



Journey to Healing

A newsletter for survivors of suicide

Holiday Edition 2009

Journey to Healing is a newsletter for survivors of suicide. Survivors are those of us whose lives have been changed by the completion of suicide by someone we knew. Journey to Healing is intended to let survivors know that you are not alone. If you would like to contribute an article or story for this newsletter, please send it to: Becky Kay, c/o Mental Health America of Greenville County 429 North Main Street, Suite 2, Greenville, SC 29601.

Survivors of Suicide Support Groups – Open Group meets the 1st Tuesday of each month from 7:00 PM until 8:30 PM at Providence Presbyterian Church's Ellenburg Hall located on State Highway 153. There is also a closed program for eight weeks designed to help adults, teens and children.

As we grow and recover, it is important to remember that the most powerful aid that SOS can provide new survivors is the companionship of others who have endured the same type of pain. For SOS to work at its best, we must continue going to meetings to help others after we no longer need to go to be helped.

SOS Support Team

This team of survivors who volunteer their time to reach out to survivors in need is available to anyone who feels the need to share with another survivor in between meetings. Please call CRISISline at 864 271-8888 to arrange a call from a team member.

we will have calm and peaceful, warm and loving observances?

Managing the Holidays

It's that time of year. "The Holidays" draw near once again. And for those of us who have experienced the death of a loved one to suicide, we await the holidays with mixed emotions. We are fearful that we will be overcome by unmanageable feelings of sorrow and loss, or by an exacerbation of accompanying feelings of anger or of guilt.

We dread potentially uncomfortable social situations such as parties and gatherings attended by insensitive persons. We desire positive memories of past holidays shared with our deceased loved ones, yet we worry that joyful memories will become painful ones. As we are assailed with invitations by loving friends and family, we feel confused and torn. We do not wish to hurt others in our decision-making, yet we know we must also protect and care for ourselves. How can we plan for the approaching holidays in a manner that will lead to the highest probability that

To ensure the least pain and the highest probability of joy during the holidays, it is important for us to actively *plan* for the holidays. We must be introspective, examining ourselves - our current emotional state, our strength and stamina (both physical and emotional) - and plan accordingly. If we are feeling particularly fragile, we may wish to limit our activities. If we are feeling strong and positive, we may wish to plan new activities. But we must always remember that there is no "right way" to observe the holidays. There may be old ways, old traditions, that felt right in the past, but, as we have learned, what *was* right and what *felt* right "before" may no longer feel right or be right for us now.

We must navigate slowly and carefully as we continue our journey through the holiday season. Following are some suggestions for how to survive the holiday season, whether your grief is young or you have been living with it for some time. Each suggestion may not work for you - in fact none of the suggestions may work for you. But pondering the suggestions provided below may trigger thoughts and ideas of what will work for you.

- Discuss your feelings with family members. Address the desires and concerns of persons involved in previous holiday gatherings and celebrations. Expect that there may be differences in desires, and be prepared to talk through each person's feelings.
- Make your feelings known to those who are close to you. Friends and family cannot be sensitive to your wishes if they do not know what they are.
- Expect that there will be pain. Knowing that pain is unavoidable to some extent can allow you to accept it when it arises and to move on.

