone wiser, with experience in fixing broken arms. When you are having thoughts of suicide, an adult's wisdom and perspective can help you figure out what to do about them.
- You may want to do something to remember your friend, something to show that you cared about him or her and that he or she was important in your life. And you can probably come up with lots of cool ideas. The tricky thing with this is that there are going to be some kids in your school—maybe even kids who didn't know your friend very well—who may be pretty misguided by this kind of stuff. They'll see these memorials and think, "Hey, if I die, then at least the school will pay attention to me, remember me in a cool way." It may sound crazy, but it is absolutely true and contributes to something called suicide imitation or contagion. Not cool. So this is another time when you want to turn to one of those trusted adults in the school and run by them your ideas for remembering your friend. There are safe things to do that don't feed into the contagion thing.
- Last thing to know—it does get better. Getting back close to normal takes as long as it takes. It's different for everybody, but it does happen. It never goes away, though, the memory of what happened. But it can change your life for the better. You can use your experience with suicide to become more sensitive and compassionate to the people around you who are in that dark place where death seems like a good option. You can learn about the resources that are available to help when life seems hopeless. You can learn where to go if you need help or where to send a friend. The bottom line? Maybe someday you will save a life.

This handout is provided courtesy of the *Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide*, www.sptsusa.org.