

The talk that could save a life: How to talk about suicide to kids of any age

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Suicide is the way that depression — a very serious illness — kills, just as surely as a heart attack is the way coronary artery disease kills. With depression, just like heart disease, there are things a person can do to try to be as healthy as possible, but the disease itself is no one's fault.

Kids can handle this bad news. It will be hard for you to discuss it. They will have questions, but they will be able to hear this and understand at their developmental level. Even more, it's crucial that kids understand mental illness so that they can take good care of themselves throughout their own lives. So first, the three great reasons to tell them the truth of what's going on:

1. Kids deserve the truth. Hiding and lying about the facts will almost always come back to bite you, and will get in the way of good communication in your relationship.
2. Mental health issues run in families — almost all families. It's necessary to begin explaining these to kids as soon as it comes up so that they have years to get good, solid information instead of fear and guessing.
3. Even if this happened in some other family, it will open up meaningful conversation and a framework for future talks with your kids and teens. Seeing the pain that suicide causes is important for every teenager to understand.

What to say:

As with any tough topic you address with your child, share the facts you're comfortable sharing, and then pick the one message you want your child to remember from the conversation. For suicide, the most basic fact is:

"(The person who died) suffered from an illness called depression for many years, and died of it."

For the one message that sticks, see below for some developmentally appropriate "take home points."

Toddlers and preschoolers:

"Uncle Bill was sick and he died. I'm very sad."

Ages 5-6:

"Uncle Bill was sick from an illness called depression. He died from it, and I'm going to miss him very much."

Ages 7-9:

"Uncle Bill had an illness called depression for many years. He died from his depression. I wish he'd been able to get more help."

For this age group you may be willing — or need, if they will hear from others — to address how he died. If you do, you can simply say "Depression lies to a person and makes them believe that the whole world would be better off if they were dead. So he killed himself."

Ages 10-13:

"Uncle Bill suffered from depression for years. Do you know anything about depression?"

Asking a question and listening to the answer will let you know what your child already believes about the topic. You may be surprised what they've heard, and be able to have a deeper conversation. You might also need to correct some misconceptions. But if they don't mention suicide, you have to.

"People with very bad depression sometimes try to kill themselves. It's because this disease makes them feel worthless and awful and also makes them believe they will never feel any better. They start to believe the world will be better off without them. If they don't get the right kind of help, sometimes they die by suicide. That's what happened with my brother."

Teens:

"Uncle Bill died of suicide. What do you know about depression?"

Teens value the respect of being told what's happening like an adult. Asking what they already know guarantees that you will start a conversation at their level, rather than assuming they know what they don't or frustrating your child with information they already have. Be sure — in this first conversation or a follow up — to turn the topic to your teen.

"Do you ever feel that kind of sadness or hopelessness? What would you do if you did?"

Many adults are afraid to discuss suicide with teens, fearing it will give them the idea to try it. This fear has been studied and research shows that more discussion is better, not worse. Telling our older kids straight out that we worry about them, that we'd be devastated if they died of suicide, does help!

Depression affects many children and adults. More conversation helps! When faced with this kind of tragedy in your own family, a friend or just an acquaintance, the only good that can come out of it is keeping someone else safe. So talk, ask, and get help for anyone who needs it.

If you or someone you know needs help, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255).

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