Dying to Live: Dealing with the Unthinkable

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Two Facts!

- Suicide: A permanent solution to a temporary problem.
- Creates undue pain for those that remain.
Grief, no matter where it comes from, can only be resolved by connecting to other people.

· Thomas Horn
The facts about suicide

- Suicide touches everyone—all ages and incomes; all racial, ethnic, and religious groups; and in all parts of the country.
- The emotional toll on those left behind remains long after the event.
Suicide is the third leading cause of death among teenagers (CDC, 2010). In addition, each year:

- About 4,700 young people ages 14–24 die by suicide (CDC, 2010).
- Approximately 1 out of 6 high school students seriously consider attempting suicide (CDC, 2012).
- 1 out of 13 high school students attempt suicide one or more times (CDC, 2012).
Provide direction for students

- Be truthful and provide accurate information, yet be respectful.
- Be the Director of Rumor control.
- Be aware of major changes in “normal behaviors.”
- Display empathy, but focus on the importance of life.
Helpful Information

- Suicide is a complicated behavior.
- Usually, it is **not** caused by a single event such as a bad grade, an argument or the breakup of a relationship.
In most cases, suicide is caused by an underlying mental health condition, usually depression. This condition affects the way we feel. It prevents us from thinking clearly and rationally.
Helpful Information

- Talking about suicide in a calm, straightforward manner **DOES NOT** put ideas into someone’s mind.
- “I would rather lose a friendship than a friend!”
- Thinking about suicide or having a mental health issue is nothing to be ashamed of....encourage!
“Why?” It is common to ask this question and try to answer this question ...

Be careful because... sometimes this can turn into blaming others for the death.
Do not focus on the method or graphic details.

Focus should be not on *how*, but rather on how to cope with feelings of sadness, loss, anger, and other emotions.
Helpful Information

- Accept expressions of anger and explain that these feelings are normal.
- Reassure anyone who feels responsible or think they could have done something, that in reality, no one can control someone else’s behaviors.
- Encourage students to seek help from a trusted adult if they or a friend are feeling depressed or thinking about suicide.
Advice on responding to students

- It is important to normalize and validate feelings such as anger, sadness, shock, fear or confusion.
- It is certainly acceptable to show your own emotions to students.
Advice on responding to students

- There will likely be a wide range of emotions. Respect that some students may not want to verbalize their feelings, some may want to mourn openly, and still others may not be significantly affected.

- When talking with students, please state that the student died by suicide (*NOT* committed suicide or successfully attempted).
Advice on responding to students

- To avoid contagion (copycat) situations, give students the facts, but do not attempt to explain details or why the student ended his/her life. Doing so may communicate to vulnerable students that death is a way to obtain incredible amounts of attention.

- Do not allow students to romanticize or view suicide as an acceptable means to deal with problems.
Advice on responding to students

- Focus on helping students cope with their own grief.
- Remind students that positive coping strategies (talking to a trusted friend or adult, writing thoughts or feelings, exercise, rest) will help with life’s difficulties.
- There are resources for anyone contemplating suicide.
Advice on responding to students

- One of the most valuable gifts you can give a grieving student is the gift of your presence.
- Do not feel you must give advice or suggestions. It is acceptable to say, “I don’t know, or I don’t know the answer, or “This is hard on us all”.
- Do not attempt to impose your explanation on why this has happened.
Advice on responding to students

- Do not attempt to reassure that everything is okay.
- Do not tell them you know how they feel (because you probably don’t).
- Be willing to say nothing.
- Do not lecture or use well-intentioned clichés that minimize or take away from a student’s need to mourn. For example, do not say things like “time heals all wounds.”
Why did he/she die by suicide?

We are never going to know the answer to that question as the answer has died with him/her. The focus needs to be on helping you with your thoughts and feelings and everyone working together to prevent future suicides rather than trying to understand "why".
What method did they use to end their life?

If you have factual information, answer appropriately. However, do not go into explicit details such as what was the type. (Honor everyone when releasing specific information.)
What should I say about him/her now that they have made the choice to die by suicide?

