

SURVIVOR OUTREACH PROGRAM:

Conducting a Telephone Visit with a Suicide Loss Survivor

Adapted from:

Pathways to Purpose and Hope: A Guide for Creating a Sustainable Grief Support Organization for Families and Friends after a Suicide Death, published by Friends for Survival (www.friendsforsurvival.org)

Conducting a meaningful telephone conversation with a recently bereaved survivor of suicide loss requires considerable skill and sensitivity.

A common shortcoming of phone support is that the visit volunteer may become passive and unresponsive or can be perceived as such.

It is important for loss survivors to feel that the volunteer is someone who understands them and can offer help. In order to accomplish this, the volunteer must **use active listening skills and give the loss survivor audible feedback**. After all, interaction on the phone involves only what is audible, unlike face-to-face interaction, where body language and facial expression play an important part.

Active listening skills include:

- Asking questions
- Reflecting the loss survivor's feelings
- Offering encouragement
- Using attentive silence
- Using the right tone of voice
- Staying focused

1. Active Listening Skills and Phone Techniques

Asking Questions

When used correctly, questions demonstrate both interest and involvement on the visit volunteer's part. What questions to ask and how to phrase them will vary according to the duration of the conversation and the emotional intensity and personality of the loss survivor.

Phone visits are most effective when the volunteer senses which types of questions to ask, i.e., when to ask closed-ended and when to ask open-ended questions.

Closed-ended questions usually elicit a “yes” or “no” response and are best used to gather factual information (age, location, date of loss, etc.) or to clarify what the loss survivor has said. For instance:

- “How old was _____?”
- “Do you have someone who can be with you?”
- “When did your loved one end his/her life?”
- “Are there any young children in the family?”

Open-ended questions are more effective to explore the loss survivor’s emotions. For instance:

- “How did you feel when _____?”
- “What did it mean for you when _____?”)
- “How did you hear about _____?”)
- “How have you been getting along _____?”)

When skillfully combined, these two types of questions will provide structure to the conversation, and will allow the volunteer and the loss survivor to address the emotional content of the loss survivor’s situation. Both types of questions should be asked slowly to allow the loss survivor time to think and respond.

Reflecting Feelings

Reflecting the loss survivor’s emotions means **paraphrasing and restating the emotions mentioned or implied by the loss survivor**. Reflecting feelings is a critical part of any phone visit in that it conveys to the loss survivor that the volunteer understands what is being expressed.

Bear in mind that reflecting a survivor’s feelings requires sensitivity, focus, and caution. Often recent survivors become emotionally overwhelmed and cannot identify what it is they’re feeling. When feelings intensify, thoughts may become confused, the ability to make decisions compromised, and coping skills diminished.

Alternatively, there may be times when loss survivors cannot communicate their emotions verbally; if that is the case, it is important for the volunteer to try and identify the emotions that the survivor expresses through tone of voice, and then to reflect them.

Offering “Limited Encouragements”

“Limited encouragements” are ways for the volunteer to express continuing interest in the conversation without interrupting the loss survivor. Some examples:

- “For example...?”
- “I hear you...”
- “Sure...”
- “Tell me more...”

Using attentive silence

By letting silence occur, a volunteer can encourage a loss survivor to fill in conversational gaps. Attentive silence is best used after asking a question since it gives the loss survivor time to reflect and answer.

Using the right tone of voice

The volunteer’s tone of voice should communicate understanding, acceptance, and competence. When someone is overwhelmed with loss and grief, speaking to them in a cheerful customer service tone is inappropriate. To learn about your own tone of voice, read aloud to yourself or others. Listen to others speak on the radio. If your voice communicates a sense of calm and understanding, the loss survivor will find it soothing.

2. Do’s and Don’ts for Telephone Visits

DO

- **Listen Attentively and patiently**

Grief wants and needs to be heard. Remember that everyone grieves in their own way, in their own time. Don’t rush them.

- **Sympathize**

Show concern and sorrow. A simple “I’m so sorry” is appropriate and honest. When you say, “This is a very difficult time for you and your family,” you help to validate the loss survivor’s feelings of devastation in the wake of the suicide death.

- **Accept and normalize**

Let the loss survivor know that almost any human emotion is appropriate at this time. Feelings are neither right nor wrong—they just are. Statements such as, “Most of us have struggled with these same feelings,” will help normalize the situation.

- **Encourage**

If loss survivors appear to be doing well considering what has happened, tell them so. Encourage them to do what they feel comfortable doing. Offer ideas, not advice. If during the conversation they mention what they have been doing and are making positive and healthy choices, point that out: "It sounds as if you are making some positive choices." If they seem unusually stressed, suggest counseling in addition to a practical plan of self-care, such as taking time to breathe deeply, taking it one day at a time, and spending time with people who are helpful.

DON'T:

- Dominate the conversation
- Listen passively
- Ask overly personal and intrusive questions; loss survivors will share what they feel comfortable sharing
- Assume that you know what's best or give advice
- Say, "I know how you feel"; each person's experience is different
- Add to the loss survivor's feelings of grief and guilt by pointing out things that should have been done differently
- Be judgmental or argumentative; don't dispute what the loss survivor says
- Tell them that this was God's will
- Repeat upsetting stories about yourself or others
- Let the call turn into a therapy session

3. Summary of Guidelines

- Listening is a process of helpful communication. Listen and let yourself be guided by the flow and intensity of the loss survivor's feelings.
- Speak slowly and clearly.
- Show an attitude of care, concern, acceptance, nonjudgment, and compassion for the loss survivor's personal situation. Set your own norms and values aside.
- Ask questions to help clarify the facts of the suicide and to encourage the loss survivor to share and verbalize their grief, but try not to question intrusively.
- Use active listening, the proper tone of voice and mood, and convey understanding by saying things like, "This is a very difficult time for you," or, "Coping with a suicide death is very traumatizing." Listen

for the loss survivor's own tone of voice or mood, and respond with a statement of understanding. Say, "I realize that this is a very difficult time for you."

- Give the loss survivor your undivided attention. If possible, eliminate any noise the loss survivor might hear in the background of your call.
- Remember that the loss survivor's feelings are real, and that survivors should be encouraged to discuss their true grief experiences.
- When dealing with a loss survivor's conflicting feelings, respond with, "This is a very confusing time for you, but that is normal for many of us." Often survivors are completely caught up in their grief; a comment like that can help them sort out their contradictory feelings and relieve their anxiety.
- Grief is usually overwhelming. Focus the conversation on the loss survivor's main concern.
- Bear in mind that there is no one right solution for everyone.
- Encourage the loss survivor to make every effort to continue normal communications with family, friends, pastors, etc.
- If the loss survivor is stressed or isolated, focus on the importance of self-care. Offer suggestions on what to do right away to minimize stress. For example, urge the survivor to eat, drink fluids, shower, get dressed, open the drapes, take a walk to the corner, etc.
- Do not raise false hopes or give false encouragement. Avoid saying, "Everything will be better soon." Explain that grief is a long process but that the intensity lessens over time.
- End the discussion with a helpful but simple plan of action. A loss survivor may be too traumatized to take action immediately, but help formulate a course of action that offers choices and encourages acceptance of the realities and responsibilities those choices entail.
- As a visit volunteer, remember to take care of yourself. As you relate to a grieving person, you are grieving as well. Find ways to express your grief outside of your responsibilities as part of the program.