



Journey to Healing

A Newsletter for Survivors of Suicide

First Quarter 2014

Suicide Grief – Healing after a Loved One's Suicide

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A loved one's suicide can be emotionally devastating. Use healthy coping strategies — such as seeking support — to begin the journey to healing and acceptance.

When a loved one commits suicide, overwhelming emotions can leave you reeling. Your grief might be heart wrenching. At the same time, you might be consumed by guilt — wondering if you could have done something to prevent your loved one's death.

As you face life after a loved one's suicide, remember that you don't have to go through it alone.

Brace for powerful emotions

A loved one's suicide can trigger intense emotions. For example:

- **Shock.** Disbelief and emotional numbness might set in. You might think that your loved one's suicide couldn't possibly be real.
- **Anger.** You might be angry with your loved one for abandoning you or leaving you with a legacy of grief — or angry with yourself or others for missing clues about suicidal intentions.
- **Guilt.** You might replay "what if" and "if only" scenarios in your mind, blaming yourself for your loved one's death.

- **Despair.** You might be gripped by sadness, loneliness or helplessness. You might have a physical collapse or even consider suicide yourself.

You might continue to experience intense reactions during the weeks and months after your loved one's suicide — including nightmares, flashbacks, difficulty concentrating, social withdrawal and loss of interest in usual activities — especially if you witnessed or discovered the suicide.

Adopt healthy coping strategies

The aftermath of a loved one's suicide can be physically and emotionally exhausting. As you work through your grief, be careful to protect your own well-being.

- **Keep in touch.** Reach out to loved ones, friends and spiritual leaders for comfort, understanding and healing. Surround yourself with people who are willing to listen when you need to talk, as well as those who'll simply offer a shoulder to lean on when you'd rather be silent.
- **Grieve in your own way.** Do what's right for you, not necessarily someone else. If you find it too painful to visit your loved one's gravesite or share the details of your loved one's death, wait until you're ready.
- **Be prepared for painful reminders.** Anniversaries, holidays and other special occasions can be painful reminders of your loved one's suicide. Don't chide yourself for being sad or mournful. Instead, consider changing or suspending family traditions that are too painful to continue.
- **Don't rush yourself.** Losing someone to suicide is a tremendous blow, and healing must occur at its own pace. Don't be hurried by anyone else's expectations that it's been "long enough."
- **Expect setbacks.** Some days will be better than others, even years after the suicide — and that's OK. Healing doesn't often happen in a straight line.
- **Consider a support group for families affected by suicide.** Sharing your story with others who are experiencing the same type of grief might help you find a sense of purpose or strength.

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Times of tragedy can be a crucible in which friendships are tested. You may feel abandoned by certain friends who vanished even before the funeral, or after a token condolence call.

Those friends may feel unequipped to help you through your grief. They may mistakenly think you want to be alone. They, too, are frightened by death,

Try to forgive them. After all, during these turbulent days, there are many times you don't understand yourself.

~ Rabbi Earl A. Grollman

Who would believe that a person
I hardly knew
would be more helpful
than my family and friend?
A bereaved teenaged

Losing a loved one through suicide is an especially devastating loss. The loved ones left behind (survivors) have a difficult array of emotions to overcome on their journey of grief. There are many reasons for this.

First of all, the death is usually unexpected and sudden, even if the person had been talking about suicide in the past. The method is often violent and it is difficult for survivors to think about their loved one inflicting this violence on themselves. Unfortunately, suicide carries a stigma in our society, friends and family members are at a loss for knowing what to say.

For many people, losing a loved one to suicide causes a feeling of abandonment thinking, "My loved one chose to leave me!" All of these issues are difficult to deal with during the grieving process.

Fortunately, the Greenville area has a self-help/support group called "Survivors of Suicide" for family members and friends of persons who have completed suicide. This free and confidential group is sponsored by Mental Health America of Greenville County.

