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Breaking the Silence: Family Conversations on Suicide

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Abstract

Suicide is the second leading cause of death for youth in the United States. Suicide remains to be a stigmatized topic. There is a necessary need for families to openly communicate about suicide as well as knowing what measures they need to take to prevent them from occurring. Providing a child with a secure attachment and an authoritative parenting style decreases the likelihood of suicidal ideation as well as engaging in suicide-related behaviors (Diamond et al., 2022). Media exposure may serve as a resource for parents to enhance their knowledge on mental health literacy (Abesinghe et al., 2023; Cingel et al., 2021). Parents may experience heightened levels of anxiety, depression, accompanied by sleeping disturbances, as a result from visiting the ER with their child from a suicide-related incident (Smith et al., 2023). Siblings may be left feeling isolated or overprotected by their parents after the loss of their sibling. Sometimes the other children in the household may even be neglected from their parents as parents shift their focus onto their affected child (Adams et al., 2019; Weissinger et al., 2023). Parents and children can participate in suicide prevention interventions like ITT-FT and YAM that provides them with tools to assist those who are struggling with suicidal ideation and suicide-related behaviors (Schlagbaum et al., 2020; Schuck et al., 2023). Thus, family conversations on suicide are essential to break the stigma surrounding it.

Keywords: suicide, suicide prevention, stigma, family communication, youth, mental health literacy
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Allie gathers her things and puts them in her backpack. As she is walking to the main office, she wonders why she got excused because there was no reason for her to leave early. She sees her father on the chair with tears rushing down his face. She asks him why he is crying and if everything is okay. He feels a lump in his throat and says, “Your mom and I were at the hospital,” his voice cracks, “We found Theo…in the garage.” Allie’s heart begins to race as she asks, “What do you mean? Is Theo hurt?” Her father’s voice quakes, “He had a gun, Allie. We found him with a gun.” As she is trying to process his words, she feels a rush of adrenaline coursing through her veins, her body collapsing into her father’s arms, and tears streaming down her face. Her father whispers, “I’m sorry if I made you guys feel like you couldn’t tell me how you were feeling.”

Suicide is the second leading cause of death for youth in the United States. Many children cannot turn to their parents for support regarding their mental health because they were raised in a household where no one spoke about their emotions. As a result, children sometimes turn to self-harm and suicide-related behaviors to cope (Diamond et al., 2022). This sad reality prompts the question: How can families openly discuss the topic of suicide?

Families consist of different relationships, with parent-child attachments playing a crucial role in children’s emotional well-being. Diamond et al. (2022) identified two primary attachment styles: secure and insecure attachments. Children with insecure attachments may experience heightened emotional distress and are often at psychological risk, particularly when confronted with suicidal thoughts (Diamond et al., 2022). Insecure attachments are characterized by lack of parental guidance and security, which could leave children feeling isolated and may increase their susceptibility to suicidal ideation. Whereas secure attachments allow children to feel safe,
seen, guided, and are more likely to turn to their parents for help and support during times of distress (Diamond et al., 2022). Such evidence suggests that understanding the dynamics of parent-child relationships and their impact on children’s emotional well-being is crucial for promoting open communication about stigmatized topics such as suicide, within families. Providing a child with a securely attached relationship could decrease the risk of suicidal ideation among children and facilitate open discussions about mental health.

Allie and her family represent just one of many families bereaved by suicide. Grief is different for everyone. Grief could lead a parent to isolate themselves, neglect their surviving children, or they may become overly protective and minimize exposure to suicide-related conversations. In cases where a parent takes their child to the emergency room (ER) after a suicide-related incident, the parent may experience increased depression and anxiety symptoms, as well as sleeping disturbances (Smith et al., 2023). This intense focus on ensuring the safety of their children, could also lead parents to neglect their own well-being. However, suicide can serve as a “wake-up call” to family members, promoting open conversations about emotions and encouraging them to check-up on each other (Adams et al., 2019). Over time, families may develop empathy towards others, which may promote collective healing. While the journey of grief is never easy, it is through shared experience that families can find strength, ultimately emerging stronger and more connected than ever before.

As families begin to connect and heal from the devastating effects of suicide, it is essential to take proactive measures to prevent similar tragedies in the future. By learning to identify warning signs and by expanding their knowledge on suicide, families can have a better understanding on how to support a loved one who is struggling with suicidal ideation. One effective way to achieve this is by participating in a suicide prevention training program.
specifically designed for families. Schuck et al. (2023) underscored the effectiveness of a family-focused suicide prevention training and discovered that it could decrease stigma within the family and help to reduce the risk of suicide. When family members take the time to educate themselves on suicide, they can enhance their ability to support other family members and contribute to their communities in preventing suicide.