- If holiday celebrations previously took place in your home or you previously were responsible for planning or creating the holiday activities, i.e., decorating, cooking, shopping, etc., give yourself permission to pass on such involvement this year. Someone else can accept responsibility for cooking, cleaning and decorating.
- Should you desire to continue to be actively involved in traditional holiday activities, consider scaling them down this year, i.e., invite fewer people, hire a caterer and/or a cleaning service, buy sweets from a bakery instead of baking them yourself, etc.
- Give yourself permission, if necessary, to refrain from attending holiday gatherings, whether with friends or with family. It may be too painful to be with others in such a setting this year.
- Should you decide to attend holiday gatherings, consider taking your own car instead of riding with others. That way you can leave if feelings become overwhelming and you need to “escape.”
- Determine if there are those with whom you feel close and comfortable and with whom you *can* spend time alone or in small groups during the holidays. While escape is sometimes desirable, continuing to connect with others and being around others who can support you is also important. Perhaps these individuals can help you create new holiday traditions. Perhaps you can spend time with them even if there are no “holiday accouterments” present and no new holiday traditions are created. A quiet meal at home or eating out might suffice.
- Create new holiday traditions or rituals that include the memory of your loved one. For example, create a time during gatherings for family and friends to share memories of your loved one; hang a Christmas stocking and ask others to write down a special memory that can be placed in the stocking and read together at an appointed time; plant a poinsettia, a small Christmas tree, or other type of plant on the grave at Christmas; hang a wreath on the grave marker; create Christmas tree ornaments that celebrate the life of the loved one - perhaps including photographs; leave an empty plate at the table in honor of your loved one; light a candle in memory of the person who died.
- Take a trip during the holidays. Choose a place that you’ve never been, that will not have close memories of your loved one that might be difficult to handle - or travel to some place that was important to you and your loved one, some place that will bring you good and joyful memories.
- Change your routine - Attend religious services at a different time and/or attend a different church or

synagogue; host the holiday meal at a restaurant instead of at home; have a holiday dinner instead of a luncheon; serve the holiday meal as a buffet instead of a sit-down meal; serve the meal in a different room; open presents Christmas Eve instead of Christmas day, or vice versa.

- Don’t let yourself be overly sensitive to the normal actions of people during the holiday season. It is natural for people to wish each other Merry Christmas, Happy Chanukah, and Happy New Year. Most people would be distressed to know that their words or actions had inadvertently hurt you. Try not to feel hurt if someone’s words are unwittingly painful.
- Shop by mail or over the internet to avoid the commercialism and forced gaiety of the retail establishment during the holiday season. If you must go out, shop early.
- Do something for someone else during the holidays - visit someone in a nursing home or hospital; collect toys for needy children; help cook a meal at the local homeless shelter; etc.
- Cry when you feel like it - without feeling embarrassed, no matter where you are when the tears arrive! Laugh if you feel like it - without feeling guilty!
- Talk about your loved one if you wish. Spend time with friends or family members who will allow you to share memories, and who will share their memories as well.
- Attend religious services. Use the occasion to find solace in your beliefs. In many communities various churches and synagogues have special holiday services dedicated to the memory of loved ones who have died. Consider attending one of these holiday memorial services.

Holiday times can be very draining physically and emotionally, even during the best of times. Spend time alone with yourself, at home, outdoors, in a house of worship, etc. Be gentle with yourself. Give yourself permission to *feel*, whether you are feeling grief, sadness, anger, joy, etc. Take care of yourself physically - eat well and sleep well. And, importantly, monitor yourself and be flexible, prepared to make on-line changes to plans if necessary.

Donna Watson Lawson
Reprinted from the December, 2006 issue of *Solace*





Love Deeply

Do not hesitate to love and to love deeply.

You might be afraid of the pain that deep love can cause. When those you love deeply reject you, leave you, or die, your heart will be broken. But that should not hold you back from loving deeply. The pain that comes from deep love makes your love ever more fruitful. It is like a plow that breaks the ground to allow the seed to take root and grow into a strong plant. Every time you experience the pain of rejection, absence, or death, you are faced with a choice. You can become bitter and decide not to love again, or you can stand straight in your pain and let the soil on which you stand become richer and more able to give life to new seeds.

The more you have loved and have allowed yourself to suffer because of your love, the more you will be able to let your heart grow wider and deeper. When your love is truly giving and receiving, those whom you love will not leave your heart even when they depart from you. They will become part of your self and thus gradually build a community within you.

Those you have deeply loved become part of you. The longer you live, there will always be more people to be loved by you and to become part of your inner community. The wider your inner community becomes, the more easily you will recognize your own brothers and sisters in the strangers around you. Those who are alive within you will recognize those who are alive around you. The wider the community of your heart, the wider the community around you. Thus the pain of rejection, absence, and death can become fruitful. Yes, as you love deeply the ground of your heart will be broken more and more, but you will rejoice in the abundance of the fruit it will bear.

