

How to Talk to a Suicide Loss Survivor

Talking to those who have lost a loved one to suicide presents challenges beyond the discomfort we commonly feel in the presence of grief. Despite our best intentions, our eagerness to comfort someone or to fill a long silence may unwittingly cause us to say hurtful things. Similarly, the fear of compounding the loss survivor's pain by saying the wrong thing may cause us to self-edit in unhelpful ways or lead to our avoiding those who are grieving altogether.

Below are ten helpful tips to help you navigate conversations with suicide loss survivors in a kind, thoughtful and responsible way.

“I don't know what to say, but I'm here for you.”

Suicide loss is complicated, devastating, dumbfounding. There are no easy answers and no easy fixes. Be a patient, non-judgmental listener. Be a safe place for the loss survivor to give voice to their anger, frustration, fear, relief, sadness, or any other emotion they may feel. Or just be there with them – the reassuring presence of someone who cares may offer a lot of solace.

Refrain from saying, “I understand what you're going through.”

Because suicide loss is not like other losses, you cannot truly understand how the loss survivor is feeling. That's okay, and it's okay to acknowledge as much, too – it shows that you recognise the complexity of the loss survivor's grief and helps keep the conversation open.

Do not ask intrusive questions about how the person died.

If the loss survivor does not bring up the suicide method, assume they would prefer not to talk about it. If they do mention how their loved one died, do not ask for details beyond those that the loss survivor volunteers. On the other hand, you don't have to avoid the subject of the death altogether. Instead, offer a no-pressure invitation to talk: Are there things about the death that the person who's grieving would like to talk about? If not, let them know you are there to listen if they ever do want to talk.

Avoid trite advice and hurtful clichés.

Other than reminding the suicide loss survivor to take care of their basic self-care needs (getting rest, getting exercise, eating well), try to avoid direct advice-giving; there is no one right or wrong way to cope with a suicide loss. In addition, if there are any children who are affected by the suicide, it is up to the loss survivors closest to them to determine what to tell them, how to tell them, and when. Refrain from offering unsolicited advice such as, “They are too young to hear about such a death,” or “Just say it was an accident.”

Remember, too, that some of the common phrases we sometimes use when expressing our sympathies – “She’s in a better place,” “Everything happens for a reason,” “You are never given more than you can handle,” and “You’ll get over it” – may be hurtful in that they minimise the magnitude and nature of the suicide loss survivor’s grief.

Do not place value judgements on the suicide.

Do not refer to the suicide as a selfish choice, a sin, an act of weakness, or a lack of faith or love or strength.

Do not assign or imply blame.

In trying to answer the question of why, suicide loss survivors often place blame on themselves. Be careful not to say things or ask questions that might suggest they’re responsible for the suicide, whether directly or indirectly: Was there something they did to upset the person? Something they didn’t do? Did they miss any warning signs? Did they fail to take the signs seriously? These questions may feed the fears, regrets and self-recriminations that the loss survivor is already struggling with or, worse, introduce new ones at this already stressful time.

Be proactive about offering help.

People often find it hard to ask for help, or may not even know what kind of help they might benefit from, especially in the shock of the early days following a suicide loss. For that reason, a simple, “Let me know if you need anything” may not suffice. Offer help repeatedly and specifically. What everyday things that might be adding stress can you help with in the short term? Does the loss survivor need help running errands or picking up the kids from school? Would they like someone to just sit with them for a while? Making concrete suggestions shows that your offer to help is genuine, and will make it easier for the loss survivor to accept.

Don’t be afraid to talk about the person who died.

Say their name as you would after any other loss. Give the loss survivor an opportunity to reminisce with you about the person they loved.

Be patient.

Don’t place a timeline on the loss survivor’s grief; healing after a suicide loss is a lifelong journey. Well-intended though they may be, frequently heard phrases such as “This too shall pass,” and “You need to move on” can make the loss survivor feel pressured to “get over it.”



Don't disappear.

Remember that the weeks and months following the funeral, when the initial shock wears off and the full reality of what has happened sinks in, may be the toughest for the loss survivor. Continue to check in with them, let them know you are thinking of them, and that you're there for them.