It is important that we remember the positive things about them and to respect their privacy and that of their family. Please be sensitive to the needs of their close friends and family members.
Didn't he/she make a poor choice and is it okay to be angry with them?

They did make a very poor choice and research has found that many young people who survived a suicide attempt are very glad to be alive and never attempted suicide again. You have permission for any and all your feelings in the aftermath of suicide and it is okay to be angry with them.
Isn't someone or something to blame for this suicide?

They made a poor choice and there is no one to blame. The decision to die by suicide involved every interaction, and experience throughout the young person’s entire life up until the moment they died, and yet it did not have to happen. It is the fault of no one.
How can I cope with this suicide?

It is important to remember what or who has helped you cope when you have had to deal with sad things in your life before. Please turn to the important adults in your life for help and share your feelings with them. It is important to maintain normal routines, proper sleeping and eating habits and to engage in regular exercise. Please avoid drugs and alcohol.
Notice!

Resiliency, which is the ability to bounce back from adversity, is a learned behavior. Everyone does the best when surrounded by friends and family who care about us and by viewing the future in a positive manner.
What is an appropriate memorial to a suicide victim?

The most appropriate memorial is a living one such as a scholarship fund or contributions to support suicide prevention. The American Association of Suicidology cautions that permanent markers or memorials such as plaques or trees planted in memory of the deceased dramatize and glorify their actions. Special pages in yearbooks or school activities dedicated to the suicide victim are also not recommended as anything that glorifies the suicide victim will contribute to other teenagers considering suicide.
Commonly asked questions and suitable responses

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What are the warning signs of suicide?

The most common signs are the following:

- Making a suicide attempt,
- Verbal and written statements about death and suicide,
- Fascination and preoccupation with death,
- Giving away of prized possessions,
- Saying goodbye to friends and family, and
- Dramatic changes in behavior and personality.
What should I do if I believe someone to be suicidal?

Do not minimize their feelings or problems. Listen to them, support them, believe them, and let them know that they are not the first person to feel this way.
Commonly asked questions and suitable responses

- Do not keep a secret about suicidal behavior.
- There is help available—mental health professionals have special training to help young people who are suicidal.
- It is important to stay with the person until they are connected to their support system.
- If you feel someone is in imminent danger, call 911.
Contagion is the process by which one death may contribute to another (suicide, MVA, cancer, etc.).

It is somewhat rare (1-5% of all suicide deaths), but appears to be more susceptible because students identify more readily with the behavior and qualities of their peers.
Of special concern are those students who:

- Have a history of attempts,
- Are dealing with stressful life events (death, divorce, etc.),
- Close friend/family members,
- Received a phone call, text, or other communication
- May have had negative interaction
When classes resume...
Impact On Learning

- Student reactions after a death can have a significant impact on learning and may be displayed by:
  1. A decline in school performance
  2. Difficulty mastering new material
  3. Becoming more irritable
  4. Becoming more withdrawn
Impact on Learning (continued)

5. Becoming more anxious or depressed

6. Becoming more likely to engage in risk-taking behaviors such as substance abuse, promiscuity, reckless driving, and suicide attempts

7. Becoming extremely focused on the loss
Impact on Learning

What Teachers can do:

1. Listen – to what students want to share with you. It may be difficult, but just listening can be a powerful healing force.

2. Protect – students from becoming re-traumatized. Sometimes other students may ridicule or bully students who are highly emotional or cry.

3. Connect – with students who have suffered a loss by asking how they are doing; checking in with them on a regular basis; letting them know that you are available to listen; or giving them positive feedback about their attendance or classroom work.
What Teachers can do:

4. *Model* – adult behavior that shows them how responsible adults react to loss and respond to a crisis. Adults may grieve, but they continue to act with consideration and maintain calm routines at school.

5. *Teach* – teach students about the normal signs and symptoms of grief and/or trauma so they can assess and understand their own behavior and learn new ways of coping.
Never let a bad day make you feel like you have a bad life!
Contact Information

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