

How to help... A grieving child

After a Suicide

Support
system

Time

Worries

Encourage

questions

Reassure

Prepare

Give information

Honesty

Why

Memories



FERNSIDE

SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND
FAMILIES THROUGH GRIEF

This booklet was written especially for families who have experienced a death by suicide.

We want to thank all of our alumni families who contributed to the creation of this publication. All of the quotes in this booklet are their words, from their experience.

“Understand that suicide is a different kind of death. I want people to know just like with anything, it gets better with time; you just have to learn to live and get to a new sense of normalcy.”

“I loved coming to Fernside because I could speak freely. Fernside helped my son because he didn’t feel alone anymore and it also let him voice how he was feeling in his own way.”

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Help
Memories

Memories

August 21, 2007

These old memories that come to me are like waves rushing to shore.

I write them down, keep track of them and dig through my head for more.

They all come as different feelings, like smells, or things I can see.

Then they waft through my nostrils, or flash in front of my eyes, all so clear to me.

Then I finally see what the memories create; a man sitting by my bed.

On his face is a stubble beard and he has little hair on his head.

As he leans closer to me, his fading cologne becomes stronger,

He slowly whispers in my ear, "I couldn't bear it any longer."

-Nick Farley, written at age 11

In memory of his father, Kent Farley

Nick attended Fernside peer support groups with his Mom and brothers after his Dad's death. He found that his gift for poetry helped him express his feelings. He hopes that other children continue to find ways to express themselves even after they move on from Fernside.

Grief

How Do You Tell?

Because it can be especially difficult to talk about suicide, well-meaning adults may avoid talking about the true cause of death.

“Surrounded by members of both sides of the family, I told my kids that daddy had died. He took his own life.”

Inform children as soon as possible. They should hear the truth from someone close, not from outsiders. Waiting until later can cause confusion and resentment and you run the risk of the child learning information from another source – the school bus or someone else’s conversation.

It’s important that adults are open and honest about discussing suicide with a child.

By talking to your child about death or death by suicide, you have the opportunity to address any misconceptions or worries they may have.

**Support
system**

Help

Finding the right words can be a challenge. Children are still developing an understanding of death.

He was not thinking clearly at the moment.

Her brain stopped working right.

Encourage questions and give honest, age-appropriate answers. Be prepared to share details including how the person ended his/her life.

He shot himself with a gun.

She used a rope to hang herself.

Children may ask questions about the details of the death over a period of time. Let their questions guide you to how much information they need. This information can help a child make sense out of what has happened.

“We told her that he decided to end his life; that he did not want to live any longer.”

“I let them know that the information was back from the coroner’s office and that their daddy had chosen to end his life – that he took that much medicine on purpose.”

“We told each child in words that we best felt they could understand. Mostly we listened and asked questions and corrected wrong information or assumptions.”

Questions They Might Have

Why? After a suicide, the question most often asked is *why* by children and adults alike. Children will inevitably ask this question at some point.

Give your child information that is pertinent to your situation. For example, there may have been a history of mental illness or substance abuse but this is not always the case.

Often there is no answer to the question *why*? The important thing is to provide a safe environment where your child can express his/her feelings and ask questions even if the answer is *I don't know*.

“Honestly, I think the only question he asked was Why!”

Why
Why
Give
Worries
Reassure

Other Questions

“If we had been home, do you think we could have stopped him?”

“How did she do it?”

“How could he do something like this and leave us hurting forever?”

“Did my daddy not love us?”

“Will you do it too?”

“Will people think I’m crazy because my Dad killed himself?”

“Be honest and talk, talk and talk! Keep the lines of communication open.”

“Don’t try to hide it. Speaking openly and honestly about it may help others.”

information **listen** Prepare

How to Help Children

Make sure they know the death was not their fault. Nothing they did or said caused it.

Reassure them that all feelings are normal including feelings of anger, shame, shock or relief. Role model a healthy expression of feelings.

Check in with your children to see if they have questions. Be a good listener.

Help your child come up with their response if they are asked questions about the death.

Use conversations about the death as an opportunity to help your child understand that suicide is not a solution. Encourage your child to reach out if they feel their problems are too big to handle.

Give your child a forum in which to express their feelings and share memories. Consider a support group or counseling.

“What helped were people – including other kids – who reached out to them with a hand or a touch, but then treated them normally.”

Why? Reassure

Adults

Don't blame yourself. Know that you're not responsible.

Surround yourself with supportive people. Limit your contact with judgmental or unsupportive people.

Accept help and decide what's most helpful for you - someone to cook dinner, watch the kids, drive the carpool, do a load of laundry, etc.

Do things that you enjoy - watch a funny movie, have dinner with a friend, take a walk, etc.

Find a support system - a peer support group, friends or family - where you can talk about what happened and remember the person who died.

Seek professional help if you're feeling overwhelmed and unable to cope.

“Allow others to help you. You will want to shut them out, but use all the help you can get.”

“I appreciated it when people talked about Joe to honor his life, not focus on his death or how it happened.”

Listen
Give information

Keep in Mind

There is no time limit on grief.

Everyone grieves differently – even children in your own family.

Children grieve sporadically. They may focus on the death for periods of time and other times seem unaffected.

As children reach new developmental stages they will reprocess their grief.

Let your child decide what details about the death they want to share with friends.

Getting back into a routine can be helpful for both you and your children but flexibility is important as you return to both work and school.

“Some days are good, some not so much, but each day I go on and I think of him always.”

“Talk about it. Let yourself feel the pain and let yourself be free from the guilt.”

“I have learned that I cannot do it on my own and I have come to accept help.”

Memori

Fernside is a non-profit organization offering support and advocacy to grieving families who have experienced a death. Fernside offers peer support for grieving families – children, teens and adults. Fernside works to increase community awareness of grief issues through community outreach.

Fernside, established in 1986 as the nation's second oldest children's grief center, remains today a national leader in providing grief support services, outreach and education to the community. Fernside is an affiliate of Hospice of Cincinnati. All Fernside services are offered free of charge.

Honesty

Encourage
questions

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