



## Journey to Healing

***A Newsletter for Survivors of Suicide***

***Fourth Quarter 2017***

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### ***Restoring Family Stability after a Suicide***

Every family has various needs for structure. As they grow, families will create the rules and routines that support their ability to function. We know that families have different resources and various amounts of structure supporting day-to-day living, but if they have inadequate structure and routine for too long there can be emotional and behavioral reactions. As parents, we instinctively take steps to “get back to normal” following sickness, vacations, too much activity, conflict or time away from home. We learn to create structure for ourselves as young adults and consume psychoeducational resources to help our babies self-regulate, socialize and learn. We make efforts to construct unique routines and relationships that support the needs of each person in the family. Stability grounds us, offers a sense of equilibrium and keeps us feeling normal.

Stable conditions seem to reflect the health of a family’s relationship bonds, resilience to stressors and the way we view the world. It supports our forward-thinking momentum. A family’s dedicated activities toward goals and outcomes is the norm for which we get up in the morning, work, own cars and homes. With stability, we expect everyone to grow, learn, cope and relate better.

But when a parent or child dies by suicide many aspects of regulated family life are interrupted, at least momentarily. A physical link in the family is suddenly gone, and sometimes this includes the people, places, financial resources and accoutrements associated with the deceased loved one. As we respond with shock to the loss, we may even experience other cherished family connections with a sense of estrangement, even if we can’t describe why, leading to a sense of isolation. And we seem to not know ourselves in this strange, awful situation of loss. A suicide loss assaults our entire notion of normal. The initial grief reactions are likely to deplete energy and interest in the routines and patterns that had been part of our everyday lives, even causing us to question the meaning of the future that has always moved us forward. A sudden, irrational death like suicide causes disruption at every level of family life. It can greatly alter the stability that a family enjoyed prior to the crisis imposed by suicide loss.

While it might seem difficult to imagine, most families coping with suicide loss do reconstruct a “new normal,” perhaps an over-used, and condescending-sounding term. But survival is a complex, energizing process of renewal that includes identity work and meaning and values and determination... and connecting with resources to rebuild the ground for recovery. Stability reforms gradually with patience, love and mindful intention. The intention can steady us, even when we have little energy for following through in the moment. We hope that bereaved parents can find good therapeutic support as they resume the watchful role of raising grieving children.

During the first days and weeks after a suicide, there is a great struggle with the reality of the loss. Many describe a sense of stopped time, in contrast to the momentum that had characterized the daily life of the intact family. It can be healthy to recognize that these sensations are normal for a suddenly bereaved person, even when they feel crazy or life-threatening. Having someone who wants to be there for us, who can be a reliable witness to the pain and disorientation can be a major blessing as we figure out our footing. In a previous article I wrote about the possible benefits of facing in to the sensation of groundlessness which describes the acute experience of loss and upheaval. In her book, *When Things Fall Apart*, Pema Chodron speaks from her own experience with loss when she suggests that it is actually the resistance to the free-fall that feels calamitous. She

encourages us to take an intimate look into the groundlessness that engulfs us, to find there the “seed of taking care of those who need our care and of discovering our goodness.” The author is known for her endorsement of a heart-opening approach to our most vulnerable human experiences. I think she is talking to us about taking on the survival process by first being present to the no-answer mystery at the heart of groundlessness, the recognition that we are here, beginning, being patient with the vicissitudes of recovery from profound loss, turning toward our children and caring for them. Facing in to groundlessness is a courageous practice that may allow us to start rebuilding from where we are. With its spiritual/existential orientation, I only recommend this for mature individuals. As a grief counselor to children and teens, I am more and more convinced that their most beneficial opportunities for processing a profound loss will take place with the best facsimile of normal that you can put together with a support system. For this age group, developmental tasks, identity and ego development are best addressed with a secure base and less of the abstract searching that adult grief evokes.

We step outside of ourselves when we care for our children. We find ourselves waking them, patching together a day, until days become more solid. A regained sense of equilibrium is the foundation for further steps toward individual and collective healing within the family. Esther Shapiro stresses to grief professionals that the process of restoring equilibrium is what will allow the family system to tolerate the crisis of loss. She identifies four areas or pillars that support the family system during a time of life-changing loss and grief.

- Individuals must find private ways to manage the most intense emotions, perhaps with journaling, therapy, time alone.
- Shared strategies should be created for helping one another during overwhelming stress.
- Involvement of “extended family and community supports for managing day to day living and interpreting the meaning of the death and loss.”
- Use of cultural rituals which elevate the role of each participant, bring dignity to the loss and providing another structure for making meaning of the loss (*Shapiro, pg.16*).

Shapiro’s strategies cover the bases to guide bereaved families toward channels for healthy grief responses and a secure base for continued individual and family development. Each family requires unique attention based on the developmental stages and needs of the persons affected by the loss.

