

*Ways you can help persons whose family member or friend has died through suicide.*

Ask “How are you feeling?” or “How are you really doing?”, and be willing to spend the time to listen patiently. Allow times of silence and accept strong feelings such as intense anger, sadness, fear and guilt. Don’t say “I know exactly how you feel”. Allow them the right to feel what they feel. It may be very different from your own experience of loss.

They may tell their story over and over as they process the events. Grieving takes time. Avoid telling them to “get over it”, “it’s time to move on”, or “it’s God’s will”.

Help them know that what they are experiencing is a normal part of grief after a suicide. Reading some information about suicide and how grief affects people after a suicide can help you understand this too.

Allow them to talk about the dead person, use his/her name when culturally acceptable, and be willing to share memories of the person that may bring emotions ranging from tears to laughter.

Use the words “suicided” or “took his/her own life” rather than saying “committed suicide” which implies that suicide is a crime.

Pass on resources or information on services that may help the person, so it is handy when they are ready for that help.

Urge them to wait before making major decisions such as moving or leaving their job. Encourage them to take time to look at alternatives rather than act rashly and irretrievably. Avoid encouraging the use of alcohol or drugs to deaden emotional pain.

If the person is experiencing nightmares or seems overwhelmed by their thoughts and feelings, having no days they could refer to as “good/better”, they may need to see a counsellor. Support them in accessing one.

If the person is expressing a desire to join their dead loved one, gently ask them if they are missing their loved one so much that they want to take their own life. If they are thinking of suicide they need professional assistance. See Chapter on *Prevention and Early Intervention* for information on what to do to help.

Offer whatever practical support you are able to give such as cooking a meal or providing transport.

Remember you can’t “fix everything” for them or “take away the pain” but you can help them feel you care and they are not alone. If you say “I’m there if you need me” be aware that the bereaved person may find it hard to ask for help so continue to call or visit them.

People usually offer support in the lead up to the funeral but then, as time goes on, people outside the family go back to their own lives and contact with the bereaved often lessens. This can be a difficult time when the bereaved may appreciate a caring call or a card saying “thinking of you”.

Suggest a bereaved by suicide support group if one exists locally.

Know your own limits as it can be emotionally draining to support the bereaved person. You may also have your own grief to deal with following the suicide. Be aware you need to take care of yourself too. Do something you enjoy for your own social and emotional wellbeing.

Children affected by the death also need help. Encourage the bereaved to be honest with children and use language that is appropriate for their age and to their culture.