

## **Talking to Your Children about Suicide:**

All of us would like to believe that suicide will never be a reality that we will have to deal with (let alone a reality that will impact the lives of our children and teenagers) but the unfortunate reality is that suicide can impact ANY family, ANY congregation, ANY school, or ANY community at ANY time. Suicide is something that we need to talk about with each other and with our children. We need to talk about people who die by suicide and about suicide attempts and hospitalizations.

Here are some general recommendations from Lily Nutt and Rev. Jonathan:

- Talking about suicide will not plant the idea in someone's head; rather, it can open communication and be an important preventive step
- When to have a conversation:
  - When they are reading a book or watching a show that includes storylines about suicide like *13 Reasons Why* (which we don't recommend the book or the TV series for anyone).
  - When suicide is in the news especially when a famous person your children would listen to or watch dies or attempts suicide
  - When a classmate, the parent of a friend, or a neighbor dies by or attempts suicide
  - When a family member or close friend dies by or attempts suicide (You need to start the conversation here, but you also need to connect them with a mental health professional asap).
  - Remember that cutting and other self-harming may or may not be related to suicidal thinking so if you encounter these behaviors get connected to a mental health professional asap.
- If you have to break the tragic news of a suicide or an attempted suicide, to your child:
  - Share the news as soon as possible.
  - Try to find a quiet, private place to tell them.
  - Check to see what they already know or have heard.
  - Warn them that you have bad news and that you are feeling sad too.
  - Tell them in simple, direct language without too many graphic details.
  - Check to see if they understood.
  - Reassure that the tragic news is not their fault.
  - Do not tell them not to cry. Accept their emotions whatever emotions they might show or not show, and do not tell them to be brave.
  - Assure them that everything possible was done to help the person.
  - Tell them what is going to happen next.

- Ask them if they have questions and remind them that you want them to ask questions any time in the future.
- Follow up and follow up again.
- Tips about having the conversation about suicide:
  - Location is very important! Find a private location where your child feels safe and doesn't have to worry about being seen by other people or having other people jump into the conversation.
  - Take time to plan out what you want to say. Don't be afraid to write a script or rehearse the conversation and tell your child that this topic makes you're nervous and upset. By sharing your feelings, you are giving them permission to share their feelings.
  - Be aware of your own feelings. A calm or even sad voice is much more helpful than being angry or losing control of your own emotions.
  - Listen...often when we are nervous, we talk too much. Silent opens the door for your child to ask questions, share their feelings, or just process. Just because no one says anything for a couple of minutes doesn't mean that this conversation is over.
  - Avoid talking about the person who died by suicide in negative, judgmental terms (no matter how angry you are). Also, if marriage or family problems contributed to the suicide, avoid details that would force your child to take sides between parents, family, or friends.
  - It is recommended to not talk about the means of suicide. If your child asks you might say, "It makes sense to me why you are asking how this happened or what the person did. But that information isn't available to us (or the family has chosen to keep that private), and in the long run that information won't help us heal and move forward."
- Ways to start the conversation:
  - For older children, mention what has been in the news or what you have read about suicide and tell them you want to talk about it with them.
  - For younger children, read one of the resources books below together and talk about how the characters feel and how they feel.
  - Ask direct questions about how your child feels and what they are struggling with. Have you ever thought about suicide? Have any of your friends ever expressed that they are suicidal? What is everyone saying about suicide?
- Answers to the question: What is suicide?
  - Use the phrase death by suicide and do not use the phrase committed suicide.

- If your child asks what suicide is, you might say, “Suicide is when a person is very sick and very sad, and he/she makes their body stop working.”
- If your child asks about what mental illness is, you might say, “You know how sometimes your body gets sick, well sometimes people’s minds get sick.” But reassure them that there are doctors and other professionals who are there to help people who have mental illnesses and that if they ever have a mental health problem then that you and other professionals will be here to help them. Remind them it is always important to ask for help and listen to mental health professionals.
- Keep it short and simple! Don’t over explain with too many details.
- Do not use a euphemism or hide the fact that it was a death by suicide. Be direct and be honest. Do not lie or tell a half-truth.
  - It can leave children feeling betrayed and not trusting you years later.
- Ways to support your children after the conversation:
  - Don’t overreact or under react. If you have a question about how you should react call a professional.
  - Realize that this isn’t a one-time conversation. Follow-up. Have you been thinking about our conversation from yesterday?
  - Reassure them over and over. Remind them how much you love them and that this tragedy was not their fault. Remind them that not everyone who feels sad or depressed will die by suicide.
  - Work to continue daily, normal routines and work to keep their lives as stable as possible.
  - Let your children know about other people who would be open to listening to them and talking if they have questions or think about suicide. Help them write a list of at least three people that they will contact.
  - Consider letting school counselors, clergy, or teachers know but also give your child permission to not talk with someone about the suicide if they do not want to or feel uncomfortable.

### **Recommended Children’s Books for Talking about Suicide**

Please remember that these books cannot replace open, honest conversation. They are here to help those conversations start. Reading these books together can be a medium to start your conversation.

#### **Younger Children (Pre-school to Third Grade)**

- Diana Sands' *Red Chocolate Elephants: For Children Bereaved by Suicide*
- Alan Wolfelt's *How I Feel: A Coloring Book for Grieving Children*
- Diane Bouma Kaulen's *In the Wake of Suicide: A Child's Journey*
- Doreen T. Cammarata's *Someone I Loved Died by Suicide*
- Janis Sliverman's *Help Me Say Goodbye*
- The Dougy Center's *After Suicide: An Activity Book for Grieving Kids*
- Todd Parr's *The Goodbye Book*
- Caron Levis' *Ida, Always*
- Emmi Smid's *Luna's Red Hat*
- Charlotte Moundlic's *The Scar*
- Jess Brallier's *Tess's Tree*
- Margaret Holmes' *A Terrible Thing Happened*
- Susan Varley's *Badger's Parting Gifts*

### **Older Children (Fourth Grade to Middle School)**

- Eric Perl's *All Three Stooges*
- Joanna Rowland's *The Memory Box*

### **Teenagers**

- Marilyn Gootman's *When a Friend Dies*
- Earl Grollman's *Living When a Young Friend Commits Suicide (Or Even Starts Talking about It)*
- Ruth White's *Belle Prater's Boy*
- Nora Raleigh Baskin's *What Every Girl (Except Me) Knows*
- Esther Ehrlich's *Nest*
- Donna Gephart's *Lily and Dunkin*
- Tae Keller's *The Science of Breakable Things*
- Michelle Cuevas' *The Care and Feeding of a Pet Black Hole*

### **Books for Parents and Caregivers:**

- Anne Hatcher Berenberg and Vicki Scalzitti's *10 Steps for Parenting Your Grieving Children*
- Barbara Rubel's *But I Didn't Say Goodbye*
- Recommended Website (Including the ones I use to help prepare this resource sheet):
  - The Children's Bereavement Center <https://childbereavement.org/>
  - The Children's Bereavement Center UK <https://childbereavementuk.org/>

- The Rocky Mountain MIRECC for Suicide Prevention <https://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn19/>
- Skylight Resilience Hub <https://www.skylight.org.nz/>
- The Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide <https://www.sptsusa.org/>
- Children's Books About Suicide <https://slate.com/human-interest/2018/07/childrens-books-about-suicide-and-severe-depression-are-too-rare.html>