



The month of May is designated as “Mental Health Awareness” month. Find out how you could help replace stigma with hope by going to [NAMI.org](http://NAMI.org)

Erin Nelson, director of Jessica’s House, offers these thoughts on some common questions about suicide:

Q: What is the best way to explain suicide to children?

A: Allow children to ask questions and listen without judgment. Be honest and concrete, using language such as:

- “People die (when your body stops working) in all kinds of ways - heart attacks, cancer, car accidents. Suicide is another way people die and it means the person made their own body stop working.”
- “When a person dies by suicide their mind was sick and they were not able to think clearly and make healthy decisions.”

The most important thing is to be honest and allow children to express emotions. Children bereaved by suicide may feel:

- Abandoned
- That the death was their fault
- Afraid that they will die, too
- Worried that someone else will die and concerned about who will take care of them

SUICIDE SUPPORT:

*We're all in it together*

Suicide is complicated. Experts agree it is not caused by a single event, such as an argument or a breakup or a bad grade.

“The key suicide risk factor is an undiagnosed, untreated, or ineffectively treated, mental illness,” said Erin Nelson, director of Jessica’s House.



Ashley and her sons, Lukas and Jackson, found support at Jessica’s House in grieving the death of the boys’ father 2 years ago.

Research shows that 90 percent of those who die by suicide have a mental disorder at the time of their death. That’s important to know both for finding ways to reduce suicide rates and for helping families bereaved by suicide heal.

“As a community, we can work together to help people with depression and other treatable mental illnesses find the support they need,” Nelson said. “And we can help destigmatize this type of death by recognizing the cause, and by helping families remember and honor their loved ones for how they lived.”

Ashley Ford of Modesto knows firsthand the challenges families bereaved by suicide face, and the power of knowing you are not alone. Josh Eighmy, the father of her two young sons, died by suicide on Father’s Day 2014.

“The people at Jessica’s House help me and my sons work through the grief, and focus on Josh’s life, not his death,” Ashley said.



Lukas and Jackson play with Legos in the activity room

Ashley and Josh were childhood friends, who dated soon after they graduated from Beyer High School in 2005. They fell quickly in love, and soon married. Ashley was 20 when their first son, Lukas, was born. Son Jackson arrived four years later.

“We had it all – a home, a dog, the perfect little family,”

- Sad
- Embarrassed
- Confused
- Angry

Give children permission to express how they feel. Don't tell them how they should or shouldn't feel. Assure them they can always talk about it and ask any questions. Kids need to know they won't always feel they way they do now, and they will always be loved and taken care of, no matter what.

Q: What's the best way to support friends and family bereaved by suicide?

A: Friends and family bereaved by suicide need:

- To be heard and understood
- Your nonjudgmental support
- The opportunity to tell the story
- To be able to express their grief in their own way and own time

Q: What are good resources for people affected by suicide?

- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, 1-800-273-TALK (8255) [suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://suicidepreventionlifeline.org)

The site also offers toolkits for schools and other support groups.

- Stanislaus County offers information on local and national resources at [www.suicideispreventable.org](http://www.suicideispreventable.org)

- Jessica's House provides crisis support for schools after a suicide, the "Families Affected by Suicide" ongoing group support, as well as resources and bridging support after a suicide.

Call 209-250-5395  
or go to [www.jessicashouse.org](http://www.jessicashouse.org)

**DONATE** 

Jessica's House fully relies on private donations to administer these important programs. No government funding is received for this service and no fees are ever charged. Contributions to Jessica's House are tax-deductible to the full extent allowable under IRS guidelines.

Ashley remembered. "But we were so young. As we grew up, we grew apart."

Sadly, Josh and Ashley divorced in December 2013. Josh remained very much in the boys' lives, Ashley said.

"Josh was always a good father," she said. "He was at his happiest when he was with his sons."

On Fathers Day 2014, after Ashley had picked up the boys from his house, Josh died by suicide. For Josh's family, everything faded to black. Modesto Police officers mentioned Jessica's House to Ashley when they delivered the news. But for the first three months, Ashley says it took all her energy just to get out of bed. In August, she made the call.

"I took a deep breath and decided to reach out for help," Ashley remembered. "I did it for my sons and me."

At Jessica's House, she and her boys found strength in the "Families Affected by Suicide" group, which Director Erin Nelson says offers a special camaraderie.

"When a person dies from suicide it can be especially difficult for those left behind," Nelson said. "Families affected by suicide often receive less support than those whose family member died in an accident or illness, for example. The stigma for suicide is strong, and the sense that it could have been prevented can cause shame and self-blame."

Jessica's House works hard to destigmatize suicide, Nelson said.

"In suicide, a person's perception of their pain is greater than their capacity to find or imagine a way out of that pain, which is something we learned from Donna Schuurman from the Dougy Center, the National Center for Grieving Children and Families," Nelson said. "It's the result of psychological pain, a diagnosable mental illness. Bereaved families need to be heard and understood, and provided nonjudgmental support."