Henri Nouwen

From *The Inner Voice of Love: A Journey through Anguish to Freedom*,

In loving memory of Bobby (7/25/08, Mike 11/01/07) — Becky

and in loving memory of all of the loved ones we have loved and lost to the tragic death of suicide.



After Suicide — How to Help Yourself

Learn all you can about the causes of suicide; it will help you understand what happened and why. Information can be obtained from libraries, crisis centers, mental health centers, and funeral directors.

Learn all you can about what to expect during your grief-recovery process. Many good books on grief are available in addition to literature from the sources listed above.

Realize that:

- It may take a long time to recover; you will never forget, never again be the same person, but you can find life to be meaningful.
- Your need to search for meaning is justified and the search is necessary. It is mental and verbal replay of events which begins to make order of the events. This is not “a morbid dwelling on the grisly details” but an action which examines, interprets, and gains insights.
- You may dread anniversaries, but apprehension may be worse than the actual day’s arrival.
- Searching for the deceased is normal; it affirms physical absence. Once the searching instinct is satisfied, we often find we still have the relationship but on a different level. Somehow, in releasing grief, we may find our loved one, as did C.S. Lewis in *A Grief Observed*.

Find a way to express anger constructively. Anger is natural and justified. The person did leave you with old and new burdens to handle alone. That’s not saying it was right or wrong - but only that it happened and you are angry about it.

Understand the guilt. Don’t be afraid to face it, admit it, and explore it - that’s the only way to resolve it. You can’t cement over a volcano and expect it to stop boiling. The same is true of guilt. Denying guilt does not make it disappear; it continues to churn inside. Denial retards healing. It is not validity of guilt which is important at this time but simply how you feel. Consider that holding on to guilt may be a way of controlling things.

For example, “I can’t control or prevent suicide from happening but I can control how I feel, and by golly, I’m going to feel guilty.” Guilt may be used as an excuse to keep from changing or doing something about the situation. Guilt can also become a habit. Sometimes guilt can be a way of gaining approval: “See how good I am - I’m feeling guilty.” Most of us are willing to throw off the guilt once we have suffered enough, but why wait - lay out your guilt and take a painfully honest look at it. Perhaps there is some validity to your feelings. If so, admit it to others or to God if that is helpful to you. Confession may be the catharsis you need to begin healing. Again, it’s your need which is important - not determining the “right or wrong” of that need .

Don’t be afraid to express grief and emotions. Grief is emotional and is the natural reaction to a significant loss. Find a time or place where you can cry and make use of it. Plan a time to cry and do it. It also helps to talk about the loss, experience it, and perhaps write about it. Believe that in due time the painful reliving will give way to pleasant memories.

Tell people when you need to talk or cry. Ask them to be understanding, to mention your loved ones name, to recall events and his/her characteristics. You need time to grieve and the supportive comfort of others when you do. Let them know that you need them.

Claim your right to grieve. It is your loss, and you must grieve if you are to heal. Reliving and experiencing the pain of grief is something akin to childbirth pain. You know you must suffer through it in order to gain the relief and joy beyond. With each grieving episode, the pain becomes less intense, of shorter duration, and less frequent. To lose your right to grieve is to suffer yet another loss.

Learn to recognize defense mechanisms so you can tell when you are using them. Listen to yourself to see if you are denying, being realistic, making excuses or justifying. Examine your own attitudes objectively.

Allow yourself to be concerned, but not overly concerned, with the “right or wrong” of the event - the “all black or all white” of the nature of things. You need to exercise a certain amount of proclaiming that “it was wrong” or “this is right,” but don’t allow yourself to fall into the copping-out game of placing individual blame or making excessive judgments. That will eventually hurt you and others even more. Rather, direct your energy to learning, growing, and finding a newer and richer meaning in the lives of others as well as your own. Refuse to let that death be for nothing.



Living With Grief...Especially During the Holidays

As we approach a New Year, it has been proven that the suicide rates are the highest from shortly after Christmas through March. This says a lot about the holidays at the end of the year and the beginning of a new year.

