
Talking to Children about a Military Death by Suicide

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When a military loved one dies by suicide, it can be incredibly difficult to know how to support children. Sesame Workshop, with funding support from Defense Health Agency, developed new materials to help military families navigate the complex experience of losing a loved one by suicide. These materials were informed by a qualitative research study consisting of in-depth interviews with surviving military spouses and health care providers who work with military families. The goal of the study was to better understand the experiences of military children ages three to six following the suicide of a caregiver.

Both survivors and providers highlighted the wide range of challenges that families with young children face following the suicide of a caregiver, including posttraumatic stress, stigma or judgment from their friends and acquaintances, and alienation from their religious communities. Additionally, surviving caregivers are often tasked with explaining the concept of death or dying to their children, helping their child express and navigate mixed and confusing emotions about the suicide, and comforting their child through any trauma that they may be struggling with.

Military families, in particular, face another set of unique challenges. They can experience shame and lack of support as a result of the death being thought of as “less honorable” in military communities. Relocation following a suicide death may lead to feelings of exclusion or disconnection from their military community, in turn resulting in isolation from their network of friends and family, as well

as a loss of social support and identity. Survivors also may experience anger or distrust toward the military or their unit, particularly as they absorb the stress associated with line of duty investigations and the implications for their financial futures.

New materials on these topics have been added to the Sesame Street for Military Families: Grief topic page at <https://sesamestreetformilitaryfamilies.org/topic/grief/>.

The resources are intended to support parents, caregivers, and providers in helping children understand and cope, while offering strategies for adults to take care of themselves while grieving. The new resources include a documentary, printable resources page, and topic-specific articles. The documentary highlights the experience of one family who is learning to cope with the death by suicide of their father, as well as a group of military kids and families at the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS) Good Grief camp.

For over a decade, Sesame Workshop has been creating age-appropriate resources and content to support military families and strengthen the resiliency of their young children as they encounter life-changing challenges through its Sesame Street for Military Families (SS4MF) initiative. These resources are housed on the Sesame Street for Military Families website and are also disseminated to families via partner organizations. The resources often cover strategies for addressing difficult topics and life events with young children. Please find all the materials at SesameStreetforMilitaryFamilies.org.

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The Need

When a loved one dies, it can be incredibly difficult to know how to support children. But there are strategies and steps you can take to create a space to share, grieve, and celebrate that loved one.

The Response

To help military families navigate the complex experience of losing a loved one by suicide, we have added new materials to the [Sesame Street for Military Families: Grief](#) topic page. The resources are intended to support parents, caregivers, and providers in helping children understand and cope, while offering strategies for adults to take care of themselves while grieving.

New Resources Include:

- **A Documentary** highlighting the experiences of real kids and families at the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS) Good Grief camp and offering strategies for adults to help children honor their special person.
- **Printable Resources Pages** that offer self-care strategies for adults while grieving and suggestions for talking to children about the difficult topic.
- **Articles** to help caregivers stay connected to the military community while grieving and communicating with children after a suicide.



Supporting Military Families After Death by Suicide

SESAME STREET for Military Families

Taking Care of Ourselves While Grieving

When your child has a parent die, it's natural to focus all of your energy on that child's well-being. But it's also important to take care of your own mental and physical health. It's a challenge for your child, so how do you cope as a parent? However, it can be impossible to find the time to engage in self-care, and it's not too soon to get it off in the office of caring for your child, partners when you are grieving too. For even small acts can have an impact on your mental health. Here are a few suggestions for ways to build ongoing health-care habits with your little one.

Two-Minute Exercises

- **Five deep breaths** — Inhale in for four seconds, hold for four seconds, then exhale for four seconds. Repeat four more times.
- **Tea or coffee** — Reconnecting contact with friends and family is crucial. Take two minutes to initiate a quick conversation with someone you love.
- **Drink a glass of water** — It's easy to forget how much things like drinking water can impact our mental health. Fill a glass of water and find a quiet place to sit and drink it.
- **Stretch** — Two minutes is enough time to stretch your legs, arms, and back.

Ten-Minute Exercises

- **Get outside** — Science shows that spending time in nature has positive impacts on physical and mental health. Step outside and drink a cup of coffee, take a walk around the block, or just watch the clouds.
- **Listen to a favorite song** — Music can help transport us to another place and state of mind, but on headphones and listen to one or two songs that make you feel good.
- **Close one laptop** — Getting things in order can help you regain a sense of control. Pick one small space — a desk or kitchen counter — and clean it.

Taking care of yourself is a habit. Try to pick one or two of these to do every day. And remember, it's also important to find a way to incorporate sleep habits into your life — healthy, well-rested, and speaking to someone about your feelings.

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SESAME STREET for Military Families

Strategies for Parents After a Loved One's Death by Suicide

In the video *Supporting Military Families After Death by Suicide*, Andy Michiel, a bereavement support professional on children and grief, guides us through a comprehensive approach to meeting children's needs when experiencing a death by suicide. Here are a few suggestions Michiel provides to help you, parents and caregivers, once you have decided to talk with your children about it.

What to Say

When you are ready to talk about what happened, it is important to have honest conversations with your child about a loved one's suicide. It's critical for you to maintain a trusting relationship with your child. Here are a few things to keep in mind.

- **Use accurate language** — Using phrases like the loved one "went away" or "is sleeping" can be confusing. People who "go away," "come back," and people who are "sleeping" wake up. Using the word "death" will help children process the loss now and in the future.
- **It's okay to say "accidental"** — It is okay to use the word "suicide" when talking with children. Avoid using the word "commit" and instead say something like "died from suicide." You can explain that "suicide is when someone does something to themselves to make them die."

Big Feelings

It is important for children to know that all of their feelings are okay:

- **Blame** — Children will often blame themselves, and may need to hear that the person did not die because of something they did or did not do. But be sure to let them express these feelings before you try to correct them, and reassure them that the feeling is natural, even though it isn't true.
- **Anger** — Children may ask questions like "Did they not love me?" Tell children that being angry is okay, and that it doesn't mean that they love the person who died any less. It can be very helpful to share any anger you have as well.
- **Silence** — There is a lot of stigma attached to death by suicide that children might experience from others. This is a reason why it is important to talk openly and honestly, and not feel like a shameful secret.

Remember that you don't have to have answers to every question, especially in regards to feelings. Sometimes, it is enough for your child to just express the feeling and know that others feel the same way too.

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