The increasing rate of youth suicide highlights the urgent need for effective strategies to address this pressing issue. As society grapples with the devasting impacts of suicide, it is evident that approaches such as avoidance and silence are insufficient in addressing the root causes of suicidal ideation and behavior. Hence, it is vital to explore alternative methods that prioritize open communication and destigmatization within families. Although suicide tends to be a sensitive topic that many parents believe should be avoided to reduce ideation in their children, a combination of heightened awareness and lessened stigma should be prioritized in family contexts, because it will likely (a) promote open communication, (b) aid in the grieving and healing process, and (c) enable early detection and intervention.

**Promoting Open Communication**

Three factors that majorly influence parent-child communication are attachment and parenting styles, self-harm, and the media. Diamond et al. (2022) addressed how the attachment theory delineates two fundamental styles between a parent and child: secure and insecure attachments. Secure attachments demonstrate a parent consistently meeting their child’s needs, offering love, guidance, and a sense of security. Consequently, children with secure attachments are less prone to suicidal ideation. Conversely, an insecure attachment fails to provide the child with the necessary needs for emotional support (Diamond et al., 2022). As a result, the child may experience heightened levels of suicidal ideation, and lack of emotional stability. Besides
attachment styles, parenting styles also contribute to parent-child communication. The three parenting styles are known as: authoritarian, permissive, and authoritative parenting (Diamond et al., 2022). Parents that establish an environment where there are set rules, consequences when necessary, and validate their children’s emotions and opinions may serve as a protective barrier to their children at risk for suicide. This is known as authoritative parenting. On the contrary, parents that abuse their authority, rely on, or rarely use punishments, and neglect their children may elevate suicidality, and suicide-related behaviors (Diamond et al., 2022; Hawton et al., 2012). This combination is known as authoritarian and permissive parenting (see Figure 1). Establishing an authoritative parenting style and a secure relationship with their children can enable parents to create a supportive and communicative environment, potentially reducing the risk of suicidal ideation.

Self-harm is defined as intentionally cutting or poisoning oneself (Miettinen et al., 2023). Self-harm is closely associated with suicide; however, it is not always with a suicidal intent. In fact, if self-harm occurs without suicidal intent, it may increase the risk of subsequent suicidal behavior (Hawton et al., 2012). Contributing factors to self-harm in children include emotional distress, lack of socialization, and poor parent-child attachments (Hawton et al., 2012). Discovering their children’s self-harming behaviors could deeply affect parents, triggering a range of negative emotions. While parents often encourage their children to seek help from the parents themselves or professionals, children might struggle due to the lack of open communication surrounding self-harm and concerns over confidentiality. Hawton et al. (2012) surveyed a substantial number of individuals aged 15-16 years, revealing that adolescent’s express apprehension about seeking help due to fears of potential disclosure and the subsequent rumors within their school environment. Additionally, Diamond et al. (2022) found a potential
link between parenting and self-harm, particularly when mothers have insecure relationships with their children and adopt authoritarian parenting styles. Further research is needed to confirm this relationship. Addressing self-harm can be challenging, especially when children are unwilling to discuss it with someone. Nevertheless, if parents open their minds to become more knowledgeable about suicide-related behaviors, they will be better equipped to support their children.

Media holds an immense significance in the lives of individuals, serving as a crucial source of information such as global events. It may also act as a valuable tool for sharing sources and guidance concerning mental health crises and issues related to suicide. Cingel et al. (2021) stated that discussions about sensitive topics, such as self-harm and suicide-related behaviors with children, are often avoided by parents due to stigma surrounding these issues or a lack of understanding. On Netflix, there is a series called 13 Reasons Why, which centers around teen suicide. Moreover, Cingel et al. (2021) conducted a study where they took a four-country sample of parents of adolescents who have seen the series. The study aimed to investigate whether exposure to a series like 13 Reasons Why could enhance parents’ comprehension of such topics, leading to more open discussions with their children. Their findings revealed that media exposure could facilitate discussions between parents and children on topics related to suicide.

Mental health literacy involves becoming more educated on the basics of mental health management (Abesinghe et al., 2023). Improving mental health literacy through media exposure could significantly benefit parents who lack resources in their communities to support their children during mental health crises, such as suicide-related behaviors. Accessible information and education about mental health could empower parents to better understand and address their children’s needs during these challenging times. Increasing awareness and knowledge through
media as a result, may serve as a powerful tool to break down barriers and foster open communication among parents and children.