Ashley says she found strength talking with people who understood what she was going through, and her boys found ways to express their sorrow by drawing pictures, playing games, and just being in a safe place with other kids who had experienced a similar loss.

"They learned that it's OK to feel sad, and be mad and scared," Ashley said.

In time, Ashley found the words to explain to Lukas and Jackson what happened to their father.

"We talk about depression, and how Daddy sometimes felt like he was under a very dark cloud," Ashley said. "I tell them that he loved them very much. I tell them there are lots of places to get help when you are feeling pain and darkness."

After nearly two years, Ashley says her family is starting to find a new normal, with days filled with soccer and baseball and pizza with friends. She and the boys still attend as many sessions at Jessica's House as their busy schedules allow. Ashley is engaged to be married to Jared Lomeli, the fiancé who stood by her during this tumultuous time.

"I'm grateful for Jared, and the people at Jessica's House, and so many of the wonderful people in our lives," Ashley said. "Lukas and Jackson will always honor and love their father. Jessica's House helps them remember the man he was. They are helping my sons continue their lives with the memory of their father in their hearts."



**Jessica's House**



 Joins the 

# 2016 Turlock Garden Tour



This wonderful group of ladies from the Turlock Garden Club maintains the beautiful garden at Jessica's House

The healing power of plants will be on display April 23 when the Turlock Garden Tour stops at Jessica's House, a special place in Turlock where children gather to grieve and heal after the death of a loved one.

"This is the first time we have included Jessica's House in the tour," said Lynda De Graff with the Turlock Garden Club, one of several ladies who help maintain the beautiful garden outside the healing house. "We wanted people in the community to get a chance to see all the great work they are doing at Jessica's House."

Jessica's House is a nonprofit formed in 2012 to provide a safe, loving space where children, teens, and young adults are welcome to attend free, bi-monthly sessions to work through their loss by talking,

playing, drawing, and being with mentors and friends. The garden, created by volunteer Ellen Mooneyham soon after the house opened, is a natural extension of that process.

"Nature provides a frame of reference for death and dying and helps us find ways to explain these cycles to children," said Erin Nelson, director of Jessica's House. "In the garden we observe decay and death, but we also see restoration and renewal."

Children are invited to play in the garden every time they come to Jessica's House, and they interact with the space in their own special way. Some water plants. Some pick cherry tomatoes and herbs to bring home. Some listen to the soothing fountain, and smell the sweet scent of spring.

"We've had activities with teens where we pick lavender and invite them to take a deep belly breath while smelling the lavender leaves," Nelson said. "It opens up ideas for how we can feel better when we're worried, and helps them identify what helps them feel better."

In the garden, children are sometimes invited to decorate stones and plant forget-me-nots in memory of their loved one.

"I remember one child who wanted to place his pot of forget-me-nots where he knew the sun would shine just perfectly for it to thrive," Erin said. "He really thought about that as he nurtured his plant."

Like all seven gardens on this year's tour, Jessica's House will be lovely to look at, with hydrangeas, camellias, geraniums, and snap dragons in full bloom. Tour goers can also enjoy the garden's tile memorial, the gift of Melanie and Kevin Chiesa, who lost their daughter, Ciara, on Dec. 7, 2010.

"The Chiesa family donated tiles, which our children and teens painted to create a lovely memorial and tribute to the Chiesa foundation, 'Ciara's Circle of Hope'," Nelson said.

The theme of this year's Turlock Garden Tour is, appropriately, "Planting Seeds of Hope." It will be held April 23 from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. Tickets cost \$20 for adults, \$10 for children under 13, and are available at the Greenery Nursery in Turlock, Morris Nursery in Riverbank, Westturf



Nursery in Modesto, and Hilmar Lumber Company. All proceeds support the Turlock Garden Club scholarship fund for students pursuing degrees in horticulture and agronomy.

Docents will be on hand at Jessica's House to provide tours of both the house and the garden. Some of Jessica's House children will host a lemonade stand.

Leticia De La Hoya, an intern at Jessica's House, said everyone is looking forward to welcoming the community to their "garden of life."



"Our therapeutic garden helps teach the realities of life and death, and the regenerative powers of nature as it promotes health and wellness," De La Hoya said. "Our garden helps us make sense of life, and understand that it is natural to die, and to grieve, and to find hope in renewal."

*Helping you discover your own way through grief  
Jessica's House is here for you!*

### *Support Groups:*

- Sibling Loss
- Families Affected by Suicide
- Parent Loss
- HeartStrings - Pregnancy and Infant Loss
- GriefKeys - Grandparent Loss
- School Groups - Eight week on-site school support groups for grieving children

### *Crisis Team:*

Support for critical incidents in our schools or community.



*Grief Support for Children, Teens,  
Young Adults and their Families*

741 East Main Street · Turlock, CA 95380 · [www.jessicashouse.org](http://www.jessicashouse.org)

