HOW DO WE TALK TO CHILDREN AND TEENS ABOUT SUICIDE?

Talking about a death by suicide is difficult, but we have some helpful guidelines you can follow. Grief experts recommend being honest, using child-appropriate language, only telling children the basics and letting their questions guide the rest of the conversation. *The Dougy Center, a grief support center in Oregon, provides this* ***helpful resource***.

When talking about a suicide death, we now avoid the from "committed suicide." It is a common, and harmful, idea that those who die by suicide "commit" something wrong — a crime, a sin, etc. This blame only furthers stigma or shame. Instead, we use terms such as "suicide attempt," "suicide survivor," or "died by suicide." We can also say someone is "living with suicidal thoughts/ideation." **By changing the way we speak about it, we can begin to eliminate the stigma and criminalization of suicidal thoughts and behaviors.**

When talking with children about suicide or the mental illness that may have contributed to a loved one's death by suicide, it helps to get guidance on the most appropriate language for the age of the child.

In a podcast episode of *This American Life*, grief counselors at a center called *The Sharing Place* discuss the language they use when speaking with children after a family member dies by suicide:

"There's a sickness in your brain called depression...and it can make you decide to make your own body stop working."

(**Listen to the full conversation**)

Jewish rituals for those who have died and those who are mourning can be especially helpful to share with children. These rituals provide structure, language, comfort and community at a time of loss. **(See What are the Jewish Mourning Practices for a Suicide?)** We can experience our grief and our sadness while also feeling gratitude for the community, friends and practices that make it easier to get through hard times.

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For teens: Four helpful resources for discussing mental health challenges and behaviors associated with them.

1 *I had a black dog, his name was depression (Video)*

This video is used by many practitioners to open up a discussion about depression with teens. Questions for discussion:

- What stuck out for you about the video?
- Can you relate to any aspects of this metaphor about depression, or did you notice whether a loved one can?
- Was there anything that surprised you in the video?
- What questions do you have after watching it?

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2 *Youth Mental Health First Aid*

This is a course that teens can take to learn about mental health and how to respond when they or their peers are struggling. Youth learn and practice these five skills:

- Assess for risk of suicide or harm
- Listen nonjudgmentally
- Give reassurance and information
- Encourage appropriate professional help
- Encourage self-help and other support strategies

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3 ***Learn more about self-harm or nonsuicidal injury***

NEMOURS TeensHealth

It is not uncommon for teens who are struggling to engage in self-harm. This resource explores the reasons for this behavior and the best ways to seek support.

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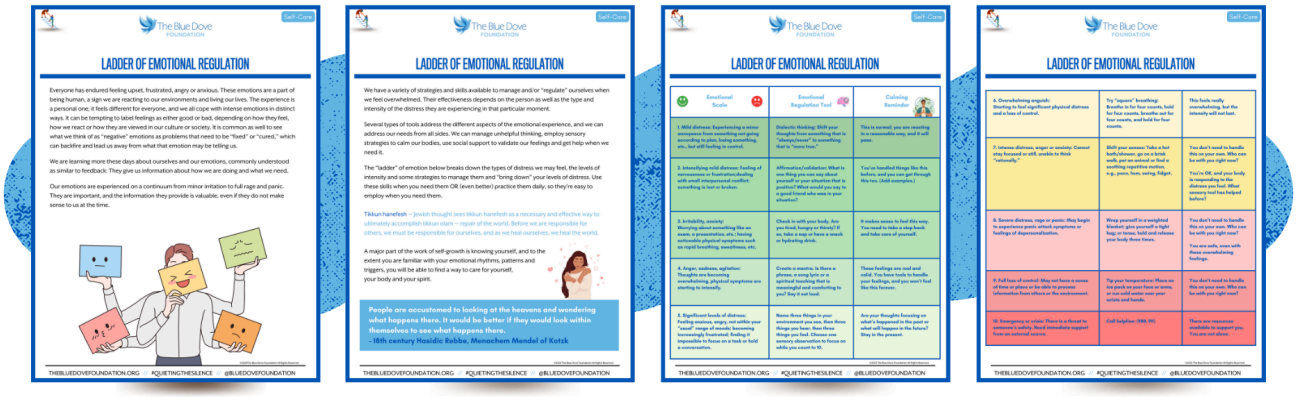
4 ***Ladder of Emotional Regulation***



This resource helps identify the many ways we can help regulate and calm ourselves when we feel a range of emotions, from being overwhelmed, to agitated, upset or in distress.

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