

Journey to Healing

A newsletter for survivors of suicide

Fourth 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 1st 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.

Grief after Suicide Stigma - What Do I Tell People?

The stigma or shame, you may think others associate with suicide, stems in part from its historical and religious interpretations. Early Roman and English laws established suicide as a crime because it was thought a person ended his life to avoid paying taxes! Though the Bible itself contains no prohibition against suicide, the early Christian church equated suicide with murder. Today very few laws exist that equate suicide with crime, and those few are rarely invoked.

If your friends seem uncomfortable talking about the death, or even being with you, it's most likely the type of discomfort felt when facing death of any kind, or a reaction to your discomfort. And if you're not comfortable relating the circumstances to others, don't. Your close friends will already know. Let others simply respond to the death of your loved one. You don't need to share the complete story with those not close to you any more than you would share all the details of a recent surgery with them.

However, it is very important that you do confront the word 'suicide'. Practice thinking, hearing, and saying it. Don't try to do this alone. You need someone, or several people, with whom you can share your feelings. For a few days – possibly a week or two – you may want to isolate yourself and take time to recover by yourself. But don't cut yourself off for too long. Let friends and relatives help you. No one will have any magic answers for you. No one will be able to make you hurt less. But the healing and coping process requires that you talk about your feelings – about all the sadness, anger, hurt and guilt you are carrying around inside you. Friends may provide all the emotional support you need or you may want to join a mutual support group and meet with others who have experienced the suicide of a loved one.

CRISISline is able to offer you some understanding and support over the telephone. These lines are answered 24 hours a day by people especially trained to help you through the rough spots. They will understand your feelings and help you find ways to work things out and give you information on our monthly meetings and any other meetings pertaining to SOS.. If you need some professional counseling, your doctor, clergyman, or Mental Health America can help you find appropriate services. Remember, you may be blaming yourself in some way but here are people who will share your sorrow and help you see things more clearly.



*The past is unchangeable, the future
unpredictable, I can only live the life
directly before me.
-Philip Yancey*

National Survivors of Suicide Day
Saturday, November 19, 2011

National Survivors of Suicide Day takes place every year on the Saturday before Thanksgiving, in communities across the U.S. and the world. In each community, activities include a blend of emotional support and information about resources for healing for survivors of suicide loss. Mental Health America's SOS will be hosting a Survivors of Suicide Day gathering, to include a local viewing of the telecast sponsored by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. The AFSP telecast features survivors and mental health professionals discussing their experiences and answering the questions that so many survivors face: "Why did this happen?" "How do I cope?"

Please plan on joining us at St. Michael Lutheran Church on Saturday, November 19th at 11:30 AM when we will begin to gather in the Fellowship Hall and will have lunch, a brief panel discussion and watch the video. This will end with a ceremony and a remembrance gift for you to take home with you.

Please RSVP to Jennifer Piver at 864-467-3564 so proper lunch plans can be made.

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.



No one understands another's pain like those who have walked the miles in the moccasins of one who has holes in them from the wear and tear of not only the soles of our feet, but of the heart and souls of our bodies.



Within Our Circle – A Broken Heart Still Beats

Anniversaries of Sorrow by Alice Baird

Once you have lost someone to suicide, anniversaries loom large each calendar year. In your former life—before you became a survivor—most probably you looked forward to anniversaries with a giddy anticipation of surprises and special celebrations. But as the anniversary of your loved one’s death approaches, that anticipation, more than likely, sours into dread.

For me, the days and weeks before the date of my son’s suicide in August become tinged with panic and colored by depression. Time slows, I slog through the hours. It becomes harder to focus, to complete tasks, to attend social events. No matter how well I may have been doing before the calendar turned the page, approaching anniversaries and birthdays always seem to plunge me into crisis. By comparison, the anniversary day itself can feel almost anti-climactic.

That being said, having just survived the third anniversary of my son Adam’s death, I have felt the intensity of the anniversary diminish somewhat from year to year (although it is completely unlike the fading anguish that accompanies the succeeding anniversaries of a parent’s death). The first anniversary of the suicide, for nearly everyone, is an agonizing marker of personal loss. A year to the day after Adam died, I stood at his grave in New York, braced by family, tears streaming down my face, as I read aloud a poem I had written for the date. The second year my sister visited from out of town so that I would not have to face the day alone. We shared stories about Adam, keeping his memory, and our love for him, alive. Her companionship imparted some stability to a rocky day.