We always encourage families to work with grief counselors to navigate at least the initial months following a suicide loss. No parent or family can be prepared for the emotional and often physical disruption to developmental time in which the life-sustaining work of families occurs. Bereaved parents are taxed to the limit. Shapiro’s first strategy for private management of overwhelming emotion can be most safely addressed by a professional who understands the grief process as it impacts a family system. The LOSS Program attends to adults and children to support a way to look at the loss and construct an honest, adaptive narrative about the suicide. Healthy grief work is life-affirming. When you participate in a clinically based program focused specifically on loss and grief you and your children find a safe place to express feelings and make sense of your experience. And consultation is always available as you improvise the first steps toward creating a new secure base for yourself and loved ones.

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### ***A Gentle Reminder:***

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 and gently guide them into the group. Additionally, CRISISline is available 24/7 at 864-271-8888 and a callback can be returned by a survivor of as close to the type of death you have experienced.



## *Inspirational*

During the months of October, November and December we celebrate different events in our history. The first one is Columbus Day when we celebrate the man who discovered America, the second is Halloween, when we dress up and pretend to be something we are not, the third is Thanksgiving, when we give thanks for our many blessings and lastly, but certainly not least, is Christmas.

I would like to focus first on Columbus Day and the issue of discovering. There is a lot of discovering that goes on with survivors. They realize some things about themselves that they never thought possible. For those people who have lost a loved one to suicide, it is very important from the beginning to choose just how you are going to best use your time in a constructive way.

By this I mean that as a survivor you are going to get a lot of advice on what you should be doing. Some practical advice that might not make sense, such as “you have other children,” in the event that you lost a child to suicide. Though well-meaning and meant to distract from the intense pain and shock of the loss, survivors should determine just where they want to focus their attention.

In the immediate aftermath of the suicide there are certain tasks to be accomplished — funeral arrangements, taking care of other members of the family, and other tasks. Survivors are very resilient and achieve the seemingly impossible in the aftermath of this unbelievable happening. They might need to rely on a very trusted friend or family member to help in some of these decisions. Survivors need to trust a few people to assist in these tasks. It is very important to take one step at a time and not be too overwhelmed by the enormity of what has happened and what has permanently altered their life. The grieving process has not diminished a survivor’s ability to think and make good decisions. It can be helpful to seek out advice from trusted people, but survivors should choose where to focus their attention. Survivors can learn and discover that they are still in control of their lives and that they can focus on what needs to be done for the good of the rest of the family. Survivors should take their time and not make any rash decisions that will not be able to be reversed. Nothing needs to be done immediately. Life will evolve in its natural course.

Survivors might think that their life is over and that they cannot go on without this loved one. Life does go on, but life is very different once a significant person has died. Another part of the discovery of survivors is that they are able to bear and feel the pain. This is probably one of the more overwhelming parts of the journey of grief, but it is also one of the most important aspects. In order to successfully master the journey of grief it is vital to feel the almost unbearable pain of losing a loved one to suicide. Suicide is often looked upon as the unspeakable way to die, and yet thousands of people in our country die each year from suicide. It is a different type of death than natural causes or accident. Suicide is inexplicable because survivors generally do not know precisely why a loved one decided to end their life. At the beginning of the grief journey it is incomprehensible why one would deliberately do something to end their life. Survivors blame themselves or other people for the cause of death, spending a lot of time trying to figure out why — no rational explanation satisfies this question.

Those of us who have never suffered from mental illness have no comprehension of the unbearable pain it can cause. Mental illness kills and can be as terminal as cancer or heart disease or any other physical ailment that takes lives. These types of illnesses are understood but mental illness is not understood as a fatal disease. People who complete suicide died from this illness.

Halloween is the other feast celebrated in October. It is a time when people wear masks to disguise themselves. Oftentimes survivors wear masks to hide the incredible pain they are experiencing. It is important for survivors to own up to how they are feeling and be honest with the people around them. It is okay to be sad and feel awful — it is part of the grief journey. Honesty is the best tool in working through the grief. It is dishonest to pretend that everything is okay.

During the month of November we celebrate the feast of Thanksgiving, which is one of the great American celebrations. It is a day when families gather to watch football and have a great meal of turkey and all of the trimmings. A lot of work goes into preparation for the day. All of the shopping that is done is for the food to make the day a real love feast. People try to outdo each other as they prepare the meal. A lot of love goes into the preparation for this day. In many instances Thanksgiving stretches into the whole weekend, it is more than just one day. Families are able to enjoy each other and each other's presence. It is a great family celebration. Generally, people are in great moods because they are not tired out from running all over the place.

