



## HOW TO TALK ABOUT FIRE FIGHTER SUICIDE

Because suicide can be misunderstood – and because people who die by suicide are sometimes judged negatively – it can be difficult to talk about the suicide of someone you care about.

### PRINCIPLES TO CONSIDER

- You have a right to privacy. To talk – or not – about any topic is up to you. You can insist on your preference without needing to explain your choice.
- If you choose not to say that your loved one died by suicide, then others may come to their own conclusions. That's OK – if you're alright with it.
- Your loved one's life is about more than how they died. This will include happy and sad memories, good times and bad – just as with anyone's life.
- The suffering of a person who dies by suicide is like suffering from any severe illness. You can speak of the person's suffering from that perspective.
- Talking about the suicide of a loved one with safe, trusted people can be healing. Doing so can help you explore and tell the story of your understanding of what happened.
- Your loved one was a precious human being. That's just true, and you don't have to prove it – and nothing anyone says or does can change it.
- "My loved one was overcome by emotional pain so severe that they ended their life, and there is nothing about it that I am ashamed of."
- "Alcoholism killed my loved one, and I wish they could have gotten sober even in the face of everything that was overwhelming them."
- "My loved one died by suicide, which means it could happen to anyone because they were a good, loving, caring person."
- "What happened to my loved one was terrible, and it shouldn't happen to anyone. I am going to miss them forever."
- "Suicide is complex. I didn't realize their struggles were life-threatening or that they couldn't tell me that suicide is what might happen to them."

### EXPLAINING SUICIDE TO OTHERS

These statements illustrate various ways people might explain what happened:

- "My loved one died by suicide after a courageous struggle with depression. They didn't see any other way out of their pain."
- "I believe my loved one died from PTSD, and it is awful that they could not get the help they needed."
- "Suicide took my loved one away from me even though they were getting all of the help they could – and I don't understand how that could be."
- "I think that question is too personal. That's just not the sort of thing I want to talk about."
- "These things you're asking are very upsetting to me. I just need to mourn my loss and not have to answer questions like that."
- "My family and I are going through a terrible tragedy, and it is very painful for me to talk about what happened."
- "My loved one died of a mental illness, and that is truly no different than when someone dies of a physical illness."
- "I really am not asking for advice; I just need to know that you care about me."



## HOW TO TALK ABOUT FIRE FIGHTER SUICIDE (CONT.)

- “I don’t want to talk about how my loved one died. I want to talk about how they lived.”
- “I am choosing to think of the positive things about their life and how much I love them, not about how or why this happened.”
- “It’s just too hard for me to talk about any of this right now. Please excuse me.”

### WHAT ABOUT SPIRITUAL ISSUES?

The death of a loved one by suicide is a powerful and tragic experience that can elicit deep feelings about spiritual matters.

Modern science views suicide as being caused by unbearable psychological pain combined with a person’s mistaken conclusion that killing themselves is the only way to end their suffering. Most modern religions view people who die by suicide no differently than they view people who die from an accident or physical disease.

However, some survivors encounter people, including members of their own faith community, who judge suicide harshly — even as being sinful — and who do not treat survivors with compassion and understanding. This contributes to some survivors struggling with their beliefs or even leaving their faith. It compels others to seek support and healing in a new faith community.

One of the most valuable resources on the topic of suicide and spiritual beliefs is talking to other survivors of suicide loss who have dealt with these issues. Share your spiritual journey with survivors you relate to — and ask them about their search for answers and the conclusions they have reached. The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention’s (AFSP) Healing Conversations Program can connect you with others who have lost a loved one to suicide.



### IN CRISIS? *Call the Lifeline*

Dial 988 for the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline in the US and Canada



If you’re unable to function because of your grief, if your grief feels relentless, or if you’re using alcohol or other harmful means to cope with grief, contact a peer supporter, behavioral health professional, employee assistance program or your physician.

This handout is part of a series. For additional information about understanding and coping after someone dies by suicide, see the IAFF’s handout *Fire Fighter Suicide: How to Cope with Grief and Loss*.