

Therapy?

When the grief of children and adolescents leads to aggression, withdrawal or self-harm, counseling centers and psychologists can help. You should consider taking therapeutic support in case the child acts aggressively in everyday life over a long period, displays concentration disorders or physical symptoms like stomach-ache, or shows signs of regression to early childhood behaviors (wetting themselves, sleeping only with the lights on). Irrespectively, children's or adolescents' grief support groups can be a grieving home.

Adolescents often use the internet to exchange views on their new life situation. It's important here that the conversations take place in competently moderated chats. You'll find a list of websites with pertinent opportunities on the backside of this flyer. However, if you witness adolescents speaking of their own suicide plans, giving away dearest possessions, giving up friends and hobbies, or speaking of wanting to follow the deceased in death, then there is an acute risk of suicide that requires crisis intervention.



New structures

Children and adolescents have a keen sense of change and they feel a huge responsibility for the things that are happening in the family. Sometimes, upon the suicide of a parent, elder children slip into the role of the surrogate spouse, they console and care for others. Some children display extremely adapted behaviors and put their own grieving processes last, so that they burden no one. Upon the suicide of a child, the whole family has to rearrange itself. Some parents start keeping an eye on and looking after their children permanently. Others are so dominated by their grief of the deceased child that there is not much room and feeling left for the children alive.

Grief does not automatically mean the family members draw closer together. Neither does it mean that they will automatically disintegrate. New structures, priorities and relationships converge in time. This process needs to be talked over within the family, and the whole family should give of their time to see to it that children can be children again and stability is restored.

Entering adulthood

Children and adolescents are not responsible for the suicide of the relatives, and it's essential that you say it to them repeatedly and without being asked. They do wish their grief to be taken seriously, though, even if the adults find their grieving processes somewhat confusing. With this in mind, they are usually in good hands in adolescents' grief support groups or with their peers. Stimulate familiar adults, who can be supportive of both you and your children, and allow your children breaks from the intense grief. Fierce disputes are a part of puberty, and the question "why" will always be a part of the path to adulthood, too. Watching adults seek help for themselves makes it often easier for adolescents to welcome help from outside.

Available grief counseling services:

- www.allesistanders.de
For children and young adults
- www.traudichtrauern.de
For children and adolescents
- www.youngwings.de
For children and adolescents 12 – 21 years of age
- www.leuchtturm-on.de
For children and adolescents
- www.johanniter.de
Lacrima – grief counseling for children

Available suicide prevention counseling service

- www.u25-deutschland.de
For adolescents and young adults up to 25 years of age
- www.youth-life-line.de
For adolescents and young adults up to 25 years of age
- www.frnd.de
Plattform for local aid opportunities
- www.nummergegenkummer.de
Hotline for children and adolescents: 0800 – 111 0 333

The texts are based on the AGUS brochure „Suizidtrauer bei Kindern und Jugendlichen angstfrei unterstützen“ by Chris Paul (Trauerinstitut Deutschland, Bonn). This 36-page brochure covers further detailed information and can be obtained from the AGUS e. V. (available only in German).

www.agus-selbsthilfe.de

We are grateful to Techniker Krankenkasse for their financial support enabling this publication!

Published by: Bundesgeschäftsstelle AGUS e. V.

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ACCOUNT FOR DONATIONS

AGUS e.V. Bayreuth
VR Bank Bayreuth-Hof
IBAN: DE72 7806 0896 0006 1989 37
BIC: GENODEF1HO1

Issue: June 2021 · www.opus-marketing.de



Suicide – what am I going to say to my children?

Helpful hints for conversations with young people



Grieving

Grieving processes vary from person to person. They might last a lifetime and are not only marked by anger, despair and pain, but also by love and beautiful memories. Grief is usually manifested in adults in long-standing phases, whereas in children it comes and goes on and off by comparison. One moment they are crying over the beloved person, and the next hopping around merrily, laughing. Adolescents are somewhere in between and often try to take time-outs from long and emotionally intense grief phases. Adults often find both children's grief and that of adolescents confusing. Allow your children their own pace in grief and realize that children express their feelings seldom in words but rather in behavior.



Children depend on adults

A suicide in the family haunts the family members typically for the rest of their lives. Children therefore depend on adults in this situation to bring back security and confidence into their shattered world. They depend on adults to talk to and help them come to terms with what they have undergone. When children witness that the demise of family members are "hushed up" out of shock and desperation, this induces a loss of confidence in all adults. Therefore, do not refrain from talking to your children about your loss.

