

Following the tragic death of one of our teenagers, many parents have requested some guidance on how to manage questions and feelings their child may be experiencing or struggling with. Tracey Wood, the Clinical Social Worker from Rondebosch Boys' Preparatory School has put the following guidelines together (which have been re-printed with permission).

ADVICE & GUIDANCE

I think most importantly, be honest with your child. If you don't have all the answers to his/ her questions, say you don't know the answer or that it may be something we may never know the answer to. Encourage the asking of questions and the expression of feelings, however difficult they may be.

As a parent, you too will experience a range of emotions about the death of Harry. The shocking reality that such a young boy has chosen death as a way of coping with his difficulties is frightening and painful and often difficult to comprehend and process.

Supporting a child when you may be grieving yourself can be an incredibly overwhelming and draining process. To be able to take care of your child during this difficult time, it is important for you as parents, to take care of yourselves.

You might do this by:

- Recognising and acknowledging your own feelings of sadness, fear, anger or other feelings.
- Talking to other trusted adults/friends about your feelings about Harry's death
- Maintaining contact with other parents
- Getting back to a normal routine. This gives space to slowly resolve feelings. It is important for your child to have time to forget what has happened for some part of each day. The eventual healing takes place when "normal" life goes on and when distress slowly changes to more manageable feelings.
- Do things together as a family that are fun and allow time and space for happy and easy interactions.

HELPING YOUR CHILD

Explain suicide in a way your child can understand.

One of the hardest things for children to understand is why someone would take their own life. A child's experience of death is usually of a loved one dying due to an accident or illness. While difficult to cope with, there are usually clear answers as to how or why the person died.

When talking about suicide, you can explain that sometimes people feel so sad or upset that their mind is in a sense suffering from an illness. Although they look healthy on the outside, something was going wrong on the inside that we may not know about, that has made them not be able to cope with their sadness in any other way.

Reassure your child that whatever feelings he may experience, at different times in his life, it is always helpful to tell someone, to talk about the feelings and to know that there is help for these feelings and that you will ensure they receive any help they may need.

Validate your child's feelings.

There are no right or wrong feelings to have when we have experienced a loss or faced an event that causes us to be confused and uncertain. Whatever feeling your child may have, or tell you about, reassure her/him that they are normal and understandable, considering the situation.

Explain to your child that their feelings may change throughout the day and that it is fine that they are happy, have fun and enjoy time with their friends.

Talk about what they think would help with their particular feelings. Some ideas might be

- Writing down your feelings
- Preparing some kind of farewell ritual as a family, such as lighting candles, a prayer, writing to the family
- Learning deep and slow breathing in times of distress and high emotion.
- To talk with trusted adults
- Encourage the continuation of regular daily routines.

Some feelings your child may experience.

- Anger – can be a strong response to a young person killing themselves. Anger is a natural reaction. *“Why didn't someone do something?” “Why didn't someone notice that he wasn't okay?”* Often there are no answers to these questions. We just need to be able to hold and understand the expression of these feelings.
- Guilt – can be felt very strongly. There may be feelings that *“I could have done something”, “If only I had”*.
- Disbelief, numbness and shock – it can take some time for the reality of the situation to really settle in.
- Trying to make sense of what has happened and why it has happened.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- Listen carefully to their feelings about the loss and let them know that you're hearing what they are saying.
- Listen and respond, without judgment or shock. Accept whatever feelings they express
- Be ready to invite questions, even if they are at random times.
- “Check in” with your child periodically.
- Try to make time alone with them or offer space and time for them to be quiet and to think about and through things.
- Have the conversation in several “doses”. Be guided by your child as to how much is enough at a particular point.
- Be prepared to talk about the suicide many times during the next days and weeks. You can open the door to this continuing dialogue by saying, *“You may choose to talk with me now or later about what you are feeling, and if you want to ask more questions, I will be available to you. It may be hard to figure out what you need right now, but we will figure this out together.”*

Much of what is offered here you may already be doing and thinking about. Your insight into your child, your knowledge of him and your relationship with him is really the most important guide for you as a parent working at supporting your child.