Groups meet on the first and third Tuesday of each month at 7:00 - 8:30 PM at St. Michael Lutheran Church, 2619 Augusta Street, Greenville, SC 29605. Additionally, CRISISline is available 24/7 at 864-271-8888. *Inclement Weather Policy: If the weather is severe, your well-being is our main concern. Please watch for e-mails, call CRISISline at 864-271-8888 or check the website of Mental Health America at MHAGC.org for cancellations. Please stay alert with these notices and take care of yourself.*



Inspirational

An aspect of life after a suicide are the new friends that survivors meet at support groups for people who are also grieving the loss of a loved one from suicide. It is often said people meet some of the nicest people that they never wanted to meet when they meet these new friends at a support group. The bond that is formed results from the commonality of losing a loved one from suicide. As time goes on the fact of the suicide that initially bonded these new friends fades as the friendship grows. There is a comfort level with survivors that they do not have to pretend anything because these new friends know exactly what the feelings are that result from losing a loved one from suicide. There is a certain comfort level resulting from the fact that someone else knows the feelings of grief from a completed suicide. The social interaction that began by meeting someone else who knows the feelings that go along with losing a loved one to suicide moves on to other levels and other topics of interest. With these new friends there is a renewed interest in life. This renewed interest in life can become a very satisfying experience. There is always a risk to be taken as a survivor moves into another phase of life. There is fear as survivors move on to other new ventures in life. The hurt that results from losing a loved one to suicide leaves a lasting impact on the life of the survivor and this can cause fear of venturing forth to new and different life experiences. It is important for survivors to realize that this fear is normal and to give in to the fear can result in survivors never venturing forth to create a new life for themselves. It would be tragic to be paralyzed for the remainder of one's life and not attempt to venture forth to new and different experiences that can enrich one's life. The potential is there waiting to be discovered and enjoyed. There is a new and different life for the survivor who is willing to take the risk and experience a life beyond the suicide. The suicide ended a

life of pain for these loved ones but it did not end the life of the survivor. There is and can be a life of joy and fulfillment for survivors who are willing to take a risk and discover new opportunities for themselves. It takes courage and determination to want to discover new and different experiences that can enhance and enrich the lives of survivors of suicide. These new experiences are waiting to be discovered. The potential is there.

One of the fears that survivors have as they traverse the journey of grief is the fear of losing contact with their loved one. As time marches on survivors fear remembering this important person in their life. Sometimes survivors erroneously are under the impression that if they hold onto the pain resulting from the suicide that will be a guarantee that they will not lose contact with this loved one. Nothing could be further from the truth. Granted the pain is a connection to the loved one and it is the last connection with the loved one but it is not the only connection. There are myriads of connection with those people who have gone before us. There are countless memories of these loved ones. There are countless stories that recount when these people were alive and the antics that made survivors laugh and memories that bring tears to survivors. While the pain is the last connection that survivors have with these loved ones the pain can also be a way that survivors torture themselves because they feel that they failed their loved ones and were not there when these tortured souls were at the nadir of their lives. Survivors failed to see how desperate these loved ones were. Survivors replay the final hours or days or weeks that their loved ones were still alive and missed the signals that these loved ones gave. In most instances these signals were either not there or were so very subtle that no one could comprehend the meaning of the signal. It is only when

survivors look back do these signals make any sense at all. The point is that experiencing the excruciating pain that accompanies the loss of this loved one from suicide for years after the suicide is not helpful in the grieving process. Certainly in the immediate aftermath of the suicide there is going to be horrendous pain that all survivors experience. That is a very normal reaction and a very normal step that survivors need to experience as they journey the path of grief. There does come a point in the grief process when survivors are able to relinquish the excruciating pain and allow the pain to become ordinary. That is a very important step in the grief process. The pain has been incorporated into the psychic part of the survivor. The pain becomes an ordinary part of the life of the survivor. It is there but it is not all consuming and so distracting that the pain impedes the future life of the survivor. The survivor is able to go about the other activities of their lives. To reach that point is no easy task. Survivors need to make a decision that the initial pain that is experienced is not going to interfere with the rest of the life of the survivor. There are other aspects of life for the survivor and these other aspects will eventually distract the survivor and put other meaning in their lives. Does this mean that this loved one who died is going to be forgotten? Absolutely not. These loved ones who found life too painful to continue will always be a part of the life of survivors.