Since I lost Mike on November 1st and Bobby the following July 25th, this made the experience still very fresh during the respective December festival periods. Throw in the fact that we had certain family Christmas ‘traditions’, like going to church and a large gathering with extended family, and those Christmas’ felt all the more lonesome and empty.

Indeed, I distinctly remember feeling big voids for many years, and still have reoccurring ones. This is a huge emptiness. Time does help with the healing, as trite as that may sound, and with each passing year, things become easier; however, not “fixed.”

There is still sorrow within me, I do wonder – what would I give to spend just “one more” Christmas with the two of them? We could talk, take a walk, reminiscence, and basically have a really good time. We could hug often, too.

It would be so different because we would “know” we only had this one more chance, one more Christmas to spend together.

Why “living with” grief, as opposed to “overcoming grief” or “recovering from grief?” Because even though I have moved on in my life, adapted to a new routine and embarked on new adventures, the grief has never fully left me – it comes and goes all the time. In fact, I suspect it will be my companion for my life. Sometimes, each passing of a loved one even seems to build on the other, depending on the hurt. The healing journey is long and laden with obstacles – it’s been years, but I know I have not yet bade them farewell. And, I’m under no illusions – there *will* be more of such losses to come in the future.

However, amidst the sorrow and tears, I have discovered nuggets of opportunity for peace and growth.

Have a wonderful and blessed Christmas, my friends. Fill yourselves with the company and warmth of loved ones...let us strive toward making every day Christmas.





Reflections from Becky

Tis the Season – first Thanksgiving, then Christmas and then a New Year. This is a time when America gears up for feasting, festival, joy and parties throughout the season.

The holiday times are supposed to be wonderful, which is probably why we get more calls from desperate and despairing people at this time of the year than in any other. When everything around us focuses on joy, home and relationships, those of us in pain feel it more acutely. The year my two sons died suddenly – one in a horrific car crash and the other from a completion of suicide, I wished the holiday rush would rush just a bit faster and bring me safely into the dullness of mid-January. Don't make me look at the empty chairs while you flash lovely Norman Rockwell scenes on the TV screen. Don't sing about families hanging stockings while I sit here alone and confused. Don't show me all the joy of people opening Christmas gifts, when I don't want even to send Christmas cards. The holidays, for many of us, are not all they're cracked up to be.

Yet the holidays come, and those of us looking at the empty chairs of loved ones past — those of us with hurting lives — need to find a way through. In my experiences of holiday loss, there are two things that have gotten me through.

The first of them is doing something different. We've tried several different celebrations and dinners over the course of the years, and finally have come upon one that works with our family.

The second, and for me the more important coping mechanism, has been listening to what I think is the best Christmas sermon ever preached: *How The Grinch Stole Christmas*, by Dr. Seuss. Although it's not overtly religious, I find it conveys the truth better than just about anything else out there at this time of year. You see, when I am hurting, I want very much to be the Grinch. I want to take Christmas and all the trappings and dump it over the edge of a cliff. I don't want the fruitcake (and as funny as that is – I love fruitcake), the toys, the songs, the feast—none of it—and I don't want it going on all around me either. I want to make it all go away, so my hurt will not be quite so raw.

But then, as I'm pulling my sleigh full of the joys of others up to the top of Paris Mountain to dump, I pause and look back for a moment. And in that moment I see past the glitz and feasting, I look past my own heartache to really see what is going on. It isn't what I expected! All those things that made my own pain so acute are, in fact, shadows. They aren't what the holidays are really all about. Christmas and the coming New Year are not about me. They are about the higher power we believe in and what has been done for the world, not about what the world has done to my life.

“And the Grinch, with his Grinch-feet ice cold in the snow, stood puzzling and puzzling, how could it be so? It came without ribbons. It came without tags. It came without packages, boxes or bags. And he puzzled and puzzled 'till his puzzler was sore. Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before. What if Christmas, he thought, doesn't come from a store. What if Christmas, perhaps, means a little bit more.”

The story of the Grinch never fails to remind me that the real celebration is not about who is absent from the table, but Who is present, and the One who is present with me in and through all things keeps me connected to all those I love, both present and past.