**Aiding in the Grieving and Healing Process**

Some parents are consumed by sorrow, while others wrestle with feelings of isolation and guilt (Adams et al., 2019). Taking a child to the ER may leave parents feeling distressed, especially when it is suicide related. Some of the symptom’s parents may experience after a suicide related ER visit, are heightened levels of depression and anxiety, and sleeping disturbances. As a result, those feelings may prevent parents from trying to support their children (Foster et al., 2022). Although it may be painful to witness their child in pain, it is crucial for parents to take care of themselves too. When supporting someone going through a mental health crisis, individuals often put their own needs aside to assist the other person. Ways for parents to seek support include reaching out to extended family members, friends, or professional therapists.

Weissinger et al. (2023) examined parents’ experiences during and after their child’s suicide crises. Tragically, two teenagers between the ages of 12 and 18 lost their lives to suicide during the period between their initial crisis and the subsequent interviews. These interviews were specifically aimed at exploring the teens’ initial crisis and interactions with the healthcare system. Parents who have experienced the loss of a child or faced challenging circumstances appeared most inclined to seek therapy, motivated by desire to transform their pain into a meaningful purpose. Their journey toward healing and finding significance involved endeavors to prevent others from enduring the same overwhelming sense of isolation and trauma they had encountered (Weissinger et al., 2023). The results showed that therapy has brought families closer together and fostered much better understanding among family members. Therapy could
provide support for parents, both as they navigate through their own healing process, and as they support their children during a suicide crisis, or through their own grieving.

Losing a child is incredibly difficult, and losing a sibling can be just as devastating. The aftermath of such a tragedy may lead parents to isolate themselves from their surviving children. In cases of suicide attempts, parents may redirect all their attention towards the affected child (Adams et al., 2019; Weissinger et al., 2023). Moreover, parents may develop a heightened sense of overprotectiveness towards their surviving children, driven by the fear of losing them as well. This protective nature could hinder open communication within the family. Adams et al. (2019) stated that children may find it challenging to share their thoughts and feelings with their parents, fearing that their words might be misinterpreted. Nevertheless, children and parents both deeply care about one another and are trying to grapple with the reality of not having a family member – a child and a sibling – among them anymore. Suicide may also push families closer together. Adams et al. (2019) interviewed individuals who lost a sibling by suicide and shared their grieving experiences, as well as their family ties. Participants shared that their families were all coming together and supporting each other during that difficult time. Families go through huge changes and grief plays a significant role in that. However, amidst the profound challenges, there exists a powerful capacity for resilience and unity, as families draw closer together to navigate the complexities of loss and find healing in each other’s presence.

Unfortunately, not everyone has someone to communicate with for support regarding the topic of loss by suicide. Consequently, the process of healing may become difficult for the individual due to lack of open communication about the topic. Other factors that hinder the healing process are disrespect, and rejection. Hunt et al. (2019) conducted interviews with suicide loss survivors and found that some individuals had a difficult time during the healing
process. A participant shared that they felt disrespected on behalf of their brother, who died by suicide, when a classmate made a comment about how their brother “took the way out” (Hunt et al., 2019, p. 340). While other participants shared about being rejected. People surrounding the participants would refuse to hear their thoughts and feelings due to feeling uncomfortable. Suicide is an uncomfortable topic to discuss, though an individual who lost a family member by suicide may feel the need to suppress their emotions as a way of coping because they have no one to turn to. Considering these challenges, it becomes evident that fostering open communication and empathy within communities is essential to support individuals navigating the complexities of grief and loss after suicide.

**Enabling Early Detection and Intervention**

Parents are widely recognized as the primary educators for their children, teaching them essential rules like “stranger danger,” road safety, and basic manners. However, there exists a troubling gap in resources for families when it comes to suicide prevention. As a result, parents may be left with questions and feeling helpless when their children turn to them for support. Implementing suicide interventions within families could equip parents with the necessary knowledge and skills to assist their children who are searching for help. Schuck et al. (2023) directed a family-based suicide prevention training called “It’s Time to Talk About It: Family Training for Youth Suicide Prevention” (ITT-FT) and found that it was beneficial to families who participated in the training. Parents were trained to look out for warning signs to be able to identify any signs that their children might experience. For instance, firearms tend to be a risk factor for suicide. Parents would then be taught about how to safely store firearms away from their children. Fortunately, Goldstein et al. (2022) stated that there are also laws and policies in place imposing restrictions on obtaining firearms without certain waiting times and background
checks. Besides firearm safety, other risk factors that parents need to be aware of are mental health issues, interpersonal trauma, and substance abuse (Goldstein et al., 2022). Depression tends to be associated with suicidal behavior. When it comes to treating a mental disorder like depression, seeking for professional help like visiting a mental health clinician, or getting regular mental health screenings, may lower the risk of suicidal ideation. Mars et al. (2019) declared that parents should look out for sleeping problems in their children because they are linked to suicidal behaviors. Although parents may feel overwhelmed with the risk factors, educating oneself is essential. Because they provide resources in prevention trainings, they could also educate their friends and help others become more aware of what signs to look out for when a child who has suicidal ideation is seeking for help.

