



Journey to Healing

A Newsletter for Survivors of Suicide

Second Quarter 2016

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.

By Mayo Clinic Staff

When a loved one dies by 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.
- **Confusion.** Many people try to make some sense out of the death, or try to understand why their loved one took his or her life. But, you'll likely always have some unanswered questions.
- **Feelings of rejection.** You might wonder why your relationship wasn't enough to keep your loved one from dying by suicide.

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.

Dealing with Stigma

Many people have trouble discussing suicide, and might not reach out to you. This could leave you feeling isolated or abandoned if the support you expected to receive just isn't there.

Additionally, some religions limit the rituals available to people who've died by suicide, which could also leave you feeling alone. You might also feel deprived of some of the usual tools you depended on in the past to help you cope.

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. There is no single "right" way to grieve. 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. However, if you find going to these groups keeps you ruminating on your loved one's death, seek out other methods of support.

Know When to Seek Professional Help

If you experience intense or unrelenting anguish or physical problems, ask 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. 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. Short-term 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 might feel like you can't go on or that you'll never enjoy life again.

In truth, you might always wonder why it happened — and reminders might 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 find peace and healing, while still honoring the memory of your loved one.





Inspirational- Facing Suicide with Faith

"Nothing seems to matter anymore since my loved-one took his life," said a client in a past therapy session. "My job feels empty, my connection to family is shaken, and any past sense of well-being has been shattered." "I've lost my sense of purpose and I'm drifting away from everything and everyone that used to anchor me." This survivor of suicide is going through what has been defined by psychotherapists as complicated or deep grief. Losing someone you love to suicide cuts into your heart and forever redefines you and the world you live in. Though not all survivors grieve the same way or for the same length of time, it is still essential that a survivor comes to terms with the loss and finds inner healing in their life.

Sudden outbursts of tears are common in complicated grief, triggered by memories or reminders of their loved one. Grieving is an individual process. Some may feel numb and disoriented, anxious, have trouble sleeping, or perhaps dwell on the words they wish they had or had not expressed to their loved one. A suicide death intensifies emotions, and often leaves family members feeling isolated, shunned, and broken. Survivors face unanswerable questions. Almost everyone who is touched by suicide wrestles with "Why? Why did this happen? Why did it have to come to this? Why couldn't it have been stopped?" No matter what the reasons, you are left with questions that can't be answered because the person who ended their life is gone.

One survivor asked the question, "Is it possible to reconcile my faith with the reality of the suicide?" This survivor taught me that faith often means giving up control and accepting that there will always be mystery and the unknown. Though some survivors may find comfort in their religious tradition, others may be angry with God and stay angry, while others may get angry and later make their peace with God. Some have expressed a desire to find a deeper meaning to their loved one's suicide, or a spiritual explanation that may not be available by other conventional or familiar means.

Spirituality and faith are extremely intimate and personal. Exploring your spiritual side can help you discover resources and pathways that help you in the healing and recovery process. Bringing up spirituality in therapy can sometimes create sparks of instant connection and understanding or may trigger the fight or flight response in a survivor. Recently, a client told me about his spiritual experience on the Appalachian Trail this past summer. He explained that the purpose of the trip was to see if he could connect to some kind of higher power and make sense of what he had been going through since the suicide of his loved one.

He hoped that by meeting the physical and spiritual challenges on the Appalachian Trail, it might help him believe that anything was possible and that he could survive this loss. To him, this hike was more than just a hike in the woods. He was hoping it would become the most spiritual experience of his life, an existential awakening to the beauty and splendor of the natural world around him.

During his journey, not a day passed that he did not undergo a significant challenge; the weather had been brutal and the water scarce. Several falls, a terrifying lightning storm, and torrential rain rounded out the first few days of the hiking trip. As the weeks progressed, his body-ached, he had blisters on his feet, an aching stomach, irritability, frustration, and finally full-blown anger. He tried to look at his emotions as messengers, asking "what are my anger, sadness, and pain, telling me about my current situation?" At times he felt full of hate, even calling his hike a 'hating hike': He hated the rocks, the weather, the bugs, and even the weight of his backpack. Many days and weeks went by on the trail without much significant pause or spiritual awakening. He felt overwhelmed, forgetful, and wanted to stop and go home on many occasions. He said it was almost impossible to feel any deep clarity or inner awareness.

He contrasted the experience to that of being in a fog. The moments he had allowed himself to meditate, bask in the sun, or make afternoon tea, allowed him to feel alive and refreshed. He started to cry when he realized that his ability to appreciate the beauty of nature and mystery of nature had not been extinguished by the suicide. Though his life had been on hold, nature had continued on. He was grateful to his loved one for helping him open up his spiritual side and consider new dimension to life. After several months, he ended the trip and traveled home. He reflected on having walked the same path as other hikers on the same days, but had engaged with different spiritual aspects on the trail.

