

## I. How to tell a child a Parent has committed Suicide:

Crossley and Stokes believe that parents should try to be as honest as possible with their children. In their experience telling a child that someone has died by suicide may involve five stages, which may happen in the space of minutes, hours, days, months or even years. The five stages may be:

- Explaining that the person has died
- Giving simple details about how they died
- Saying that the person took their own life
- Describing in more detail how the person died
- Exploring possible reasons why the person died by suicide

## II. When a Parent Commits Suicide: A Psychiatrist's Advice

By Dr. Harold S. Koplewicz

After a suicide, children need to know that they're not to blame. Being natural narcissists, kids tend to put themselves at the center of the narrative: If I had behaved better, if I had come home right after school, if I had tried harder to cheer Mom up, etc., she wouldn't have done this. What we want them to understand is that mom was ill.

Even more than an accidental death, a suicide generates horror, anger, shame, confusion, and guilt—all feelings that a child can experience as overwhelming. The biggest risk to a child's emotional health is not being able, or encouraged, to express these feelings, and get an understanding of what happened that he or she can live with. When a mother who has been depressed commits suicide, we want that understanding to be that she suffered from a mental illness, a disorder in her brain that caused her death, despite the efforts of those who loved her to save her.

## III. How to Explain a Family Member's Suicide to a Child

Edited by Juelle Bemby, Foxglove, MA, D rae and 5 others

- **Explain mental illness or depression simply.** If the child is still not understanding, tell him or her that "Uncle was very sick, and this was a sickness, not of the heart or lungs, but of the mind. He got sick very fast, and there wasn't time to fix it." Answer any questions as clearly as you can.
- **Make sure the child understands that nobody could have saved the loved one.** Be sure to stress that it is nothing that the child did that caused or allowed this to happen. It's common for suicide survivors to feel guilt, and that includes children. Tell the child "Nobody could have prevented uncle's decision, and nobody did anything wrong." If the child asks about whether they may be at fault, ensure they know that they should not feel guilty.
- **Be sure the child knows that the suicide victim loved him or her.** A child needs to know that the person who died loved him or her, but that because of the illness s/he may have been unable to express that, or to think about how the child would feel after the death. But do stress that sometimes, love is not enough to cure all ills. No matter how much we love or are loved, mental illness is powerful and, even though many people can be helped, there are some who cannot be.