Finding the words

Children and adolescents usually know exactly when you keep something from them. Missing information often leads to fearful fantasies, manufacture of possible scenarios and an underlying feeling of deception. That's why it's extremely important for young people that they obtain the information they want and require about the death of the relative, and that they've got adults around who provide them with such information. Consider carefully the terminology of suicide you'd like to resort to in your communication, and which terms are most understandable at the age of your child (Example: "gone" could be misread as "left the room").

Seek the support of familiar adults and pursue a wording that is as objective and nonjudgmental as possible. If you must break off or delay a conversation, or if you need time to think things over, fix a specific time to continue and keep the appointment. Being an adult does not mean you have to have an answer for everything, though. You might as well return a question back to the child and encourage them to find an explanation themselves. It is extremely important that you make it clear to your children that they are not to blame for the relative's suicide. Adults cannot internalize such an „absolution“, but children actually can.

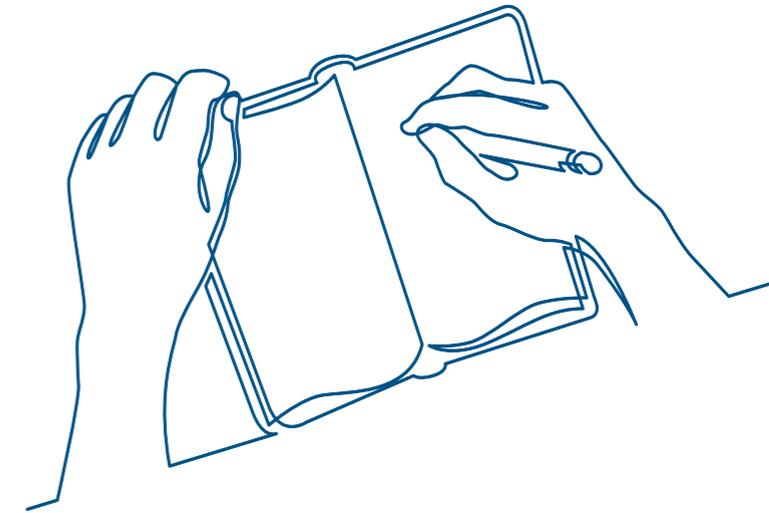


Understanding

Young people gain a new understanding of death and suicide with each age bracket. In this sense, each family member has different memories, feelings and opinions as to the deceased and their mode of death. To young kids, every loss is a far-reaching experience, to which they react vehemently. It's important that they receive tender loving care and attention in this emotionally exceptional situation, too – whether from the parents or from other attachment figures. At elementary school age, children are very curious and they feel connected to everything/everyone around by a close bond. Particularly at this age, it is important that children know it's not their fault that a relative is gone. Up to adolescence, death is seen as the definitive end, and the pain associated with it can be severe. There begins an intensive mental confrontation with death and suicide as a mode of death, and the contacts get to extend to the environment. When adolescents are grieving, this usually takes place in the tense atmosphere of puberty and is not rarely conflictual. They often want to converse only with peers or grief support groups in their age bracket. And now that they are confronted at this life stage with a good deal of decisions that need to be made for their future, some adolescents stifle their grief and set them loose only after a long time.

Saying goodbye

Children cannot understand dying and death exactly, and therefore need tangible, direct experiences perceptible by the senses. It's not enough for them to merely make sense of the statement. If it is possible, and provided the children and adolescents are willing, too, they should be given the opportunity to say goodbye to the departed in a coffin or laid out, and to attend the funeral. They should be as deeply involved in the process as they wish to be (examples: singing songs at the funeral service, laying keepsakes into the grave, painting the coffin) and at any rate well prepared for and accompanied at the farewell. Familiar adults and peers are a great help on the day of farewell.



Everyday life

The death of a parent, as well as that of a child, can evoke fears of loss. A death brings the family members in a peculiar situation that is hardly ever desired. Accordingly, contacts and supporters are extremely important to young people in particular. It is likewise helpful for them to sustain their accustomed everyday life structures as steadfast as possible, enjoying external support along the way as well. This might often contradict the needs of adults, but it reinforces the confidence of children in a reliable network. Communication with teachers or preschool teachers is crucial here for being on the same level of information. The everyday life structures can be complemented with commemorative rituals, to which relatives and familiar attachment figures can contribute.