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When You Lose Someone to Suicide



Losing a loved one is difficult, but when your loved one dies by suicide, that feeling of loss is different. You may experience guilt, grief, intertwined with shock, confusion, and questions of “*Why?*” If you have lost a friend or relative to suicide, this may be one of the most challenging experiences you’ve ever faced. And while grieving is different for everyone, we hope that this resource will provide you with encouraging and helpful tools as you go through this process. Above all, we encourage you to seek professional help from someone who is trained to assist people who are mourning, such as a therapist, counselor, or chaplain.

Why is death by suicide different?

- **Stigma.** Different cultures view suicide in different ways. For some people, death by suicide is thought of as a sign of weakness; for others, it may conflict with religious views. There are those who believe suicide is a choice, whereas others may argue it is an inevitable consequence of mental illness. This can make talking about your loss with others a challenge — as you don't know how people will react to your loss and feelings, or what they will say about your loved one. It's important you find the right people to talk to: someone who can listen without judging and can provide you with practical help. If you do not feel confident speaking about this with someone in your immediate support group, seek help from a trained therapist in your community.
- **How do you tell people what happened?** Due to the stigma, you may be hesitant to tell people how your loved one died. Some people may find out through word of mouth, the news, or some other means. Giving details about the death of your loved one is a very personal choice. But according to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, most survivors are glad that they decided to be honest about the facts of the death. By telling people the truth, it's more likely that your friends or family will be able to support you appropriately.



Another issue is how and what to tell children about your loved one's death by suicide. As the parent or guardian, you determine what and how to tell your children. But to help you, the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention along with the Dougy Center has put together a helpful booklet on how to communicate suicide loss to a child or teen. To download a copy, visit our Helpful Websites section at the end of this resource.

- **The question of “why?”** While many who grieve ask this question, it may be an even harder question to address when you’ve lost a loved one to suicide. You may wonder why you didn’t notice the signs earlier, why your friend or relative committed suicide, or why no one was there to stop the suicide from happening. The truth is, while some questions may be answered, you may never find solid answers to others. In this process of mourning your loved one, you’ll need to work on learning to accept that some things may remain unknown.
- **Mixed emotions.** One minute you may be sad at the death of your loss, missing that person and all his or her great qualities, and the next you may be angry at him or her for having committed suicide. It’s not uncommon to mourn their death, while holding strong feelings about the circumstances of their death. Part of the healing process is allowing yourself to experience these emotions, but also working through them towards a path of inner healing.



- **It affects many people.** Suicide doesn’t just take the life of one person; it can deeply affect the lives of people who interacted with that person. In 2000, the World Health Organization reported that at least 6 people are intimately traumatized by the death of a loved one due to suicide. This could be you, a neighbor, coworker, fellow student, friend, etc.
- **Risk for survivors.** Commonly called “suicide survivors,” people who have recently lost a loved one to suicide are at an increased risk of having suicidal thoughts themselves. You may have feelings of dread, wishing you too were dead or feeling that the pain is too much to bear. While these thoughts are not uncommon, it’s important that you not take them lightly. If such thoughts are increasing over time or are intensifying, or if you are considering putting these thoughts into action, seek immediate support from a mental health professional or call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, available 24 hours every day, at 1-800-273-8255.

How grief manifests itself

Some people view grief strictly as an emotion you *feel*, but the truth is grief can manifest itself in a variety of ways — including physically and socially. Emotionally or mentally, a person can experience crying spells, rage, worry, a sense of lack of control, memory problems, edginess and guilt. But physically, you may find yourself fatigued, with headaches, stomach pain, changes in appetite, and sleeping problems.



Social symptoms include isolating oneself or not wanting to be alone, feeling uncomfortable in large groups, or feeling detached from others. Some people also struggle with their faith or system of belief, whereas others may find themselves delving deeper into spiritual guidance to find consolation.

The Five Stages of Grief

The process of grieving is complex, and everyone goes through it differently. Still, many of us experience these five common stages of grief, as defined by renowned psychiatrist, Dr. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross. It's important to note that these may not be experienced in a linear progression and that not everyone experiences each stage.



- **Shock or denial.** You may struggle with accepting a diagnosis or death. You may feel “numb,” as if though you are going through the motions or struggle to do usual activities.

- **Anger.** The anger could be geared towards yourself, the person for whom you care, physicians, the health-care system, God, your faith, or life itself. Some people may bottle up this anger, whereas others may demonstrate it by isolating themselves or through reckless behavior, self-harm, or drug and alcohol abuse.

- **Bargaining.** This is when we think of “if only” or “what if.” We make deals with ourselves, with life, God, our families ... thinking that somehow this will change our circumstances. Most of us, however, know that bargaining will likely not bring about the quality of life we seek for our loved one.



