



# Supporting Teens after a Suicide: A Handout for Parents and Caregivers

*This information is not a substitute for consultation with a licensed health or mental health professional. If you are concerned about your child, obtain individualized advice from a health or mental health professional, or seek emergency services.*

When your child experiences a death by suicide, parents face unique challenges in helping them navigate their loss. It is important that youth receive helpful message following a death by suicide, to reduce the chances that suicide becomes an option they would ever consider. Here are some tips for parents:

- Ask your child about how they have been impacted by the death, and how they are feeling. Find out what they have been told and help them understand what information is factual versus what is rumor, if this is known to you.
- Offer to attend any services or memorials with them, and/or to transport them to and from these services.
- For some teens, taking action can help. Offer to help them prepare and send condolences to the family, or to donate their money or time to a cause identified by the family.
- Encourage your child to continue to maintain their regular routines and rhythms (e.g., eating, sleeping, attending school and activities). Although some time with friends can be helpful, discourage your child from spending extended periods with groups of teens unsupervised, in the days following the death.
- Monitor your child's reaction to the death. Watch for behavior changes, such as changes to eating and sleeping patterns, withdrawal from regular activities and social connections, low energy, or physical symptoms (e.g. stomach pains, headaches), as these changes signal that your child is struggling, even if they don't share their struggles openly.
- For some youth, exposure to the suicide of a friend or peer can increase thoughts or behaviors related to ending their own life. Let your child know that you are aware that this can happen and ask them if these thoughts have ever come up for them. Assure them that you will not get upset with them if they ever want to share these kinds of thoughts with you, that help is available and effective, and that you are always there to help them get the help they need.



- Talk about the suicide as a tragic loss and a missed opportunity to reach out for help. Emphasize that there are always other solutions other than suicide, and that most crises, no matter how difficult, are temporary, and people can go on to thrive after going through even the most difficult periods. Assure them that no problem is too big, shameful, or complex to be solved with right kind of help. Avoid speaking negatively about the person who took their own life (e.g., “they made a stupid/weak/selfish choice”), as this may discourage your child from sharing thoughts about ending their life, should they arise.
- Encourage your child to use healthy coping strategies during this difficult time, such as physical exercise, spending time outdoors, spending time with others, engaging in activities they enjoy, and talking about their feelings with those they trust.
- Explain to your teen that exposing themselves to graphic information and distressing rumours about the death will only make them feel worse. Recommend that they limit their social media use and take breaks from peers who are discussing the suicide. Remind them not to pass along rumours, as these are hurtful to everyone, especially the deceased’s family and friends.
- For teens who are actively grieving, try not to put timelines or expectations on their grief. However, if you are seeing concerning and persistent changes in your child’s behavior or patterns, seek individualized mental health advice (see list of services below).
- Take care of yourself during this difficult period when you may be experiencing grief, sadness, fear, and uncertainty. Seek further support from a mental health professional if you feel it would be helpful to navigate this situation for yourself and/or your teen.
- Counselling supports are available at low or no cost at the following local agencies:
  - [Access Mental Health](#) (call the intake line at 403-943-1500)
  - [Calgary Counselling Centre](#) (register on their website, or call 833-827-4229)
  - [CARYA](#) (call their intake line at 403-205-5244)
  - [Kindred Connections Society](#) (call 403-205-5294)
  - [Calgary Family Therapy Centre](#) (call 403-802-1680)
  - [Calgary YWCA](#) (call 403-536-2844)
  - [Children’s Grief Centre](#) (call 403-263-4525)
  - [Health Link Alberta](#) (call 811 or 1-866-332-2322)

Some of the information in this handout has been adapted from *Prepare; Prevent; Respond, A Suicide Prevention Guide for Parents and Caregivers*, by School Mental Health Ontario and from *Supporting Your Teen After the Suicide of a Friend* and *Social Media Use After a Suicide* by Riverside Trauma Center.