Thanksgiving is also a time to take stock of some decisions that we have made in our lives. In my estimation, there are two types of decisions that we make in our lives. One type of decision is such that does not transform our lives. Our lives remain basically the same. Such a decision makes an accidental change in life but it is not transformative. An example of such a change would be to make a job change such as going from a sales job to a marketing type of job. One might remain within the same company or go to a different company. Basically, one's life remains the same. The other type of change is more dramatic and is referred to as a transformational type of change. This type of a decision changes the dynamic of the person's life. An example of this type of change is the decision to have a child. Such a decision is life-altering in that nothing is the same as before. Another example is the decision to get married. Once that decision is made one alters the life that they had before the marriage. That life that was lived before the marriage is over and a completely different type of life is now going to be experienced. Sometimes these transformational decisions are made by the person or persons and such people live out the results of the decision. They willingly entered into the transformational decision that was made and they willingly live with the consequences of such a decision.

Two religious traditions celebrate joyful religious holidays during the month of December. Our Jewish brothers and sisters celebrate the Festival of Lights. Our Christian brothers and sisters celebrate the birth of Jesus. Both traditions are joyful and uplifting events. There are family gatherings and there is an emphasis on gift-giving for both of these traditions.

For people grieving a death from a suicide, this time of year can be exceptionally painful because a loved one is no longer there to receive our thoughtful gift or our deceased loved one is no longer there to give a gift. This causes undue pain for survivors. Very often grieving people don't want to receive any gifts or are not in the mood to shop and give gifts. That is okay for the first year or two but that should not become the norm for the years ahead. In order for grieving people to be able to have the potential for joy and fun and happiness in their future there is one thing required and that is to work diligently in the grief process. People I have known over the years who have worked hard to resolve the grief are then able to have joy and pleasure and fun in their lives. This is a very lengthy process and a very painful process, but it does happen. It has happened to me in my own life as I have grieved the death of my family of origin, and it has happened in the lives of people who have been part of the SOS Program over the past 21 years. The journey is long and painful, but joy does return to people's lives.

What greater gift can a survivor of suicide give to themselves and to their loved ones around them than a commitment and a resolution to work diligently on their grief so that their lives can be recreated and reconstructed in a joyful and positive fashion.

It is not okay when a loved one has died from suicide. It is extremely painful to suffer the pain of a death from suicide. It is vital to own the pain and to share feelings with other people. The intense pain is not going to last forever, but it certainly is going to be a long journey. Admitting this fact to people who care can lessen the burden. It is not as if every person has to know all of the details of the pain, but survivors should not wear a mask to the world around them.

Keep the faith!

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## ***Two Special Dates to Remember:***

# Survivor Day

*International Survivors of Suicide Loss Day is November 18, 2017*

11:00 am – 2:00 pm

Ellenburg Hall, Providence Presbyterian Church

4000 Highway 153

Greenville, SC 29611 (in Powdersville)

### *About Survivor Day*

Survivor Day is the one day a year when people affected by suicide loss gather around the world at events in their local communities to find comfort and gain understanding as they share stories of healing and hope. In 2016, there were over 350 Survivor Day events in 18 countries.

This year, all gatherings will include a screening of *The Journey: A Story of Healing and Hope*, a compelling AFSP-produced documentary about the suicide loss experience, as well the new follow-up featurette, *The Journey Revisited*, in which six of the original *Journey* participants gather three years later to reflect on how their grief and healing journey is evolving.

More information will be sent out via e-mail as it gets closer to the date, so please make certain your e-mail is on file with the facilitators.



### ***Christmas Remembrance Meeting, Dec. 19***

We will once again gather on the third Tuesday of December, for our Christmas Remembrance Potluck Meeting. Bring your loved one's favorite dish and we will have a service of Remembrance at Providence Presbyterian Church's Ellenburg Hall. The address is noted above for National Survivor's Day. You may bring a memento of your loved one, and we will release balloons after we have shared a meal and stories. This will occur during our normal meeting time – 7:00 pm – 8:30 pm. We hope you will be able to be a part of this very meaningful time.

# Reflections by Becky

Surviving a loss by suicide is one of the most traumatic and devastating things that a person should never have to experience. It is the ultimate shock that can cause not only grave emotional and psychological pain but physical symptoms also. I have known many LOSS members who experience medical issues as the result of a loss. We no longer feel like ourselves and wonder if we will ever regain some of those pieces again. Sometimes our family members can become frustrated, waiting for that old person to return. The dynamics in our families can shift. After losing my dad our family felt very different. We no longer celebrated holidays the same and some family relationships changed as well. Some survivors report that they are no longer the person that they used to be. Some are forced to make new friendships, move into new houses, and cease relationships with family members who are not supportive. Not only are survivors trying to grapple with the idea of this person not being here anymore, they are struggling with all of these pieces of the identity as well.

