

Assisting someone who has survived a suicide loss

I. What might survivors feel?

a. *Everyone grieves differently. Survivors' emotions should be validated, whatever those emotions may be.*

1. Shock/numbness
2. Deep sadness
3. Anger, blame
4. Guilt
5. Shame
6. Relief
7. Denial
8. "why" questions
9. Fear
10. Depression
11. Spiritual/religious doubt
12. Suicidal ideation

II. General Suggestion for responding:

1. Recognize the person's emotion and allow them to feel it.
2. Be respectful of what that person needs.
3. Allow person to control the pace of the conversation.
4. Let the person know you are there IF he/she wants to talk.
5. Do not pressure person to disclose anything they are not ready to discuss.
6. Offer support and information about resources.
7. Be present and genuine.

III. Examples of specific questions/responses

1. *Is there anything you need right now?* Then offer to meet a basic need, such as a drink food, calling someone for the person.
2. *Who has been helpful to you when you have struggled with something really difficult?* (could be a close friend, counselor, family member)
3. *Is there anything you do when you're very upset that helps you to calm down?* (call a friend, go for a run, listen to music – self-soothing activities)
4. *Would you like to talk about what happened?*

5. *When you are ready, you may want to talk to someone who can help you sort out your feelings. Would you like me to put you in touch with someone from CAPS?*

IV. Signs the survivor may be at risk for a suicide attempt

1. Person's physical appearance changes – appears unkempt or chronically tearful.
2. Person withdraws from others; becomes uncommunicative.
3. Person may be heard making statements such as "I understand why (my friend) died the way (he) did," "I can't take this anymore," or other statements signifying hopelessness and/or intense distress.
4. Person appears to be experiencing unremitting despair, anger, numbness, depression, hopelessness.
5. Person may share information with you about traumatic losses of other loved ones to suicide or other unexpected/catastrophic events.

V. What to do if you believe the survivor may be at risk for a suicide attempt

1. **Ask directly in the form of a yes/no question.** *"You have been through a terribly difficult experience and I am concerned for you. I need to ask you – are you thinking about suicide yourself?"*
2. Another example – *"You look very sad every time I see you, and I heard you say you don't think you can take it anymore. Are you thinking about killing yourself?"*
3. Another example – *"You seem so overwhelmed, and that's understandable given your loss. Sometimes when people lose someone to suicide they think about suicide too. Is this something you are thinking about?"*
4. **If the answer is yes, it is important to contact CAPS as soon as possible.** Let the person know you need to call a counselor for them to talk to. If the person becomes upset and leaves the room, let them go and call CAPS immediately. If the person stays with you, encourage him/her to talk to CAPS personally.
5. If your conversation happens M-F 830 – 430, offer to walk with the person to CAPS for a crisis appointment. Sit with them in the waiting room and offer to accompany them in the meeting with the therapist.

6. If the survivor refuses to speak with someone from CAPS, and refuses to walk over to CAPS for a crisis appointment, let the person know how concerned you are and that you need to let CAPS know what is going on.
7. If you are concerned the survivor may be at risk for a suicide attempt, but you feel you cannot talk about it with him/her, call CAPS and ask to have a consultation with one of the therapists. The therapist will make a determination about whether the situation is emergent, and how to respond.

VI. Important Information

1. CAPS

Davison Health Center 2nd floor
327 High street
Middletown CT 06459

General number: **860.685.2910 M-F 8:30 – 4:30 PM**

Same-day crisis appointments: **860.685.3143**

After-hours on-call: **860.685.2910**

Director: **860.685.3196**

2. Public Safety

Non-emergency: **860.685.2345**

Emergencies: **860.685.3333**

Source: A Guide for Early Responders: Support Survivor's Bereaved by Suicide. Winnipeg Suicide Prevention Network, 2012.