



# Journey to Healing

*A newsletter for survivors of suicide*

**Third Quarter 2011**

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 1<sup>st</sup> Tuesday 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.

## **Suicide Grief Healing After a Loved One's Suicide**

**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 dies, your grief may be heart-wrenching. When a loved one completes a suicide, your reaction may be far more complicated. Overwhelming emotions may leave you reeling — and you may 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 may set in. You may think that your loved one's suicide couldn't possibly be real.

**Anger.** You may 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 may replay "what if" and "if only" scenarios in your mind, blaming yourself for your loved one's death.

**Despair.** You may be gripped by sadness, depression and a sense of defeat or hopelessness. You may have a physical collapse or even consider suicide yourself.

You may 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 family, 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 will 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 may help you find a sense of purpose or strength.

### **Know when to seek professional help**

If you experience intense or unrelenting anguish or physical problems, consider asking your doctor or mental health provider for help. Seeking professional help is especially important if you think you might be depressed or you have recurring thoughts of suicide. Keep in mind that unresolved grief can turn into complicated grief, where painful emotions are so long lasting and severe that you have trouble resuming your own life.

Depending on the circumstances, you might benefit from individual or family therapy — either to get you through the worst of the crisis or to help you adjust to life after suicide. Medication can be helpful in some cases, too.

### **Face the future with a sense of peace**

In the aftermath of a loved one's suicide, you may feel like you can't go on or that you'll never enjoy life again. In truth, you may always wonder why it happened — and reminders may trigger painful feelings even years later. Eventually, however, the raw intensity of your grief will fade. The tragedy of the suicide won't dominate your days and nights. Understanding the complicated legacy of suicide and how to cope with palpable grief can help you reach inner peace and healing, without forgetting your loved one.

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## **Toward Healing After the Suicide of My Son**

*“What the caterpillar calls the end of the world,  
the Master calls the butterfly.”  
Richard Bach*

When a child of ours deliberately ends his/her life our grief is compounded. We grieve the death and loss of a most beloved part of ourselves ... of our own life and future. But we grieve as well, and foremost, the fact of suicide and all suicide means and all society perceives suicide as meaning.

Every emotional response familiar in grief is intensified and complicated to almost intolerable dimensions following suicide. We are in dread of punitive societal attitudes and religious biases. We fear for our surviving children. We become obsessed with guilt and unrealistic acceptance of responsibility. At the same time we feel a tremendous sense of rejection, inadequacy, personal failure and anger ... anger at God, at ourselves,

sometimes at other family members and, perhaps most painful of all, at our dead child.

I was thrust into this overpowering morass of emotional agony by the suicide of Bobby, my bright, handsome thirty-six year old son. I could not be distracted from the horror of what he had done to his body, to his life and to the lives of those who loved him.

How could this unspeakable, seemingly senseless act have occurred within my family? How was it possible his desperate state of mind had gone unrecognized and untended? We should have known! Somehow we should have been able to foresee and prevent his death! I found small comfort in the blessing of family, his heart-broken step-father and our now three grief-stricken children, who shared the anguish of this tragedy. I saw my family as irretrievably broken ... for now, two of us were to be absent forever. And by his own choice! I was inconsolable. I believed my life was over. Oh, I never doubted that my existence would and must continue. But I saw this continuance only as pain-filled days, stretching endlessly into years ... to be endured without peace of mind or hope for happiness.

I was bereft of understanding as to why this unthinkable choice had been made. Inexhaustible, I searched for answers, for reasons, for justification I was never to find. I was desolate in my need that the magnitude of my wounding be understood and comforted. I felt assaulted, exposed, embarrassed and estranged from society. I was fearful, feeling disconnected, without bearing or direction for healing my brokenness and without reassurance for my sanity. For I was convinced the shock of his death, and that of his brother eight months earlier, had left me mentally unbalanced. The intensity of my feelings surely was neither normal nor sane!

In the following days and weeks I forced myself to go through the motions of living. My physical self performed mundane household tasks. I even extended comfort and caring to others. But it was a façade; a shallow veneer around a vast, cold nothingness. I was wretched with self-loathing, tormented by the belief that something I had done or failed to do had so robbed my son of self-love that he could no longer live with the pain of it. I thought I would explode from the embroiling force of rage, guilt and frustrated helplessness. Many times I struggled with a particular feeling and found relief from having “finished” with that part of the great complexity of my emotions, only to have it erupt again, confusing and nagging in its persistence to be reprocessed.

