

# THE WORDS TO USE WHEN TALKING ABOUT SUICIDE

When someone dies by suicide, it can be hard to talk about what has happened. This difficulty starts with choosing the right words to describe what has happened.

While it is important to acknowledge the preferred language of someone who has been bereaved by suicide, some expressions may be more helpful than others.

Most people affected by suicide **prefer** the expressions: **'died by suicide'**, **'ended their life'** or **'took their own life.'** These are the form of words which seem to cause least offence or distress and which are most readily accepted.

The expression to **avoid** is: **'committed suicide'**. Bereaved people find this hurtful and misleading, since it implies that people who die this way have committed a crime or a sin (in the same way we describe 'committed a murder'). People (for example, Samaritans and some journalists) have been campaigning for this expression not to be used since 1961 when suicide was decriminalised. It is still used quite widely but it is kinder to those who have been bereaved in this way to avoid using it.

It is also preferable to **avoid** expressions such as **'chose to die'** or **'decided to die'** as it implies that the person was able to make a free decision when, in reality, they are unlikely to have felt there was any choice.

It is important **not** to imply in any way that suicide was **'a solution'** or to suggest it was **'an option'** to solve someone's problems.

It is also important not to imply that suicide was a desirable outcome or one way of resolving problems (**'He took the easy way out'**). Talking about what has happened needs to tread a fine balance between respecting and honouring the person who died and recognising the desperation of their situation, and, on the other hand, making their death seem glamorous or desirable. For example, **avoid** talking about a death by suicide as being part of a **'suicide pact of young lovers'** or implying that **'friends are devastated...'** This is particularly important when it is a young person who has died to avoid any risk of others seeing this death as having achieved a desired effect.

It is also important to use the right words when talking about an **attempted suicide**. It is particularly important to be cautious and careful in the presence of the person and/or in the presence of those who may also be vulnerable to suicidal thoughts. **Avoid** expressions such as **'unsuccessful attempt'** which adds a painful sense of failure to a desperate act. It also implies that to die by suicide would be a **'success'** and this can make the idea seem more attractive. Use instead something like: **'made an attempt on his/her/their life'**.

**DO SAY** 'Died by suicide'  
'Ended their life'  
'Took their own life'  
**DON'T SAY** 'Committed suicide'  
'Chose to die'

**DO SAY** 'Made an attempt on his/her/their own life'  
**DON'T SAY** 'Made an unsuccessful attempt...'  
'Did something silly'

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Giving hope to grieving children

## Describing a death by suicide

When someone hears that a person has died, a natural early question is 'How?'. People bereaved by suicide can find talking about what has happened very challenging. They may fear that the person who died is being judged, or that they are being judged and criticised themselves.

Sometimes people are tempted to describe a different cause of death: however, this becomes much more complicated as time passes and more details of the death become more widely known.

The family of someone who dies by suicide is entitled to tell people when they are ready and to say whatever they want about how the person died. However, because it is likely that the cause of death will become known (through press coverage or social media, for example), it is probably more helpful in the long run to be honest now.

Here are some things that could be said:

- *{person's name}* died on Friday. I don't want to say any more at the moment
- *{xxx}* died on Friday. It looks like he/she/they may have taken his/her/their own life
- *{xxx}* died on Friday. We are beside ourselves and cannot imagine what happened. The police think he/she/they may have taken his/her/their own life but we won't know yet
- *{xxx}* died on Friday. It looks as if it was intentional. We knew he/she/they had been thinking about it for a while but we always hoped he'd/she'd/they'd find a way through his/her/their problems
- *{xxx}* died on Friday. It was suicide, I'm sad to say
- *{xxx}* died on Friday. Please understand that it is too soon for us to talk about how he/she/they died
- *{xxx}* died on Friday. I'll tell you more when I feel able to.

## Helpful resources for talking about suicide

- The Australian website [www.conversationmatters.com.au](http://www.conversationmatters.com.au) has a large range of practical resources to encourage communities to talk about suicide in ways that break down the stigma and increase understanding and support for those thinking about suicide, or those affected by suicide.
- Research has shown links between the depiction and reporting of suicide and increases in suicidal behaviour. Samaritans have developed Media Guidelines for the responsible and safe reporting of suicide in the media and depiction of suicide in drama. They are available here: [www.samaritans.org/about-samaritans/media-guidelines/](http://www.samaritans.org/about-samaritans/media-guidelines/)

## Helpful resources for those bereaved by suicide

- [supportaftersuicide.org.uk](https://supportaftersuicide.org.uk) is the website of the Support After Suicide Partnership of organisations offering help to those bereaved or affected by suicide. It includes helpful resources and links to local organisations
- [supportaftersuicide.org.uk/resource/help-is-at-hand/](https://supportaftersuicide.org.uk/resource/help-is-at-hand/) is the direct link to an important guide, **Help is at Hand**, for anyone bereaved or affected by suicide. It can be read online, downloaded and paper copies are available to order.

## Helpful resources for those considering suicide

- **116 123** Supportive listening from Samaritans is available 24/7/365 by phone, email and Instant Messenger.  
[samaritans.org](https://www.samaritans.org)
- **85258** Winston's Wish Crisis Messenger service is available 24/7/365 by texting **WW to 85258**
- **0800 585858** Listening and support from CALM is available by phone and Instant Messenger.  
[thecalmzone.org.uk](https://www.thecalmzone.org.uk)
- **0808 808 4994** Support and information about anything that affects young people from The Mix for those aged 13-25. Phone, text, online support and web forums.  
[themix.org.uk](https://www.themix.org.uk)
- For someone thinking about suicide, it can help to have a 'safety' plan to keep them safe.  
[stayingsafe.net](https://www.stayingsafe.net)

## Support for children bereaved by suicide

- **08088 020021** The childhood bereavement charity, Winston's Wish, can offer guidance to anyone supporting a child bereaved by suicide (or by any cause of death). The experienced practitioners on the Helpline (Mon-Fri 9am to 5pm) can talk through how to talk about a death by suicide with a child and how to support children bereaved in this way.  
[winstonswish.org](https://www.winstonswish.org)