

Student Reactions to Suicide

Every student grieves differently. Personal and family experiences with death, religious beliefs, community exposure, and cultural traditions all play a role in how a student both experiences and expresses feelings about loss. There are, however, some predictable adolescent reactions to a suicide. The following is a list with suggested adult responses:

- **Disbelief over the news of the death.** The reality of the death has yet to be taken in. You are likely to hear things like “You are kidding, right?” or “This is just a joke—it can’t be true.” Acknowledge the disbelief; anticipate that once the shock has worn off, there will be a more emotional reaction. Let students know you’ll be available to talk when they’re ready.
- **Being protective of the deceased.** Students may want someone to blame and may openly express or direct anger at the deceased’s parents/teachers/boyfriend/girlfriend. You may hear “Why did you let this happen?” or “This is all your fault!” Listen, and then listen some more. Gently explain that we all try to find a reason for the things we don’t understand. Remember that suicide is a complicated human behavior and that there are always multiple reasons for why it happens. Remind students that blaming another individual may put that person at risk of suicide as well.
- **Guilt.** Students may blame themselves. You might hear things like “If only I had called him back last night” or “I should have known . . . I should not have teased him.” Remind students that the person who has died by suicide was struggling with intense and often conflicting emotions and saw no other way to resolve the feelings. If anyone had realized that the deceased was really thinking about dying, of course they would have acted in a way to save his or her life.
- **Being upset at the deceased.** This is expressed in statements like “How could she do something so stupid?” Allow and acknowledge some expression of anger. Suggest, however, that behind the anger there are often feelings of fear and pain. This may open up a different, more helpful conversation with the student.
- **Personal worry.** Students may worry about themselves and/or friends. They may say things like “If she could get upset enough to kill herself, maybe the same thing will happen to me (or one of my friends).” Help students make the distinction between themselves and the deceased. Make them aware that help is always available and discuss these options and resources. Practice problem solving with them.
- **Loneliness.** Those closest to the deceased may find it hard to return to their normal routine. They may miss the regular presence of the deceased in their everyday lives. They may resent those who seem like they are having fun, because they feel so empty, lost, and disconnected. Some students make it their job to keep the memory of their friend alive. This can often take the form of destructive behavior like drinking at the cemetery or partying in his or her honor. Encourage students to help each other move forward in positive ways. Notice anyone who seems to be isolating from others and reach out to them, offering resources to help with their grief.

- **Hope and relief.** Once the reality of death has been accepted and the acute pain of the loss subsides, students find that life resumes. Normalcy returns to a certain degree, and students begin to feel better. They can remember their friend without extreme pain. Remain open to listening to your students' feelings, especially on the anniversaries (two weeks, one month, one year, etc.). Recognize the importance of both mourning and remembering.