The first few weeks and months can be so overwhelming. In one split second life has changed and survivors are forced to figure it out, almost like learning to swim in the middle of the ocean. When I think back to my first few weeks after my dad died, I always feel sympathetic for our LOSS survivors who are just beginning their journey. Everything that you may have understood about your life and the universe has shifted in a matter of moments. People look different, you feel different, your friend's problems seem so different and insignificant, and your home may look and feel very different. Not only are survivors struggling with these missing pieces of themselves and family, but many people experience guilt and begin searching for answers. This can become an obsession: What was he wearing? Why did he chose that method? What was her last thought? I could have called her and that many have prevented this? Some people have proper support where they can process these feelings, but some do not, which can lead to unhealthy ways of coping like drinking, smoking, being involved in toxic relationships.

In those few weeks and months after a suicide loss, it can also feel like you are walking on a cloud, dissociated from yourself, in a state of shock. Sometimes that shock can actually be helpful because how could our minds so quickly comprehend such an enormous blow? For many people it is helpful to stay close to home or someplace comfortable. Some people cannot function and need to rest and sleep, while others cope by going back to work and "over functioning". When LOSS members call in these first few weeks we encourage them to do whatever their bodies and minds are telling them that they need, as long as it is healthy and safe. Sometimes it can take a few weeks or a few months for people to acknowledge that they need help processing this loss. Some survivors may not be psychologically ready to enter a support group or see a new individual therapist until their minds have some ability to tolerate the pain after the loss.

Making the decision to seek counseling or support group help can be difficult but I would highly recommend it. It is not for everyone, but I do think that for many these types of supports can be some of the first steps in the healing process. Groups are wonderful because they help survivors to normalize their experience. I remember the first time I attended a group, I had chills when I realized that other normal looking people had similar stories to my own. I spent so much time thinking that my family was "dysfunctional" that it was a burden released when I learned that this was something that other people experienced. Even some of the details of my father's suicide story seemed to be a shared experience around the table that night. Some people describe the groups to be their space to be understood, not judged and they can also share some of the semi-gory things that other people in their lives cannot tolerate. Many feel as though it is the one area in life where they don't have to "defend" the person that died by suicide due to the stigma of suicide and mental illness. The Obelisk and other survivor's forums can be useful in this regard as well. Having an individual counselor to help you process feelings and understand who you are in the context of all of this can be invaluable. Whatever your journey may be, know that we are here to support and guide you, should you choose to use us. Please reach out to friends and family and other survivors for support.

As the fall brings nostalgia to all of us, I particularly find it still somewhat difficult after so many years. Bobby's birthday is October 29<sup>th</sup>, All Saint's Day is November 1, the date Mike was killed in a car wreck, then comes all of our popular and merry occasions that bring families together...yet that chair is still empty. Talk to Alice or me about some of the things we do to fill that place and yet honor their presence with us. They are there, regardless of what we do, and it is comforting to have special things to bring their presence around us.

Be at peace, as imperfect as it may be, and know that many prayers, love and support surround you on this journey.





### *Inclement Weather/National Holiday Policy*

*We are at the beginning of fall ~ with that comes storms and cancellations. Your well-being is always the most important thing to us. Please make certain that we have all your contact information so we can keep you up-to date; in the event of inclement weather or a major National Holiday, you may look on MHA's website at [www.mentalhealthamerica.org](http://www.mentalhealthamerica.org) or feel free to e-mail or call either Alice or me if you are uncertain of our meetings Becky's cell is 864-616-9413 and Alice's cell is 864-884-3283.*

*The main priority is to care for you, and you to care for yourself.*

*Your Facilitators,  
Becky  
Alice  
Deb*

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!



*“There is a sacredness in tears. They are not the mark of weakness, but of power. They speak more eloquently than ten thousand tongues. They are the messengers of overwhelming grief, of deep contrition and of unspeakable love.”*

*— Washington Irving*

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

*Bringing wellness home.....B4 Stage 4*

## ***In this Issue:***

*Restoring Family Stability*  
*Inspirational*  
*Two Important Dates*  
*Reflections from Becky*  
*Inclement Weather Policy*  
*Closing*

*Pages 1, 2*  
*Pages 3, 4*  
*Page 5*  
*Page 6*  
*Page 7*  
*Page 8*

“Journey to Healing” is a newsletter for survivors of suicide. Survivors are those of us whose lives have been changed by the suicide of someone we knew. “Journey to Healing” is intended to let survivors know that we 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, or [beckykay40@gmail.com](mailto:beckykay40@gmail.com).

**Survivors of Suicide Support Group** This group meets the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Tuesdays of each month from 7:00 – 8:30 PM at St. Michael Lutheran Church, 2619 Augusta Street, Greenville, SC 29605. There are separate groups for adults 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 ask you to consider attending meetings to help others, even after you feel you may no longer need to go for your own healing.

### **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.