



Strategies for Parents After a Loved One's Death by Suicide

In the video [Supporting Military Families After Death by Suicide](#), Andy McNiel, a bereavement support professional on children and grief, guides us through a comprehensive approach to meeting children's needs when experiencing a death by suicide. Here are a few suggestions McNiel provides to help you, parents and caregivers, once you have decided to talk with your children about it.

What to Say

When you are ready to talk about what happened, it is important to have honest conversations with your child about a loved one's suicide. It is critical for you to maintain a trusting relationship with your child. Here are a few things to keep in mind:

- **Use accurate language** — Using phrases like the loved one "went away" or "is sleeping" can be confusing. People who "go away" come back, and people who are "sleeping" wake up. Using the word "death" will help children process the loss now and in the future.
- **It's okay to say "suicide"** — It is okay to use the word "suicide" when talking with children. Avoid using the word "commit" and instead say something like "died from suicide." You can explain that "suicide is when someone does something to themselves to make them die."

Big Feelings

It is important for children to know that all of their feelings are okay:

- **Blame** — Children will often blame themselves, and may need to hear that the person did not die because of something they did or did not do. But be sure to let them express these feelings before you try to correct them, and reassure them that the feeling is natural, even though it isn't true.
- **Anger** — Children may ask questions like "Did they not love me?" Tell children that being angry is okay, and that it doesn't mean that *they* love the person who died any less. It can be very helpful to share any anger you have as well.
- **Shame** — There is a lot of stigma attached to death by suicide that children might experience from others. This is a reason why it is important to talk openly and honestly, and not treat it like a shameful secret.

Remember that you don't have to have answers to every question, especially in regards to feelings. Sometimes, it is enough for your child to just express the feeling and know that others feel the same way too.



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What else you can do

There are things you can do to help children have an environment that supports them in this time:

- **Physical play** — Playing together may help children feel comfortable enough to say what they are feeling and thinking, and high-energy play can lower anxiety and tension.
- **Boundaries and accountability** — Clear boundaries about what children can and can't do help them feel like their world is stable and orderly. It's okay to hold them accountable for their behavior while also acknowledging their feelings.
- **Routine** — Routines help children feel secure. Try to reestablish stable, predictable patterns around meals, bedtimes, and other daily rituals.
- **Positive relationships** — Maintaining solid relationships is critical. Make sure children are engaging with peers, and help them keep up positive contact with other adults in their lives.

Finally, make sure you are giving children your time and attention, encouragement when they are feeling down, and positive feedback. More than anything, they need your love.

For more information about this topic, you can:

- Watch this Sesame Street for Military Families video to show how these tips come to life. Take a few notes of the most helpful ideas or phrases for your family.
- Search the TAPS website and their resources at taps.org. TAPS provides compassionate care to all those grieving the death of a military loved one, including those survivors of military suicide loss. TAPS understands that suicide grief is different. Through special resources and programming for survivors of all ages, the TAPS Suicide Postvention Model™, and their free downloadable grief guide for survivors of suicide loss (*From Grief to Growth: Healing After a Suicide Loss*) they help stabilize families, guiding them through a healthy grief journey toward healing and growth.
- If you are a provider, read the book *Understanding and Supporting Bereaved Children: A Practical Guide for Professionals* by Andy McNiel and Pamela Gabbay.