

How you can help parents bereaved by suicide

Written by parents for parents

We've spoken with some parents whose son or daughter has taken their own life. We listened as they told us about some of the particularly unique characteristics of this type of loss: what helped, and what doesn't help. Here's what they would love you to know.

Grief following the suicide of a loved one can be very challenging. This is in part due to the sudden and traumatic nature of the death, and the recurring thoughts and anxieties that arise from this. These may be accompanied by feelings of failure and guilt – the feeling that 'I should have done something to prevent it'. We may desperately attempt to understand why this has happened, and struggle with the stigma and social pressures which accompany a death by suicide. What's often less talked about is the mix of emotions people bereaved by suicide often feel – struggling with the feeling of being rejected by your loved one while also acknowledging the emotional pain they must have felt.

✓ DO

- ✓ **Do** let me talk about my child. If you avoid me, it can feel that you are denying their existence.
- ✓ **Do** just be there. You don't have to say anything or give me advice.
- ✓ **Do** talk about my child's positive and negative attributes, and share any stories you have about them.
- ✓ **Do** spend time with me – it can be helpful if you are there to ward off any unwelcome visitors if I don't want to see anyone else.
- ✓ **Do** understand that I may be struggling with all sorts of thoughts. When you spend time with me, I may need to talk, be quiet or just cry. Please be patient with me.

✗ DON'T

- ✗ **Don't** clam up and change the subject when my child's name is mentioned – I need to talk about them.
- ✗ **Don't** use the word 'committed' when talking about suicide. You commit a crime – and suicide is not a crime. Instead, say 'they took their own life' or 'they died by suicide'.
- ✗ **Don't** show shock or horror when you find out how my child died.
- ✗ **Don't** ask questions about the details of what happened or ask me why they did it. I'll tell you if I want you to know.
- ✗ **Don't** judge me. I am struggling enough with what has happened.

✓ DO

- ✓ **Do** come with me on my first trip out in public after their death.
- ✓ **Do** invite me to join you for a walk or a coffee – getting out with a friend may be a good thing for me to do.
- ✓ **Do** come and talk to me if you see me out and about. Don't avoid me just because you're not sure what to say.
- ✓ **Do** feel free to provide meals for us, especially if they're in disposable containers.
- ✓ **Do** consider what you can do to help. For example, if we don't have much money, could you help organise a break away?
- ✓ **Do** try to remember that mental illness is just like physical illness – a specific part of the body is not working properly.
- ✓ **Do** just be a shoulder to cry on – I'll need that. Saying 'I don't know what to say' is absolutely fine.
- ✓ **Do** allow me to do 'normal' things when I feel able to. I may feel that I am dead inside, but I can still try to carry on.

This resource accompanies our free helpsheet 'How you can help bereaved parents'. This, and details of the other help and resources offered by Bereaved Parent Support, is available from our website.

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✗ DON'T

- ✗ **Don't** tell me your stories of people who have died by suicide, or about your own mental health issues – that won't help me right now.
- ✗ **Don't** feel that you have to have the answers for my questions – just be there for me.
- ✗ **Don't** cross the road or go to another aisle in the supermarket to avoid me.
- ✗ **Don't** say things like 'all things work together for good'. I may believe that deep down, but I don't need you to say it.
- ✗ **Don't** think that my child can't be buried in a churchyard because they took their own life – that stopped in the 1960s.
- ✗ **Don't** say 'They chose to...'. There is no choice about it – no one would take their own life if they felt there was another way to relieve the pain that they feel.
- ✗ **Don't** tell me that I won't see my child again because of what they did. How do you know?
- ✗ **Don't** ask me 'Are you over it yet?'. This is not something I will ever get over, although I will hopefully learn to cope with it in time.