Maybe this year you will hear the song, as distant as it may be, “*Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me*”....and just maybe the Grinch ornaments will stay on the tree and not in our hearts. *Peace to you this Christmastime!*



A Minute with Michelle — A Call for Action

Before T.J's death, suicide was not a topic I discussed. It was uncomfortable, dark, and a tragedy that happens to *other* people...in *other* schools...and in *other* communities. It could never happen to people like me. All of my friends were "normal." Our parents were members of the PTA, active in the booster club, and drove mini vans with those hideous "my daughter is an honor roll student" bumper stickers. Don't get me wrong - we had problems - we just didn't talk about them. After all *what happens in our house STAYS in our house*. And of course, there was nothing too big for Jesus...so why even bother discussing it...right?

In reality, suicide crosses all social, cultural, economic, and educational boundaries. Each year over 30,000 individuals die by their own hands and it is estimated that for every 1 completion there are 25 attempts. Youth suicide is on the rise. This silent epidemic ranks as the **SECOND** or **THIRD** leading cause of death for ages 15-24 and **FOURTH** for ages 10-14. Each *week* in the United States, we lose approximately 100+ young people to suicide. **This is equivalent to an average of one suicide every two hours.** More teenagers and young adults have died of suicide than from cancer, heart disease, AIDS, birth defects, stroke, pneumonia and influenza, and chronic lung disease **COMBINED**. According to the SC Violent Death Reporting System, 60% of all violent deaths in South Carolina are attributed to suicide – simply put, we lose more lives to suicide than homicide.

And **STILL** the topic of suicide remains *hushed* and overlooked.

As a survivor and as harsh as it may sound, I know that despite all the effort in the world some suicides are unavoidable. But I also know that suicide is one of the most preventable types of deaths. Through education and outreach we can make a difference. How many times have we said "If I knew then what I know now - how different things may be?" I didn't know T.J's battle with alcohol, mood changes, or his dark moments were warning signs. Nor did I know his senior thesis would be his final gift to me. I still hear him saying "life isn't all it's cut out to be and the pieces don't always go together." How I wish I would have said something! How I wish I would have done more!

But I didn't; however, I am now. I'm breaking my silence. I'm telling my story to my family, to my friends, to my job, to my church, to my school, to my community, to anyone who will listen. Because if it happened to me it can happen to them. I'm choosing not to pretend that he didn't exist - because he did. His name was T.J. and the shame is not in the choice he made but in him not knowing that there was help. His suicide was the "heart attack" of his depression.

Mahatma Gandhi said: "***Be the change you want to see in the world.***" I strongly believe that survivors will be the catalyst for change in the area of suicide prevention, intervention and aftercare. We didn't ask to walk this journey but I don't believe we can run from it. We can stem the rising tide of suicide if we work together. While no family, school or community wants to face a suicidal crisis, statistics show that many will and it is imperative that we all be in a position to respond. We at MHAGC are requesting your support in bringing change to our community. Commit to becoming an advocate in the New Year. **Schedule** suicide prevention trainings at your local school, organization, neighborhood association, church, or workplace. **Spread** the word about suicide prevention and tell your story. **Support** suicide prevention efforts with donations of time, money, and/or resources. **Stand** up for mental wellness and join us in the fight to **Save** lives. For more information about suicide prevention efforts or to volunteer please call 864-467-3598 or e-mail michelle.morton@mhagc.org.

What we do is less than a drop in the ocean. But if that drop were missing the ocean would lack something.

If you are interested in having a part in the *Journey to Healing* Newsletter we welcome your poems, articles, newspaper clippings or readings that have been helpful to you. This newsletter should be not only an instrument of healing, encouragement and education but also a reflection of who we, the survivors are and who we have become. We need your help and input to make this meaningful for everyone and invite your feedback to tell us what additional information you would like to see addressed. Thanks!

At this season of lights
we remember the light that you brought into our lives:
the light of your laughter,
the light of your wit and intelligence,
the light of your love.
May the time not be distant when
the memory of these lights
will illuminate our hearts and minds
and eradicate the darkness therein.

~~Arthur Unknown~~

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Bringing wellness home.....