- **Depression.** While it's common to experience feelings of sadness, loneliness, emptiness, regret, fear, and anxiety over the losses and changes associated with the death of a loved one, these feelings can develop into clinical depression. If your sad feelings are interfering with your daily living and you feel you are losing the ability to control them, or if you have thoughts of suicide, contact your health care provider.

- **Acceptance.** Eventually, with time, hope, and help ... you will adjust to your new reality and move on. This doesn't mean that you will not feel sadness, anger, or regret in the future. It means that you are now in a place of healing and that overall, you can look towards the future with a sense that things will be okay.



7 Tips to Help You Cope with Grief

1. **Give yourself permission to grieve.** The emotions you are experiencing are common.

Anyone would struggle with the changes that come after a loved one dies from suicide, so give yourself the opportunity and the time to go through these feelings. Rather than bottle them up or try to oppress them, address the feelings as they come and go.

2. **Seek help from others** who can encourage you during this mourning process. You cannot and should not go through this alone. Connect with friends, family, clergy, grief support groups, and professional therapists or counselors. To find a survivor support group or join a survivor outreach program, visit our Helpful Websites section at the end of this resource.



3. **Take care of your health.** It's easy to get consumed in the many tasks that must be done after a loved one passes. Plus, the feelings of grief can be so overwhelming, that you may neglect your health, sleep, or diet. Make an appointment with your primary care medical provider — even if you feel “fine.” Perhaps you don't *feel* stressed, but your body may be reacting to that stress in ways you cannot see or may not sense, such as in the case with high blood pressure or elevated blood sugar levels.
4. **Be mindful** of how you're progressing through the stages of grief. Keep a journal or join a support group so that you or others can point out if you are, for example, dwelling in anger or perhaps rushing into acceptance. Also, be aware that others may not experience grief in the same way as you. This includes family members or friends of your deceased loved one.

5. **Talk with a professional.** While it's important you stay connected to friends and family, a professional therapist or counselor can provide you with a listening ear and an unbiased



perspective. He or she is trained to catch early signs of depression, whereas a friend may not notice there's a problem. Plus, a therapist or counselor can provide helpful tips and coping mechanisms, as well as therapy options to help you grieve in a manner that is safe and healthy. To find a suicide bereavement trained clinician or to talk to a trained counselor by phone, visit our Helpful Website section at the end of this resource.

6. **Celebrate memories.** As a spouse, child, sibling, parent, or friend to your loved one, it's likely you have happy memories of your time with them. Cherish and celebrate these memories. Honor your loved one by donating on their behalf to a suicide prevention organization or by helping others battling mental illness.
7. **Be thankful.** Show gratitude towards those who helped care for your loved one. You don't have to go out of your way; a simple thank-you card, text message, or phone call will do.

Helpful Websites

The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention: Survivor Outreach Program

AFSP offers resources to help loss survivors cope, connect, and heal in time. Our trained peer support volunteers are all suicide loss survivors who know firsthand how difficult it can be to find your way in the aftermath of a suicide. Upon request, they are available to speak with you by phone, in person (limited availability), by video call (Google Hangout, Skype, Facetime), or via email.

For more information, visit <https://afsp.org/find-support/ive-lost-someone/survivor-outreach-program/>.

The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention: Find a Local Support Group

To find a local support group in the U.S. or internationally, visit:

<https://afsp.org/find-support/ive-lost-someone/find-a-support-group/>.

The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention: Booklet on Children, Teens, and Suicide Loss

Download this free booklet to learn how you can help your child or teen grieve the loss of a loved one who died from suicide by visiting:

<https://afsp.org/find-support/ive-lost-someone/resources-loss-survivors/children-teens-suicide-loss/>.

The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention: Suicide Bereavement Trained Clinicians

For a list of clinicians who have been trained to help with bereavement after suicide and provide grief therapy for survivors, visit <https://afsp.org/our-work/loss-healing/suicide-bereavement-clinician-training-program/suicide-bereavement-trained-clinicians/>.

Joni and Friends

Contact us for encouraging resources on the topic of grieving, suicide, mental illness, and disability.

Text at 818-575-1705, Call 818-707-5664, or leave a comment at <http://www.joniandfriends.org/response/>

DisabilityCampaign.org

For helpful resources on mental health, visit <http://disabilitycampaign.org/help-resources/mental-health/>.

Focus on the Family Counseling Line

Speak to a licensed professional counselor who can provide guidance by calling 1-855-771-HELP (4357) Monday through Friday between 6:00 a.m. and 8:00 p.m. Mountain time. If call volumes are high, it may be necessary for you to leave your name and number for a counselor to return your call. One of them will be in touch just as soon as they are able.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

Provides 24/7, free and confidential support for people in distress, prevention and crisis resources for you or your loved ones.

Call 1-800-273-8255 or visit <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>.

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