Getting to the point where the pain from a suicide becomes ordinary is not easy. It results from a survivor making a very calculated decision that this pain is not going to be the cause of ruining the life of those left behind. It is all part of the grief journey. Reaching this point will not come about automatically but will come about by a decision that all survivors need to make. None of the steps in the grief journey come about automatically. Like all of the other steps on this journey there is work involved and decisions that need to be made. It all flows from making a resolution that this tragic event that has become a part of the life of the survivor is not going to unravel the life. Certainly there is going to be a detour in life but it is only a temporary detour. The life of the survivor is going to continue to be

lived but it is going to be lived in a different way. There is always going to be a missing person in the life of the survivor. That person who was so loved is no longer part of this life and the life of the survivor as the survivor knew it. Does that mean that that loved one is no longer a part of a family or part of the family makeup? Absolutely not. That would be a tragic result of a tragic death. I have often said that a tragedy worse than losing a loved one to suicide is that if this loved one were to be forgotten. There are many other ways to remain connected to the loved ones in our lives who have gone to the hereafter. Survivors do not necessarily need to experience the pain resulting from the suicide in order to keep connected to these loved ones. There are pictures and favorite songs and a myriad of stories that keep these loved ones a part of a family. In time there will be laughter and survivors will look forward to hearing about their loved ones. This will come about only if there is a comfort level about losing this loved one from suicide. Again, this is not going to come about automatically or with the passage of time. This will come about as a result of a lot of hard work. Taking part in this journey is not for the weak-hearted. Survivors of a completed suicide are among the hardest working people in creation and all survivors merit a deep appreciation from those of us who are not survivors. All survivors should be given a merit badge with the title of "Job Well Done." This work is not easy but with any task the rewards are tremendous and certainly the efforts will be worthwhile in that a life that was thought to be destroyed has risen out of the ashes. Survivors will live again and will enjoy life again –albeit a different type of life.

As always, I want to assure each and every one of the members of the LOSS family of my thoughts and prayers on a regular basis during my quiet time. I encourage you to do the same for each other – especially for those members who have recently joined our family. Our family continues to grow constantly. It is an unfortunate aspect of the LOSS program that our services are in constant need but it is also fortunate that LOSS is here to help survivors in their time of need. Keep On Keepin' On

Reprinted from the LOSS website (Loving Outreach to Survivors of Suicide)



*R*eflections by Becky

Grief is Like...

One of the difficulties bereaved persons face is how to explain to us how they FEEL when they are grieving. What does it FEEL like to be in the skin of a bereaved person? Is it similar to other experiences in our life? Is there a way we can relate on some level to the pain of grieving persons when we are not grieving ourselves?

Most people can't allow themselves to go to the place where they could actually see themselves in the dark hole of grief. We don't want to believe it would be that bad for us, that we have the inner resources to minimize grief's hold on us, unlike our grieving friends. But if we can just connect their feelings with some feelings that we have experienced ourselves, then maybe, just maybe, we can begin to comprehend the impact of grief on a person's life. Then, after you connect with any of these feelings you need to remember to multiply your own feeling times x100 to get closer to the bereaved person's experience.

Here are some feelings that I've experienced while grieving or that I've heard other bereaved persons describe.