His spiritual intentions kindled an internal fire as he explored how intention changed the space differently when his intention was simple. Even though he tried to hold on sometimes, he experienced that it was much easier to embrace and accept this fluidity than to cling. Sometimes he feels lost on the journey, at other times he said he felt found. In the end, he came to four significant truths: stand tall, stay deeply rooted in the ground, trust the process, and believe that you have more to do. His adventure helped him greatly. He persevered and found that meeting these physical and spiritual challenges made him feel that anything was possible.

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Reflections by Becky

"We humans are social beings. We come into the world as the result of others' actions. We survive here in dependence on others. Whether we like it or not, there is hardly a moment of our lives when we do not benefit from others' activities. For this reason it is hardly surprising that most of our happiness arises in the context of our relationships with others."

-Dalai Lama -

It's because of these meaningful and intimate connections that we grieve so deeply when someone dies by suicide. Someone that can bring us so much joy can cause us such pain, and ultimately our bonds and intimate relationships, are what will heal and comfort us.

After losing someone it's normal to worry about the safety of others and we often find ourselves thinking more about death in general. Many have never had to face such a devastating loss or more specifically deal with suicide loss (which can feel so different). When I lost Mike, accidentally and then Bobby to suicide, I hated that I thought about the possibility of other people dying. I liked my previously blissful state of ignorance to issues of mortality. Even 10 years after their deaths, when the thought of someone else I love dying or taking their life comes into my mind, it can feel like an intrusive and intolerable thought. I often find myself physically shaking my head to get it out of my mind. Many of us may tread lightly when entering into new relationships and find it easier to live in isolation than to risk loving someone so deeply and then risk the possibility of losing them. I often think about how the more I love the more at risk I am for loss. I am constantly reminding myself that pain and joy, love and sorrow come hand in hand, and to have joy and love you must be willing to risk pain and sorrow.

What makes suicide loss complicated is that grieving the loss of a loved one to suicide often feels very lonely. It can feel lonely because many don't want to talk about it for fear of being stigmatized, and others may feel like they have to defend the character of the person who died. Many survivors feel like people do not respond appropriately or that they just "don't get it." Grieving can be a fairly self-centered process because the pain can be so consuming that one has little space for anything else. Many survivors state that it can take all of our being just to survive in the moment. One may be able to go to work or to run a small errand but hearing someone talk about their bad day or helping with a child's homework can sometimes seem intolerable. Other survivors may find themselves getting angry when hearing about someone else's insignificant work issue or complaint about a living partner or child. With this amount of pain it's hard to empathize with other people or think that their issues even matter comparatively. Sometimes I hear SOS members in our groups speak about avoiding certain people and situations because they just don't have the mental space to cope with other people's "small problems." Grief can be a lonely place. Many SOS members have wonderful patient friends and family who are able to weather the storm but others do not. In my many years with the SOS program I have learned that the people who are able to transform and heal after such a tragedy are people who feel connected and have support from others.

From the moment we are born we are connected to another human being. As infants we survive and thrive as a result of that attachment. As we develop we are constantly forming new relationships and creating our identity based on how these relationships make us feel. Being connected to other people and living things is what makes us human. What we know about grief and healing from any tragedy is that other people are vital to our healing. We need others to support us psychologically, emotionally and physically when we do not have the space to do these things for ourselves. It's through these connections that we are going to laugh for the first time after the loss and through these connections we can begin to repair and renew our broken selves. Feeling connected is not just about having supportive friends and family; it can be about feeling connected to other living things like a beloved animal or nature, feeling attached to a certain author or blog writer, or having a sense of community and being part of something bigger. SOS can provide survivors with a sense of community. I often hear the phrase "I am now part of the club that no one ever wants to join." Many times survivors talk about the powerful feeling of just walking into the room of one of our support groups. This powerful feeling of connectedness can be bigger than words or hugs; people just know that they are amongst understanding and empathic people. Just knowing that another person has gone through something similar can be comforting. MHAGC just finished their Color Run in Travelers Rest fundraiser. Words cannot describe the intense feeling of seeing those runners, walkers and those people who came to commemorate and celebrate their loved ones who died and to celebrate the renewed hope in their own lives.

I hope that in those moments when you find yourself feeling isolated that you can reach out to an old friend or family member, a therapist, or the SOS Group. Taking this step of actively seeking out another person can be a turning point in your grief. If you are not able to do any of these things know that as you read this issue of the Journey to Healing there are hundreds of other survivors who are already bonding with you in this very moment.

Blessings, Becky



A Gentle Reminder:

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. If a family is too fragile to attend group, we will work with them to meet privately to gently guide them into the group. Additionally, CRISISline is available 24/7 at 864-271-8888 and a call-back can be returned by a survivor as close to the type of death you have experienced. **In the event of inclement weather, please always check mhagc.org for updates on our monthly meetings.**

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!



“Deep grief sometimes is almost like a specific location, a coordinate on a map of time. When you are standing in that forest of sorrow, you cannot imagine that you could ever find your way to a better place. But if someone can assure you that they themselves have stood in that same place, and now have moved on, sometimes this will bring hope”

~ Elizabeth Gilbert, Eat, Pray, Love

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Bringing wellness home.....



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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.