

Teenagers Ages 12 – 19

Talking to teenagers about suicide.

WHEN THEY SAY: Why did he do it?

DON'T SAY: He just gave up on life.

SAY: We may never know why. If you can, accept the not knowing. It is a mystery, and mysteries are for pondering, not solving.

AND/OR

I don't know for sure, but I do know he was very tortured by life and just didn't know how to stop his pain, or what he was trying didn't work. I know it's hard to understand. I struggle with it too. I do know he really cared for you, though, and his death had nothing to do with you.

BECAUSE: Why is the most common question asked after a suicide. Naturally, we want things to make sense, and suicide is often deeply personal. When we are confronted with suicide, we face a mystery. Encourage the teen to accept that she may never have the answer to why; encourage the teen to accept the mystery and instead embrace and open to the idea of eventual healing. Grieving teens need our help if they are to survive what to them often seems unsurvivable.

WHEN THEY SAY: How could she do that to us? I'm so mad at her!

DON'T SAY: Are you sure you were a good friend to her?

SAY: When Maggie decided to end her life, I doubt she was thinking of you, her other friends, her family, or anyone for that matter. If she was, she probably wasn't thinking straight and thought you'd all be better off without her or something senseless like that. Her death wasn't about you or anyone else. It was about herself.

BECAUSE: Usually when people kill themselves, they are doing it out of self-anguish, not to hurt somebody else. In fact, suicidal people often make statements along the lines of: "If I am gone it will be easier for them." The grieving teen may vacillate between sadness, hurt, and outright anger. She may feel betrayed and left behind. Let her know that her anger is normal and necessary, and help her find healthy ways to express it. It's also important for her to find a way to say goodbye. She can write her friend a letter, for example, or have a private ceremony with her group of friends or classmates.

WHEN THEY SAY: The world is a terrible place. No wonder he wanted to leave it!

DON'T SAY: He just chickened out.

SAY: Life can get overwhelming. There are hard things we often have to face in life, but there is a lot of good, even if it is difficult to see that all of the time. Matthew may have been stuck in just seeing challenges. The best way you can honor him is to seek the joy and happiness he couldn't find. If you feel stuck, who can you talk with about it? Have you participated in the peer groups at school? How about I take you to that teen support group that meets on Wednesdays?

BECAUSE: Suicide, especially when a teen dies by suicide, can have a chain-reaction effect among classmates. Maybe you've heard the term "copycat suicide." Teenagers are discovering life and often have passionate "awakenings" about world happenings. They might get impassioned about global warming, genocide, war, and other atrocities. After all, it's the age when they are exposed to challenging topics and start seeing the world for what it is – the good, bad, and the ugly. When a friend or classmate dies by suicide, the teen might feel an intense loyalty. She might irrationally think that it's honorable to "stand beside" her friend and die by suicide herself. Listen closely for defeating comments or statements that her "friend was right." If you suspect she may be planning a suicide, waste no time in getting help.

WHEN THEY SAY: I can't breathe! Or, I think I'm having a heart attack!

DON'T SAY: Take it easy. You will be fine.

SAY: You might be feeling what's called a panic attack. It's common when you feel shocked and scared after a suicide. I know it feels really scary but it will pass and no damage will be done. Lie down and let me help you relax. We can visit with the doctor about other solutions.

BECAUSE: Fear, panic, and withdrawal are common responses to sudden death and suicide. The teen might be worrying that someone else close to him will die by suicide, or he may be simply reacting to the shock and disbelief that come with suicide grief. His head is swimming, and he feels a prolonged and heightened sense of unreality and anxiety. Panic attacks are an intense feeling of pending danger, even when there is no real danger coming. Symptoms include shortness of breath, dizziness, feeling faint, labored breathing, and a racing heart. A heavy pain in the chest may also be felt, making it feel to the teen like he is having a heart attack. Consider seeing a professional counselor if the attacks become more frequent.

WHEN THEY SAY:
tonight and I am going.

To heck with it! I'm out of here. There's a party

DON'T SAY:

Go ahead; you deserve it.

SAY:

I know it's tempting to want to escape the pain. I get it. But drugs and alcohol are like band-aids. They make you feel better for a bit, but you end up feeling worse afterwards. Go have fun, but please be safe and make good choices. Check in when you get home, ok?

BECAUSE:

The intense feelings sudden deaths like suicide create often feel like they need an intense reaction from the teen, whose grief is naturally complicated during this turbulent developmental stage. He may get caught up in a group protest of a friend's death. Or, he might be feeling outrage and injustice over the idea that such awful things happen in life. He might also party to protest or drown the realization that young people die – and that he could die too. Plus, he might want to “tempt” death out of loyalty for his friend. Finally, many teens drink or do drugs after a death to experience temporary relief from the deep pain they feel – something hard to resist when you live in the moment, as teens often do. Help him find healthy ways to express his pain, such as playing or listening to music, getting exercise, participating in sports, being in nature, writing, talking, or doing something positive in his friend's name (like taking over her volunteer duties or contacting her parents).

STIGNATIZED DEATHS: SUICIDE, AIDS, HOMICIDE

Sometimes there is a stigma surrounding the nature of the death; the greater the stigma, generally the less the support available to the child and family as they mourn. Examples of stigmatized deaths include those from AIDS, suicide, homicide, and drug overdose. My colleague Ken Doka has described losses that cannot be openly acknowledged, socially sanctioned, or publicly mourned as “disenfranchised grief” experiences. The potential of stigma should always be kept in mind as you companion a bereaved child. As she might be getting the social message that the death shouldn't be discussed, continually invite her to talk about it and to ask questions so she understands she can be open about her feelings despite the nature of the death.