This year as the third anniversary approached, I vacillated with my plans. Did I want to go to New York again? It turned out to be bad timing for family members in New York, so I scrapped that idea. Reaching out to my best friend in Georgia, I learned that she would be on vacation in Hawaii that weekend. Another close friend was recovering from a stem cell transplant. It looked like I would have to face the day alone, until my sister decided she would come again to visit me. She arranged to get off from work and bought her airline tickets. I was genuinely looking forward to her visit until Hurricane Irene intervened. My sister’s flights were cancelled. I would be alone after all.

The day before the anniversary, I had lunch with a friend who was approaching the first anniversary of her father’s suicide. We shared our stories. It was a comfort to both of us. The next morning I got up early and got ready to drive to Asheville, which is what I had been planning had my sister come, only now I was going alone. I knew from experience that if I stayed at home by myself, I would soon be mired in one of those dread “lost days.”

I treated myself well, enjoying the best organic beef hamburger in the world at Roman’s, a small deli near the Civic Center, and shopping for fiber and fabrics at my favorite stores; retail therapy can be a healthy distraction (as long as you don’t overdo it), helping to soothe, however slightly, the aching heart. Trying to find one last fabric shop I had never visited before, I kept getting lost. At 4:45, fifteen minutes before closing time, I finally arrived. I made my selections hurriedly and spent a few minutes talking to one of the salespeople. Just as I was paying for my fabric, she asked me if I would like to go to a Beach Boys concert at the Biltmore Estate—“long story, don’t ask, I have these reserved seats but I can’t go.” Not being a big Beach Boys fan, I hesitated for a moment—but only a moment. It was, I knew, a gift from Adam. Not alone after all, I sat outdoors with a few hundred other women and men more or less my age, watching the sun set over the mountains, and enjoying the songs from a kinder, gentler, more innocent era in my life. It was a good anniversary, after all. So what am I saying: expect some sort of serendipity that will make your anniversary bearable, even happy? Sadly, neither you nor I are that naïve. What I am saying is this: expect the days leading up to the anniversary to be anxiety-ridden, but make plans anyway for the day itself so that you do not spend it marooned in misery and tears. Be kind to yourself, and, above all, be open to grace.

It comes when you need it, when you least expect.



Inspirational

As summer winds down we celebrate Labor Day to top off the summer fun and get ready for the autumn activities. There is always a little bit of a let down as we bid farewell to the summer months. We fondly look back on family barbecues and outdoor recreation and walks in the woods and admiring flowers and hearing the laughter of families enjoying a picnic or other activities. There is usually a bit of sadness when survivors experience an intact family having a good time and interacting with each other and the survivor realizes that their family is no longer intact due to the death of a loved one from suicide.

On Labor Day we take time to honor the laborers of our country who have contributed to the prosperity of our country. It is a day dedicated to the unions and the labor movement that has been the backbone of the workforce of our country. I have often said that no one works harder than those who are trying to resolve the death of a loved one from suicide. One aspect of this work is to adjust to the fact that a family system has been disrupted because a loved one has found life too painful to be able to continue living. A system is made up of multiple parts that are very dependent on each other. It is a unit that functions together and together makes the system work. When one member of that system breaks down then the whole system is impacted and negatively affected. The system needs to be repaired in order to function properly. What happens when one part of the system is permanently removed? The whole system is affected and the functioning becomes more laborious and the system suffers.

Looking at the family as a system that is made up of multiple parts we can see one aspect of the grieving process and the work that must be done to resolve the inner workings of that family. When someone dies from suicide that family system is permanently altered by the suicide. An integral part of that system has been destroyed by the suicide and never to be replaced. That family struggles with the void and family members try to supplant the activities of the missing member. It is important to realize that this family system has been permanently altered and there is no substitution for that missing person.

Certainly life continues for that family and the various members continue to function but that family is never going to be the same again. The void will never be fully closed and part of the grieving process is coming to the realization that the family will never be the same again because one member of the system has departed. From here on out this family system is going to be missing an integral part that made it function so well and kept the family system intact.... The point is that systems shift when one part is permanently absent. As the family engages in the grief journey the various members adjust to the changes brought about by the suicide of a loved one. Some responsibilities have to be assumed by the surviving members and the absence of that loved one has to be recognized and dealt with and acknowledged.

