

Helping a Friend Cope with Suicide Loss

If you have a friend who has lost someone to suicide, they will probably be experiencing a wide range of emotions that may be difficult to deal with at times. Here are some ways to provide support to them.

- Offer to spend time with them—don't wait for them to ask. However, it's also important to give them some private time. A balance is key.
- Let them talk. Often, a person dealing with a loss to suicide needs to express their thoughts and feelings to someone who will listen and who cares. That said, don't push them to talk more than seems comfortable for them.
- If you aren't sure what to say (as many people aren't), keep it simple. For example, "I am really sorry to hear what happened. I am here for you." You could also ask the person what is the best way for you to show your support, or simply acknowledge you aren't sure what to say but that you want to be supportive.
- Offer to help the person with day-to-day tasks (e.g., picking something up at the store, making them dinner, giving them a ride).
- Be careful about giving advice unless the person asks for it.
- If the person expresses feelings of guilt, anger, shame, or other difficult emotions, avoid immediately trying to "take away" their feelings or point out that they "shouldn't feel that way." Instead, listen and validate the person's feelings (e.g., "I can understand why you would feel that," "I hear you," "That must be hard"). If the person expresses a lot of self-blame for the suicide, it may be helpful to say it wasn't their fault, after you have listened and expressed empathy for their feelings.
- Avoid expressing your religious/spiritual beliefs or theories about life after death unless this is what the person is asking from you. It's better not to make these sorts of statements, as they can offend someone or make them feel alienated or unheard if they don't share your beliefs.
- Avoid making statements that may minimize or invalidate the other person's feelings, such as "You should feel grateful that they are in a better place" or "At least they're not suffering any more." These sorts of statements, while well-meaning, may make the person feel worse.
- If you are feeling overwhelmed providing support, see if there are other friends and loved ones who can help, too, or gently suggest that the survivor may benefit from some counseling. Suggesting professional help would be especially important if you are concerned about the survivor's safety (e.g., they are expressing that they are also feeling suicidal, they are engaging in risky behavior like drinking too much because of their emotions).
- Offer to do some research on healthy coping strategies that you could share with the person, if they express wanting this information. (And see the handout "Coping After a Loved One's Suicide" in the CAPS website self-help section.)