For months I remained entrapped; inert; impotent. I was obsessed with my son's suicide and with finding the cause. It was the first and last thought of every day. Every heartbeat accentuated his death and my loss. Every moment was consumed by hurting ... hurting ... hurting. I grew so very weary of hurting!

Perhaps it was that suffocating, disabling weariness that stirred within me a fluttering resistance against remaining within the torturous confines of grief. For, though fragile and unsure, a new being labored to emerge, a being that wanted, needed and yes ... even

deserved to be freed! This metamorphosis was not achieved quickly, painlessly or without reluctance, for I feared the glimpse of myself and my life forever changed. I feared the future, alien and distant from the uncomplicated, joyous past; a future without the gentle teasing and dimpled laughter of my son. But I also glimpsed love and kinder times waiting to be shared with my living family. I glimpsed a future offering more than just survival.

With the slow disintegration of the sheltering cocoon of grief, I saw the compassionate Ever-Presence of the God I had raged against. His love encompassed me, radiating warmth into my grief-frozen soul. I was reassured of His acceptance of my child. My value was reaffirmed and the worth of both my own being and that of my son was restored. I knew the meaning of Grace!

I recognized a deeper, richer appreciation of my strengths and found renewed confidence. I sought those wounded like me and, as our tears mingled, felt the soothing balm of genuine understanding. I saw the isolated, untended anguish of others and in extending comfort found meaning and purpose for my own loss and pain. I learned something of suicide dynamics; gained insight into the overwhelming intensity of grief my son had been experiencing and found peace of mind in forgiving the way he chose to resolve it. Finally, I was able to relinquish to him, responsibility for his act and allow him the dignity and consequence of his own personhood.

I grew to accept the short time and great love shared with this child as an unconditional gift. I grew to accept that his death, along with Mike's death, that my loss and grief are, and will always be, a part of my life. Most importantly, I grew to understand that they are not, or had ever been, the whole of it.

I will always sorrow for their deaths of my sons, but my healing is no longer hindered by the consuming obsession with the cause of Bobby's death. At last, after many cruel, exhausting months, I am free of the bondage of my powerlessness over his choice and his death. I am free to take back into myself, to treasure throughout the remainder of my days, cherished memories of life with him; memories of his mischief, of his laughter and the sweetness of his less-than-perfect person. This grief was

so different than the grief I had with Mike, and the comingling of this made it even more difficult. However I am; once again, free to look toward the future with hope. I am free ... to live again!

## *Support Groups*

It can be so powerful to connect with other survivors and such a relief to be able to talk openly about suicide with people who really understand.

For so many survivors, a crucial part of their healing process is the support and sense of connection they feel through sharing their grief with other survivors. The most common way this sharing occurs is through survivor support groups.

These groups provide a safe place where survivors can share their experiences and support each other.

It is natural to feel a bit unsure about going to your first support group meeting. In *No Time to Say Goodbye*, one facilitator explains what you can expect: We sit in a circle, with each person giving a brief introduction: first name, who was lost, when it was, and how it happened. I then ask the people who are attending for the first time to begin, because they usually have an urgent need to talk. The rest of the group reaches out to them by describing their own experiences and how they are feeling. The new people realize they are not alone with their nightmare. By comparing their situations with others, they also begin to understand that they don't have a monopoly on pain.

Some survivors attend a support group almost immediately, some wait for years; others attend for a year or two and then go only occasionally — on anniversaries, holidays, or particularly difficult days. You may find that it takes a few meetings before you begin to feel comfortable. Or, you may find that the group setting isn't quite right for you, but can still be a useful way to meet one or two fellow survivors who become new, lifelong friends based on the common bond of understanding the pain and tragedy of suicide loss.



The risk of love is loss,  
and the price of loss is grief -  
But the pain of grief  
Is only a shadow  
When compared with the pain  
Of never risking love.



## *Within Our Circle – A Broken Heart Still Beats*

### *A Suicide Survivor's Beatitudes*

***Blessed*** are those who recognize our grief is compounded; that we grieve the death of a beloved person but foremost, we grieve the cause of the death... suicide.

***Blessed*** are those who give us permission to mourn the loss of one dearly loved, free of judgment, censure and shame.

***Blessed*** are spiritual guides who relieve our concerns for the repose of our loved one's soul with the truth that God is All-Knowing, All-Loving and All-Forgiving.