The family system will continue to function but in a different way. It will never be the same and that fact should be acknowledged. The family system will survive and function. The worst thing that could happen would be if that family system suffered irreparable harm and destruction because of the suicide of a loved one. It takes a lot of work and effort on the part of each family member to make this work. Help is available through the SOS Group. We are a phone call away.

As always I want to assure each and every member of the SOS family are in my thoughts and prayers on a daily basis and I encourage each of you to do the same for each other - especially for those who have recently joined our family.



Reflections by Becky

There we were, my grandsons and I lay on the floor working on model rockets they had received as a gift. I had put a number of CD's in the changer and the one randomly selected was blues man BB King. As we worked on the rockets I started to notice the music more and more until I got up and turned the volume up a notch or two. We worked a little more and we started to move with the music and I said to them, "You want it a little louder?" They responded "YES!" and when I got up this time I really cranked it up. The extra volume was wonderful.

As I enjoyed it something inside of me snapped. This was not a muscle pull snap, this was a non-physical subtle snap that caught my attention. It felt like it was in my chest but the "where" wasn't really important. What was important was that the snap had seemingly opened up an old familiar joy, a joy I hadn't felt since my son's deaths. It was as if a lid had been lifted from a boiling pot. My joy was able to run again at what seemed to be a full boil. Now we all forgot about the rocket and just joyfully bounced along with the music. It was the first time I could remember listening to music with such powerful pleasure for a long time. I had not consciously or intentionally avoided listening to the music that I love, but I hadn't listened much since my son's deaths. I didn't even realize I had avoided it until I felt myself truly enjoying it again. This made me think of other things that I have traditionally done for enjoyment – gardening came to mind, listening to music, being around people, the smells of Thanksgiving and holidays, turkeys, roasts, yams, cakes and biscuits! It wasn't a punishment.....it is just that I didn't feel like it, simple as that.

I had been fairly conscious of the advent and process of my grief as it came to me in various ways over the year since my sons had died. What has been interesting to note is that it has seemed to be easier to see it coming than to see it going! I think in general grief's arrival is more obvious than its departure. It makes me think about being at the ocean, sitting at the beach and noticing how the tide is coming in. The rising tide calls to us and grabs our attention as we move out of its way. The receding tide however seems to be more subtle and less demanding of our awareness.

I think the same is true for grief. When grief enters our systems it often comes with a shock jarring us out of a "comfortable" state, but its exit is much more subtle and quiet. Many of us celebrate when grief starts to recede, but there are a number of things that can complicate grief's gradual departure. One of the most difficult aspects I have seen is that some people start to worry that they will somehow forget the person who died. The fear seems to be that without the grief the person will cease to abide in the griever's memory. This brings a difficult state where the grieving person grows increasingly ambivalent about their grief. On one hand they fear that if they stop grieving their loved ones will be "forgotten" and on the other hand they are ready to be done with the grief! Other scenarios include fearing to dishonor the loved ones if they stop grieving----the thought seems to be that "I haven't grieved enough considering how much I loved them." The question is "Have I grieved enough?" This is a tough question in our culture where we lack markers and community involvement with our grief.

We can look to tribal cultures to find some interesting responses to this problem of knowing when someone has "grieved enough." There is a tribe in Africa which takes very seriously this idea of letting people know when the grief is "ripe." This tribe prohibits the grieving person from ingesting a certain food during the time of grief. The grieving individual is forbidden to eat of this food while in a state of grief. During the grief the elders of the tribe keep watch over the individual and monitor their state of grief and their path toward healing. When the elders decide that the person is ready, a ritual is begun. During this ritual the people of the tribe ceremoniously bring to the grieving person a meal containing the previously forbidden food. This acts as a marker for the griever that a phase of their grief has been completed. The community rejoices together in the "return" of the individual to the community. In this way the community acts as a support and a feedback mechanism to aid the person in dealing with the elusive nature of grief and therefore in helping them gauge when they have "grieved enough". Imagine for a moment that the "elders" of your community had done this for you. What would that be like?