Providing youth with training in suicide prevention could yield significant benefits. By teaching children to identify risk factors, like the training parents receive in programs such as ITT-FT, they can effectively support their peers in school or their siblings at home. Establishing a school-based suicide prevention intervention in schools has the potential to reduce the risk of suicide and suicidal ideation. “Youth Aware of Mental Health” (YAM) is a suicide prevention intervention designed for school-aged kids and provides them with the information and tools needed to seek for help or help someone battling with suicidal ideation or mental health issues (Lindow et al., 2020; Schlagbaum et al., 2020). When schools introduce a suicide prevention intervention like YAM in their districts, children will feel more comfortable discussing stigmatized topics such as suicide, and they will be better positioned to receive treatment and validation for expressing their feelings. Alongside implementing suicide interventions at schools, they could also incorporate mental health assessments for children to track their well-being, like depression screenings conducted during doctor visits (Gottilla, 2022; Schlagbaum et al., 2020).
Investing in youth suicide prevention interventions such as YAM and integrating them into schools, not only equips children with knowledge and tools, but also fosters a supportive environment where discussing mental health issues is normalized. By empowering children to identify risk factors and providing them with resources to seek help, the risk of suicide and suicidal ideation among youth can be reduced, ultimately ensuring their well-being and safety. Furthermore, by incorporating mental health education into the curriculum, schools can promote early intervention and destigmatize seeking help for mental health issues.

**Conclusion**

Allie and her family were bereaved by suicide, forever altering their lives. In the midst of their grief, Allie’s parents reassured her of her importance, emphasizing that she was seen and heard. Together, they made the decision to seek comfort through family therapy. Healing is different for each family, Allie’s family found it most helpful to heal through therapy. In embracing open communication as a cornerstone of their healing journey, Allie’s family exemplifies a crucial step towards breaking the stigma surrounding suicide.

Open communication is vital when addressing sensitive topics like suicide. Secure attachments and authoritative parenting styles promote a supportive environment where children feel heard and validated (Diamond et al., 2022). Conversely, insecure attachments and authoritarian or permissive parenting may hinder communication and exacerbate distress (Hawton et al., 2012). Inadequate communication within families can contribute to issues such as self-harm, often linked to attachment styles and socialization deficits. To bridge this gap, parents can leverage media resources like Netflix’s *13 Reasons Why* to facilitate conversations with their children, promoting openness and understanding.
The loss of a family member by suicide, deeply impacts parents and siblings, often leaving parents grappling with heightened anxiety, depression, and sleep disturbances (Foster et al., 2022). While parents prioritize supporting their child in a crisis, they may neglect their own mental health needs. Therapy emerges as a valuable resource for parents, offering support as they navigate their own struggles and provide care for their children. Siblings, meanwhile, may experience feelings of neglect as parental attention becomes focused on the affected child, or they may witness parents isolating themselves in grief. Despite these challenges, families also find strength in unity, coming together to support one another through the complexities of loss and grief. However, not everyone has access to such support networks, and some individuals face additional obstacles such as disrespect and rejection in their grieving process. As a result, it is important for communities and families to engage in open conversations about suicide to support those who are grieving and healing.

Suicide prevention interventions play a crucial role in equipping parents and children with the necessary resources to recognize and address suicidal ideation. Programs such as ITT-FT provide parents with training on identifying warning signs and implementing preventive measures, such as firearm safety. Additionally, interventions like YAM empower children with knowledge and tools to support their peers and help them when needed (Lindow et al., 2020; Schuck et al., 2023). Equipping parents and children with these interventions, enables them to effectively support individuals struggling with suicidal ideation. Implementing such interventions in schools and communities promotes a supportive environment that reduces the stigma associated with suicide.

Addressing suicide can be challenging for families, particularly when they may feel ill-equipped to support a loved one in crisis. Family-focused suicide prevention interventions offer
vital resources and strategies to empower families in assisting individuals grappling with suicidal ideation. Through education on suicide and the cultivation of secure attachments and authoritative parenting styles, parents can significantly reduce the likelihood of suicidal ideation and behaviors among children. By initiating open and honest conversations, families play a crucial role in creating supportive environments where individuals feel safe to seek help and support. Thus, breaking the silence in family conversations becomes crucial in reducing the stigma surrounding suicide.
References


Appendix

Figure 1

*Relationship Between Parenting Styles, Attachment Theory, and Suicide Risk*

*Note.* This diagram depicts the relationship between parenting styles, attachment theory, and suicide risk. Adapted from “Family processes: Risk, protective and treatment factors for youth at risk for suicide,” (Diamond et al., 2022).