***Blessed*** are those who don't offer the meaningless cliché, "Time Heals", because, for a long while, the passing of time holds no meaning or value for us.

***Blessed*** are those who don't say, "I know just how you "feel", but instead say, "I am here for you. I will not tire of your tears or your words of sorrow and regret."

***Blessed*** are those who have the patience and love to listen to our repetitive obsession with WHY? Without offering useless answers or explanations.

***Blessed*** are those who reaffirm the worth of our deceased beloved by sharing memories of his/her goodness and times of fun, laughter and happiness.

***Blessed*** are the mental health care providers who explain to us that, very probably, our loved one died of a terminal illness called depression.

***Blessed*** are those who challenge our sense of omnipotence with the reminder that no one has enough power or control over another to cause them to end their life.

***Blessed*** are the first responders to our loved one's suicide who try to relieve our sense of guilt and responsibility by assuring us "That the death is not your fault".

***Blessed*** are those who lend acceptance to the value of the relationship we shared with the one who died by allowing us to speak of them and 'what might have been'.

***Blessed*** are those that allow and encourage us to use our loved one's death in a manner that gives our loss and grief meaning and purpose.

***Blessed*** are those who do not expect us to find "closure", "grief resolution", "recovery" or to "be healed", understanding that these terms define 'grief work in progress' that will take the rest of our life.

***Blessed*** are community caregivers who direct us to suicide bereavement support groups where our anguish is understood, our loss validated and where we are encouraged by the example of others who have traveled this road before us.

***Blessed*** are long-term survivors after suicide who role model not only can we survive, but, in time, we can thrive...we can regain peace of mind, restored confidence, renewed productivity and a revived zest for living.





## *Inspirational*

### *Suicide and God – God and Tragedy*

In an era of tsunamis, hurricanes, war, terrorism, and other tragedies, the first question many people ask is, "Why does God allow such things to happen?" Some apparently lose their faith because they can't answer this question. The problem may be more with the question than an answer. The question implies that God is up in the sky working puppet strings, micromanaging human life and history. Especially in the case of a personal tragedy, the question suggests an image of God as a kindly grandfather: How could he allow any of his grandchildren to suffer? Who wants to worship a God that could be so cruel?

To deal effectively with our personal tragedies and society's violence, we need a more sophisticated image of God. Stop using "he" or even "she," and immediately you have a more mysterious notion of divinity. Imagine God as the creating spark of this world or as the source of life, and you let go of the anthropomorphisms, the too-human images that reduce the idea of God to a mere projection of our reality and our wishes.

This is not a new idea. Why is there an injunction in Jewish practice against using the name of Yahweh? Why did the medieval Christian mystics suggest the *via negativa*, or "negative way," to God — i.e., God as the cloud of unknowing? Just to maintain a sense of awe at the majesty of God? Or to acknowledge that any language or image we use quickly reduces the very idea of God to our limited categories?

The Taoist says, "The Tao that can be named is not the eternal Tao." Doesn't that apply to the name God as well? What if we stopped naming God, or at least paused to think about what we're doing? Dietrich Bonhoeffer, theologian, pastor, and martyr, wrote about this theme from his Nazi prison in terms that would rattle a person even today. "Before God and with God we live without God. God lets himself be pushed out of the world and onto the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us." This God, Bonhoeffer says, is not the *deus ex machina*, the being who flies in like the cavalry at the last minute to save the day. This image of God is fashioned in the image of Jesus who was tortured and executed.

Religion does a disservice when it gives us childish notions of a God in the sky who will save us from human insanity. We have to be fully part of this world and take on our responsibility, doing everything possible to prevent wars and make people safe. Maybe we won't ever solve our problems completely, but we can make progress toward that goal.

Fifty years ago, there was a tragic fire at a Catholic elementary school outside Chicago. One of the nuns had the children gather round and pray instead of taking them to safety. They all went up in flames. Naïve notions of God are dangerous today, as well. If we give up the notion of a grandfather in the sky and replace it with a deep sense of the mystery at the heart of things, we might understand the importance of our efforts to make this world safe for us all. A childish notion of God keeps our religion childish.

Now let me turn everything I have just said inside out and upside down. We need images for the infinite, at the edge of which we live every moment of our lives. We need help maintaining a personal relationship with our mysterious God. The ancient Greeks piously worshipped Zeus and Hera as the greatest divinities and a holy married couple. Native American spiritual leaders call to their deceased grandmothers and grandfathers. The cloud of unknowing is itself an image.