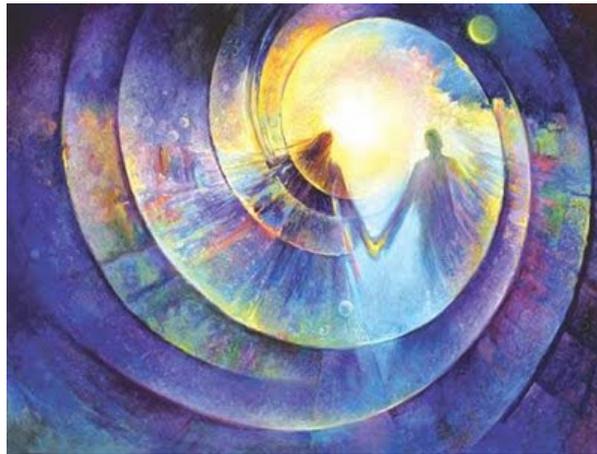
There are other tribes in Africa who paint intricate designs on their bodies to depict the details of the state of their grief. These painted designs alert the community to the type of loss that occurred, how long ago it occurred, and other details of the grief. In this way everything is above board — it is out in the open for all to see. Imagine what it would be like in our culture (US) if we wore our loss history on our bodies — or maybe on our cars!

How would it change your experience to drive in rush hour traffic knowing the loss history of the drivers of the cars around you? Knowing about these tribal people is interesting and teaches us what we don't have in our culture. It also shows us that when it comes to healing grief we are truly the "primitives." Unlike the tribal people, we don't usually live in supportive communities that know of our grief and our healing. Without this we are in more need of help in our struggles with the elusiveness of grief. Whether it is coming or going grief can be a very elusive beast. It is so elusive that it often can help us to link it with a picture or image that can act as a way to clarify. An image that comes to my mind is to think of grief as being like a cloud. Think for a second of what kind of cloud your grief would look like today? Do you have "clear skies" or is your cloud more fog-like, permeating everything and making it difficult to see even things that are close by. Or it might be more like a torrential thunderstorm, with lightning, strong damaging wind and rain so thick that you can't see in front of your face. Or possibly it is like a cloud in the sky that goes relatively unnoticed but blocks the sun's rays all the same.

Grief is a shape shifter. It rarely gives you the exact same look for too long. Like a cloud when you examine it closely it defies description. Have you ever looked very closely at a cloud in the sky? If you focus on a small segment you notice that it is constantly changing — moving from one shape to another. When viewed in its entirety the cloud seems to be a solid shape and constant — but with a little scrutiny it becomes clear that this is an illusion. Grief is the same way. The large picture of our grief is that it is not changing, it is constant, but when viewed up close we can get a glimpse of its mutability.

Grief is an elusive beast which at times demands our attention in tracking its path. Its elusiveness seems to increase as our grief recedes.

This waning of grief can bring up special problems of its own including not knowing when we have "grieved enough." There are various ways to bring conscious shape to our grief, one of which is to be aware of our increasing joy — like my joy with the music and let that indirectly tell us about our grief. My own experience with Matt and Nic and the model rocket taught me a bit about this path of understanding. In the mean time I continue to put energy into watching my grief recede knowing that as surely as the tide goes out, it will just as surely come back in.....and oh Lord, do we know this!



When we lose a dear friend, someone we have loved deeply, we are left with a grief that can paralyze us emotionally for a long time. People we love become part of us. Our thinking, feeling and acting are codetermined by them: Our fathers, our mothers, our husbands, our wives, our lovers, our children, our friends ... they are all living in our hearts. When they die a part of us has to die too. That is what grief is about: It is that slow and painful departure of someone who has become an intimate part of us... But as we let go of them they become part of our "members" and as we "remember" them, they become our guides on our spiritual journey.

~~Henri Nouwen~~

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!

Consolation is a beautiful word. It means "to be" (con-) "with the lonely one" (solus).

To offer consolation is one of the most important ways to care.

Life is so full of pain, sadness, and loneliness that we often wonder what we can do to alleviate the immense suffering we see. We can and must offer consolation.

We can and must console the mother who

*lost her child, the young person with AIDS, the family whose house burned down,
the soldier who was wounded, the teenager who contemplates suicide,
the old man who wonders why he should stay alive.*

To console does not mean to take away the pain but rather to be there and say, "You are not alone, I am with you.

Together we can carry the burden. Don't be afraid. I am here." That is consolation.

*We all need to give it as well as to
receive it.*

♥ Henri Nouwen ♥

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Bringing wellness home.....