

Surviving the Suicide of a Loved One

Introduction

Suicide of your loved one, a family member or of a friend, raises painful questions, doubts and fears. You may feel devastated and shattered. The knowledge that your love was not enough to save your loved one may raise powerful feelings of failure. Such feelings are natural, but try to accept that you did the best you could with the knowledge you had at the time. In our experience, we have found that blaming ourselves does not HELP.

Denial and feelings of shock, guilt, anger and depression are all parts of normal grief reactions, and it is natural to want to understand WHY this terrible thing has happened

Suicide has a profound impact on all the family. Parents, brothers, sisters and grandparents in particular – but all family members and often friends are greatly affected, and each one will grieve in their own unique way, some openly, some quietly. But all will be hurting and will be more supported if the way they grieve is respected.

Although it is often difficult, it is important to confront the word suicide and the reality that the death was by “suicide”. For some people, this may take time.

Cultural and religious interpretations from an earlier time are partly responsible for the stigma that can still be found associated with suicide. Those bereaved by suicide have commented on the negative and unhelpful effects of stigmatising language such as “committed suicide” (the word “commit” has many bereaved family members thinking their loved one is accused of “committing” a crime, this can be judgemental, unnecessary and can be harmful.)

GUILT

Feelings of guilt may surface and “if only” is a phrase you may find yourself repeating frequently. Consider replacing “if only” with “perhaps”. Perhaps it would have made a difference. Remember that their pain was so intense they may not have accepted any help you or anyone had to offer.

You may need to feel guilty for a time to know eventually that you were not responsible, because we must often go through a feeling to get beyond it. Believe in yourself; you are human; accept your limitations.

ANGER

Anger is also a common reaction. Anger at others, at professionals, and even anger at your son, daughter, brother, sister or grandchild who has died. This is usually a protective mechanism we adopt to help us handle pain and hurt. Recognise the pain and hurt under the anger. Recognise also that anger can often create more problems if you let it take over, and do not talk it out.

WHY?

There is a need to ask “why”? Often there are no clear answers, but it is important to struggle with the questions. Eventually you reach your own level of understanding.

SPIRITUAL MATTERS

Often relatives find themselves in a spiritual crisis, and question their beliefs. Believers or not, questions and “life after death” surface for most people. These are natural reactions, for death strikes at the very core of our existence and cannot be ignored. Perhaps find a gentle, non-judgemental person and open yourself to that person to talk through these issues.



**The Compassionate
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Supporting family after a child dies

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RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships are often strained as each member grieves in their own way, and in their own time. Conflict between partners and remaining children is common, especially if one grieves openly and the other grieves privately. Knowing this can occur helps us to understand what is happening within the family. Try to talk, as a family, about your pain, and about your feelings and the different way each has been affected. Include young children, brothers and sisters in the discussions, as they often feel left out. Remember they want to help and support you as parents just as much as you want to help and support them.

WE ALL GRIEVE IN OUR OWN WAY

No two people grieve in exactly the same way. Some cry openly, and there's nothing wrong with that. Others may not grieve immediately, as a sense of 'numbness' takes over for a while. Suicide is traumatic and you have to deal with the trauma before the grief.

"I didn't cry straight away when I learned that my brother had died by suicide – I didn't understand why I was not screaming and crying and I felt guilty about that. I understand now that I was still "numb with shock." I felt like my family was a vase broken into a million pieces and I was lost as to how we could glue it back together..... The only thing I was sure of was that things would never be the same again". Sonia

COPING IDEAS

Have a plan in place with a friend or relative whom you know you can ring when life becomes too difficult. Someone you know will listen, without judgement and allow you to tell your story over and over again.

- Allow family and friends to help. Let them take care of you. You don't have to be strong all the time. Don't be afraid to tell them of your needs and what will help you. They usually want desperately to help but often need guidance from you on how to do that.
- Speak their name. Give yourself permission to talk about your loved one.
- Talk about the good times you remember as well as the not so good.
- Crying is normal healthy and therapeutic. It reflects your love.
- Give other family members space and try to minimise the desire to over-protect or "crowd" each other.
- Involve all family members in the decisions you make in rebuilding your lives. It may be helpful to keep a journal and write about your feelings and thoughts, or write a letter to your deceased loved one expressing all the things you were not able to say before their death.
- Many find it helpful to write to their deceased loved one on special days such as birthdays and anniversaries, telling them of their love, of events in their lives, and how much they are missed.
- Allow time to feel sad and reflective.
- Consider joining a support group. Through sharing with others who have walked the same path, you can begin to feel normal again and to rebuild a sense of hope for the future. It takes courage to join a support group, but the rewards are immense.
- Seek competent caring professional help if necessary.
- Above all, give yourself time. It takes time to open your heart and mind to healing; to choose to survive.

