

WHAT'S IN A WORD?

The Language of Suicide

The following information is to increase awareness of the need to change the language used around suicide and suicide prevention with the goal of reducing the stigma. Language that instills a caring, understanding and non-judgmental viewpoint offers hope for family members and communities grieving a death by suicide of a loved one.

Each year more than 400 people die by suicide in Alberta. Suicide claims more lives annually than motor vehicle collisions. As a result, many Albertans have been impacted by losing someone to suicide.

Survivors, people who have lost someone to suicide, indicate the language used to describe suicide deaths further stigmatizes a tragic situation for those grieving and coping with the suicide death of a loved one. This stigma makes it more difficult for people to reach out for help or for others to reach in to assist them.

The terms *committed suicide* or *completed suicide* have been used to describe these tragedies. The word *commit* presents a particular problem since it is also used for criminal offences such as homicide and assault. Suicide is not a criminal act. **Death by suicide, died by suicide** or **suicide** more accurately describe the reality and respect the needs of those left behind.

The term *successful* used to describe a suicide death does not reflect the reality. Every suicide is a tragedy. Likewise, to describe a suicide attempt that does not result in death as a *failure* is also misleading. **Suicide, death by suicide** and **died by suicide** more accurately reflects what has occurred.

Changing the language used to describe suicide is not easy. For such change to occur, the involvement of many stakeholders to help lead and support this change is essential. The outcome is well worth it – helping to reduce the stigma and barriers to supporting survivors through the tragedy of a death by suicide.