

What can you do to help when someone dies by suicide?

When someone dies by suicide, family and friends can experience intense grief. This understandably affects how people are able to cope. Supportive friends and colleagues who acknowledge this grief, listen, and offer support can make a big difference in helping people learn to deal with the loss.

When the person who died had a mental illness, family and friends often experience additional grief. It is common for people to feel confused, guilty, or even a sense of relief that the person may no longer be suffering. They may also feel angry and disappointed that services have let them down. Because of stigma, they may feel they can't talk about either the mental illness or suicide, adding to feelings of isolation.

A similar grief experience may be felt when a friend or family member is missing for a long time, but with the additional stress of not knowing if the person will return. If you know family or a friend of someone missing long-term, the information in this Factsheet could help you to support them.

Common responses when someone is bereaved

I don't know what to say.

- ④ If not sure what to say, ask 'How are you feeling today?'
- ④ Tell the person you're not sure what to say. Being honest will help to build trust
- ④ Try to listen 80% of the time and talk 20% of the time
- ④ Avoid making unhelpful statements such as, 'It's God's will' or 'Time heals all wounds'.

I don't want to make it worse for them.

By allowing the person to express their grief you will be helping. Nothing you do can take away the sadness, but it is important to be there for them.

- ④ Allow tears or accept no tears
- ④ Understand that the way the person expresses grief may be different from the way you would express it
- ④ Don't take anger personally.

They have lots of family and friends around. They don't need me.

People with lots of friends and family still need support from others. It's important to have grief acknowledged by friends and colleagues so the person doesn't begin to feel isolated.

They need help from a professional. There is nothing I can do.

While professional help can be very important, don't underestimate the importance of friendship when someone is grieving. You can do things a professional person can't such as going for walks, cooking a meal or being there in the evenings and on weekends, remembering the birthday and anniversaries of the person who died.

I'm not sure what to say about the mental illness.

Ask the bereaved person how they feel about this and reassure them you are happy to talk about mental illness if they want. Seek out some information so you know something of what the person may have been experiencing. Be compassionate and understanding about difficulties it may have caused in their relationship, and encourage them to talk to a bereavement counsellor if they are not coping or do not feel they can talk to anyone else.

Some important things you can do are

- ④ Be compassionate – show care and concern and allow the person to talk of their loss
- ④ Listen and be patient, for grief lasts longer than a few weeks or months
- ④ Talk naturally about the person who has died and do not be afraid to speak their name
- ④ Let them know that it's natural to be feeling the way they are, and to accept strong emotions
- ④ Offer practical support such as cooking a meal, dropping the kids at school or allowing flexible working hours
- ④ Suggest activities that you know they enjoy. They might not feel ready to participate, but it's important to offer
- ④ Help make appointments and arrange to get them there
- ④ Find out about information and support services, and help with making calls and searching on the Internet
- ④ Suggest they get help from a GP, psychologist or other health professional if they are not coping.

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Who can provide more help?

- ④ Talking to others who have been through a similar experience can be a great help. There are support groups for the bereaved in each State. Contact the services listed on this Factsheet for more information.
- ④ The Internet can be a good way to access information and support, particularly if the person feels too upset to see people face-to-face or have difficulty travelling. Use well-established websites such as the ones listed on this Factsheet.
- ④ If you feel the person isn't coping, encourage them to talk to a health professional such as a GP, grief counsellor or someone at your community health service. Although grief is natural, sometimes it is too difficult to deal with and may trigger other health problems.
- ④ Children who are bereaved may need special support to help them cope. For more information contact Kids Helpline on 1800 551 800.

Supporting a bereaved person may affect you as well

Be prepared for possible emotional effects on yourself of supporting a bereaved person, including:

- ④ greater awareness of your own losses in the past
- ④ worry about your own possible losses in the future
- ④ anxiety about your own mortality.

It is important to look after yourself and be aware of how supporting a friend or colleague may affect you. Talk to a trusted friend or seek help from a health professional if you find you are not coping.

For more information

- ④ www.grief.org.au
- ④ www.compassionatefriendsvictoria.org.au
- ④ www.lifeline.org.au
- ④ www.missingpersons.org.au

SANE Australia also produces a range of easy-to-read publications and multimedia resources on mental illness.

- ④ www.sane.org

Other useful SANE Factsheets on this topic available from the website:

- ④ [Has someone close to you gone missing?](#)
- ④ [Has someone close to you died by suicide?](#)

Where to call for help

- ④ 24-hour crisis telephone counselling
Lifeline: 13 11 14
- ④ National Missing Persons Coordination Centre
1800 000 634
- ④ Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement
1300 664 786
- ④ 24-hour bereavement support
Salvation Army Hope Line
1300 467 354
- ④ SANE Helpline
1800 18 SANE (7263)
helpline@sane.org

Ask these services about support in your State or Territory.