

# Visiting Mourners When the Death is a Suicide

*Making a shiva call is always difficult. You may not know what to say, or how to act with someone who has recently lost a loved one. When a family is sitting shiva after a suicide, visiting can be even more challenging because of stigma related to suicide and many misconceptions about suicide.*

*This fact sheet provides some insight into what families who have lost loved ones to suicide may be thinking and feeling, and some tips for being supportive in their time of need.*

## **Jewish burial and mourning practices are typically followed.**

Jewish law has made space for compassion for someone who dies by suicide and for that person's family. The complete set of Jewish burial and mourning practices are typically followed in the case of a death by suicide.

## **What are the basics of *shiva*?**

- In many traditional communities, only family and close friends attend the first day of *shiva*. If you are unsure about when to visit, try to ask someone organizing the *shiva* to see when would be most helpful (such as to make a minyan), or when not to go because there may already be too many people attending.
- Let families set the pace and tone for the *shiva*. If you're invited to eat, eat. If there is a prayer service, take part. If the family is sitting quietly, join them. If they are laughing, laugh with them.
- Be respectful of the hours set for *shiva* and don't stay more than an hour. You don't want to make the family feel like they have to entertain guests.

## **It's okay (and sometimes recommended) not to speak.**

It may feel very uncomfortable to just sit and not say anything when paying a *shiva* call, but that can be exactly the right thing to do. Understand that there are no words that can lessen the pain of a loss to suicide.

Sometimes, what we think will be helpful can be unintentionally hurtful. Here are some things not to say:

*"They are in a better place now."*

This kind of language implies that the loved one was in a bad place before his or her death.

*"I'm sure they loved you very much."*

We don't really know about other people's relationships.

While it may seem comforting to say something like the above statement to the mourner, it's better to let the mourner take the lead in talking about his or her feelings. A death by suicide can contribute to feelings of guilt and anger.

*"You did everything you could."*

Especially after losing a loved one to suicide, families would like to maintain hope that suicide is preventable. Strive not to do harm with your words. Saying, "You did everything you could" "There was nothing that could have been done," or "Did you have any idea that this would happen?" places a lot of responsibility on the mourner.

## **Tips for things you can say to a mourner:**

If you do want to say something, try to acknowledge to the mourner that this loss is a tragedy, while at the same time offering your support:

- "I can't imagine what you are going through, but I am here for you."
- "I know there are no words that can heal your pain, but I want you to know that you are in my thoughts."
- "I realize there is nothing I can do to lessen your pain, but please let me know if there is any way I can support you during this time."

### **Grief is different for everyone.**

Allow for those who are grieving to do so in their own ways. You may see dramatic expressions of grief at a *shiva* house. Some people grieve externally, expressing their thoughts and feelings out loud. Some people are silent. Some people may seem to be acting “normally.” Common responses to loss include anger, denial, sadness, or withdrawal. There is no right order to these responses, and different people within one family might experience different feelings at the same time.

### **Don't ask questions about the suicide.**

It may seem like common sense, but you should never ask about the circumstances of the suicide, such as if the person who died suffered from mental illness, or how the suicide happened. It may be painful for the family members to relive those moments by having to answer questions about it.

There may not be a clear “why” that family members can address. It sometimes feels like knowing “why” can help provide closure, but family members are often seeking the answer to that question without having clarity themselves.

### **Paying a *shiva* call is about the mourners, not you.**

Of course it feels good to do a mitzvah like paying a *shiva* call, but remember that the *shiva* call is about the mourner, not you. Walking out of the *shiva* house feeling good about what you have done is not the most important thing in this situation.

Here are some suggestions for how to best lend support to the family in a time of tragedy:

- Focus on the life of the person who has died. Try your best to avoid talking about other people who have died, by suicide or by other causes, and focus on supporting the mourners.
- Don't talk about your feelings or other experiences related to suicide. These conversations take the focus away from the life of the person you are mourning.
- Offer a positive memory of the person who you are there to grieve, so that the family can collect memories of their loved one.

### **Mourning continues after *shiva*.**

After a *shiva*, the family's grief will continue. There are so many things that can be helpful once many friends have left the *shiva* house. Offer to make a meal or go grocery shopping, or to visit. Many families still want friends and visitors even after the period of *shiva* as they navigate the mourning process.



Additional resources:

[www.elijahsjourney.net](http://www.elijahsjourney.net)

[www.g-dcast.com/jewish-mourning/](http://www.g-dcast.com/jewish-mourning/)

[www.myjewishlearning.com/article/death-mourning/](http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/death-mourning/)

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This resource is dedicated in memory of our loved ones

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