- Grief is like wearing a very tight fitting pair of shoes that you cannot take off. Just as you can think of nothing else but your hurting feet because of these shoes, so also in your grief you can think of nothing else but your loss. You cannot get away from it. It is your main focus of attention. And your whole body begins to hurt too. Your face will also reflect the pain you are feeling. Grieving is a whole body experience.
- Grief is like being in a bubble. You are no longer a part of the world around you. Everything sounds muffled. You hear conversations, but it's like the words have no meaning. Nobody can reach you. There is an uncomfortable distance that has been created between you and those who don't understand grief.
- Grief is like looking through a one-way window. You can see others, but they can't see you. You feel invisible to others. It's hard to understand how the world can go on when your life has stopped.

- Grief is like having a heavy weight on your chest. You have trouble breathing. Sometimes your body takes deep sighing breaths in an attempt to get more oxygen. Sometimes you have anxiety attacks. And your heart actually aches. The location of your grief spot is right under your sternum close to your heart. It's no wonder that your chest hurts.
- Grief is like wearing a heavy coat with all of the pockets full of rocks. The grief literally weighs you down and slows you down. Grief is not only emotionally exhausting, but physically exhausting also. Because the warm glow of life is not pulsing through your body you may find it hard to keep warm. After a while that heavy coat of grief will begin to feel comfortable and you may decide you don't want to take it off.
- Grief is like being a traveler on a high-jacked plane. It is as if you have been taken to a foreign land where you do not know the language or the culture. Soon you learn you can never return to the world as you knew it. Grief can be pretty scary. You do not want to be there. You probably don't know how to grieve and you may not know what is expected of you. When you try to speak to your friends, they may not understand you. Your friends know you have "gone away" for a while, but they assume you will return and be the same old you they once knew. But then you

begin to realize you will never return to that place again and that others may never know or understand this.

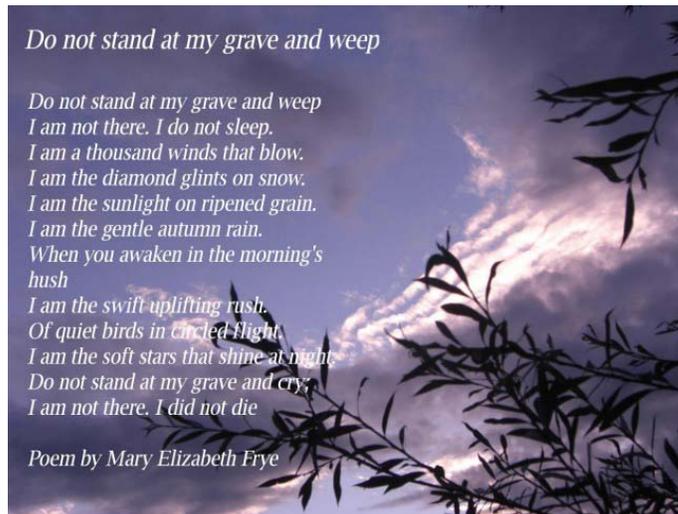
- Grief is like the stages of love: first falling in love and being totally preoccupied by your new love, then becoming comfortable as you begin to trust that your love will always be with you. In grief, as when you first fall in love, your heart longs to be with the person who's died. Your desire to touch him or her is overwhelming. Most other parts of your life seem unimportant in comparison. Then slowly, normal life begins to creep back in and you find that your grief no longer demands the high maintenance that it first required. You will have created a special space in your heart where you can carry this departed loved one with you at all times, even as you go about other things.

Death ends a lifetime, but not a relationship.

Grace and peace, Becky

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 and always take care!



Mental Health America of Greenville County
429 North Main Street, Suite 2
Greenville, SC 29601

Bringing wellness home.....

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 Group – this group meets the 1st and 3rd Tuesdays of each month from 7:00 – 8:30 PM at St. Michael Lutheran Church, 2619 Augusta Street, Greenville, SC 29605. 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 by phone or personal visit in between meetings. Please call CRISISline at 864 271-8888 to arrange a call or visit from a team member.