

## When Someone You Know Dies by Suicide

By Sasha J. Mudlaff, M.A.

*"Suicide is not chosen; it happens when pain exceeds resources for coping with pain."*

*-Martha Ainsworth*

### ♥ Talk about the facts

By dealing with the facts of the death, we help to stop rumors which only confuse and distort reality. In our society, people can sometimes be negatively influenced and overwhelmed by the cause of death. Fears that stop people from speaking the truth may seem protective but it can actually inhibit the freedom to grieve. It's important to discuss the truth about the death before we can begin the grieving process.

When we choose to not talk about suicide with others, we perpetuate the stigma and shame associated with death by suicide. By talking openly, we help to break down the stigma and the walls of shame which have unfortunately been built high by our society.

### ♥ Be open about mental illness

Unfortunately there is also considerable stigma and shame surrounding mental illness. Our brain is an organ, and just like other organs in our body, our brains can also be "sick" or not work properly. This is not a sign of weakness, it is a very real struggle for many people of all ages. If the person who died suffered from such things as depression, anxiety, or personality disorders, we need to openly talk about that. Often, suicide and suicide attempts are related to these types of mental illnesses. Knowing these facts can facilitate talking openly about a suicide and can only help others to begin to understand the circumstances leading up to the death.

### ♥ Dispel MYTHS of suicide

Avoid saying things that suggest the person "made a bad choice."

We cannot know what was going on in the mind of the person who has died. Perhaps they were incapable of concrete, rational thinking, which is necessary in order to make an informed choice:

*"Suicide is not chosen; it happens when pain exceeds resources for coping with pain."*

*-Martha Ainsworth*

Avoid proliferating the myth that this was a "selfish" act. Again, we cannot know the thought process of the person who has died. Perhaps in their mind (likely absent of rational thought at the time) this was *selfless*, that those they love most would be *better off* without them....

Avoid the phrase: "Suicide is always preventable." This places blame and makes a very loud and negative statement to the surviving family and friends that they *should have* or *could have done more to help*.

### The "Glorifying" MYTH

To suggest that we are "glorifying" suicide by acknowledging and talking about someone who has died by suicide is an unreasonable assertion at best. The assumption is that drawing attention to the person who died and talking about how they died will somehow cause others to want to go kill themselves as well. However, does it make sense that if we acknowledge someone who has died in a car crash, the others will then want to go die in a car crash? Or, if we acknowledge someone who has died from cancer, will others then wish to contract the disease as well? Of course not! Why then, when it is suicide, do we presuppose the same?

While "copy-cat" suicides are real, in those cases we typically can trace *preexisting mental health issues* with the person who has copied. *The copying does not occur because we have been open and honest about someone who has died.*

### ♥ **Share good memories and talk about ways to honor the person's life**

I believe that one of the most important things we can do is to honor life during life and also to honor life when someone has died. Acknowledging someone has died is the first step in honoring the life that was lived.

### ♥ **Some important considerations when talking with children and suicide**

When talking to children about suicide, it is important to be honest about the facts of what happened and to use age appropriate language. When telling a child that someone died by suicide, we can simply explain to a child that their loved one's brain was "sick" and "not able to think clearly" when this tragedy happened. Answer any questions a child has as openly and honestly as you can. Kids need to know the truth about the death of someone they love before they can begin the grieving process themselves. Eventually the truth will be discovered – from the media, a neighbor, a classmate... better it first come from a caring adult in that child's life. Children deserve to have the grown-ups in their lives be honest with them rather than confuse them with half-truths or lies.

Sometimes adults worry that telling a child the truth about a loved one's suicide might diminish the love the child felt toward that person. This is a very legitimate and real concern many parents share especially when a child's other parent or sibling has died by suicide. In a word, no. If we have honestly explained the facts of the cause of death to the child, we can easily move forward from there to the important task of honoring that person's life. The meaning of one's life is never solely defined by the moment of his or her death.