But somehow we have to empty out our images at the very moment we employ them. We can't take them as fact. We have to see through them even as we find God through them. Maybe it would help to remember that God is there beneath all images and names we have for "him." But paradoxically, we can only come close to that God when we give up any names or images we have and to which we have become attached — which is any image at all. In the end, Bonhoeffer said that he felt uncomfortable using the word "God" altogether.

By the way, I happen to be very attached to my grandparents, all four of them. One saved my life, and the others gave me a happy childhood. I honor them as venerable ancestors, I love them, and I can appreciate thinking of God as a grandparent. But what happens when a child is killed in an accident? I have to understand that I, too — in God's image — am called to be that child's grandparent and do everything I can for the world's children. As my heart grows bigger, the language I use for God becomes that much more accurate, and therefore, that much more undefined.



## *Reflections by Becky*

### *Dealing With . . .*

I spoke with a woman last week who had been present when a friend intentionally shot herself, taking her own life. The suicide occurred many years ago, but this woman is still experiencing significant distress.

Although she had no idea her friend had contemplated suicide, and the act was totally unexpected, she reported to me that she feels responsible for her friend's death because she refused a request she made of her just prior to her suicide. Her feelings of responsibility are so great that she does not allow herself to get close to other people, fearing that if she does so, she could once again be the cause of someone's death by suicide.

Additionally, she is plagued with traumatic memories from that evening. She stated that she stays as busy as she can, trying to occupy her mind in order to prevent reliving that day, to keep from thinking about the event she witnessed. She asked me plaintively, "When will it go away? - Will it ever go away?"

I hurt for her, having asked similar painful questions myself after my son's suicide thirteen years ago. And it pained me deeply to have to tell her, "It will never 'go' away." I told her what the rest of us who have experienced the death of a loved one by suicide have learned, that we are forever changed by the event. We are different people now. A part of us will always carry a scar, will always hurt because our loved one chose suicide, chose to unalterably sever his/her relationship with life, and therefore with us. Many of us will always carry a question in the back of our mind, "What could I have said?" "What if I had done x instead of y?" "Why didn't I know?" And little things, small events, sights, sounds, places, smells, will bring back painful feelings for years to come.

But I could offer her some hope, and I tried to do so. I assured her of several things: that the magnitude of the pain does diminish and will not always consume every waking moment; that feelings of responsibility can lessen over time; that the intrusive memories do fade in intensity, and will not always pervade her "mind's eye." But, I expressed to her my honest belief that in order for these things to happen, she must "deal with" the suicide.

That is, rather than pushing feelings, visions, and memories aside, hoping they will go away of their own accord, she must, as must we all, do as much as we can to

address the fact of the suicide and its effects upon her.

This may mean seeing a therapist, to address individual thoughts, feelings, and questions. This may mean attending support group meetings, to hear from other survivors that her thoughts, feelings, and questions are more common than she thought. This may mean crying uncontrollably, screaming at God, withdrawing for a period of time. This may mean talking, talking, talking, to anyone who will listen, about her shock, her hurt, her anger, her confusion, talking until she is talked out, then talking some more.

I hope if she is reading this, please know that the steps you must take to "deal with" your friend's suicide are painful, the process difficult. But the fact is, your efforts to ignore, avoid, and suppress what happened are not working, and you are in deep pain now. You have placed your life on hold because your friend chose to end hers.

Declare that you cannot change the fact of your friend's death, but you can change in part how it affects you. Resolve that you will do all you can to address your feelings of guilt and responsibility, and then live with any questions that remain. Determine that you could not have prevented your friend's death, but you can prevent your own loss of living. What happened and how you feel about it will never "go away," because you loved, because you cared. But you can live fully in spite of what happened. It is my hope for you, my friend, that you choose to do so.

*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!

*On this journey, we redefine what it means to be human.  
We recognize that we are all indeed receivers and  
that we are intimately related at every level of being. We discover  
that we are not masters, but members. In the most humbling  
sense, we are integral parts of the whole. Only from this position of  
humility do we discover that our roots are already in place: in our  
bodies, in the earth and in the ongoing story of life.*

*Ann Hillman  
The Dancing Animal Woman: A  
Celebration of Life*

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*Bringing wellness home.....*