



Journey to Healing

A Newsletter for Survivors of Suicide

Third Quarter 2015

To the Newly Bereaved Suicide Survivor

Someone you loved has ended their own life – and yours is forever changed. You are a “suicide survivor,” and as that unwelcome designation implies, your survival – your emotional survival – will depend on how well you learn to cope with your tragedy. The bad news: Surviving this will be the second worst experience of your life. The good news: The worst is already over. What you’re enduring is one of the most horrific ordeals possible in human experience. In the weeks and months after a suicide, survivors ride a roller coaster of emotions unlike any other.

Suicide is different. On top of all the grief that people experience after a “conventional” death, you must walk a gauntlet of guilt, confusion and emotional turmoil that is in many ways unique to survivors of suicide. “How long will it take to get over this,” you may ask yourself. The truth is that you will never “get over” it, but don’t let that thought discourage you. After all, what kind of people would we be if we truly got over it, as if it were something as trivial as a virus? Your hope lies in getting through it, putting your loss in its proper perspective, and accepting your life as it now lies before you, forever changed. If you can do that, the peace you seek will follow.

Death touches all of our lives sooner or later. Sometimes it is expected, as with the passing of an elderly relative; sometimes it comes suddenly in the form of a tragic accident. But suicide is different. The person you have lost seems to have chosen death, and that simple fact makes a world of difference for those left to grieve. The suicide survivor faces all the same emotions as anyone who mourns a death, but they also face a somewhat unique set of painful feelings on top of their grief.

Guilt. Rarely in other deaths do we encounter any feelings of responsibility. Disease, accidents, old age... we know instinctively that we cannot cause or control these things. But the suicide survivor—even if they were only on the periphery of the deceased’s life – invariably feels that they might have, could have, or should have done something to prevent the suicide. This mistaken assumption is the suicide survivor’s greatest enemy. **Stigma.** Society still attaches a stigma to suicide, and it is largely misunderstood. While mourners usually receive sympathy and compassion, the suicide survivor may encounter blame, judgement, or exclusion. **Anger.** It’s not uncommon to feel some form of anger toward a lost loved one, but it’s intensified for survivors of suicide. For us, the person we lost is also the murderer of the person we lost, bringing new meaning to the term “love-hate” relationship. **Disconnection.** When we lose a loved one to disease or an accident, it is easier to retain happy memories of them. We know that, if they could choose, they would still be here with us. But it’s not as easy for the suicide survivor. Because our loved one seems to have made a choice that is abhorrent to

us, we feel disconnected and “divorced” from their memory. We are in a state of conflict with them, and we are left to resolve that conflict alone.

The challenge of coping with a loved one’s suicide is one of the most trying ordeals anyone ever has to face, but make no mistake – you must confront it. If you attempt to ignore it – sweep it under the carpet or your life – you may only be delaying an even deeper pain. There are people who have suffered breakdowns decades after a suicide, because they refused or were forbidden to ever talk about it. Time heals, but time alone cannot heal the suicide survivor. You must use that time to heal yourself and lean on the help and support of others. It might take years to truly restore your emotional well-being, but you can be assured one thing: it will get better. *By Jeffrey Jackson, ©2004, reprinted from A Handbook for Survivors of Suicide, published by the American Association of Suicidology.*



Nothing can make up for the absence of someone whom we love, and it would be wrong to try to find a substitute.... It is nonsense to say that God fills the gap; he does not fill it, but on the contrary, he keeps it empty and so helps us to keep alive our former communion with each other, even at the cost of pain.
~~Dietrich Bonhoeffer~~

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.



Inspirational

You may never have heard of Tommy Caldwell and Kevin Jorgeson who recently completed a climb in Yosemite National Park. They scaled the Dawn Wall in Yosemite which is considered the most treacherous climb in the world. I followed their progress as it was reported in the newspaper. I was fascinated by their dedication and their tenacity as they persevered to reach their goal. At the end of the climb one of them remarked that everyone in life has a Dawn Wall to scale. I naturally thought of the members of the LOSS family who have their own Dawn Wall to scale as they grieve the loss of a loved one from suicide. I am sure that no event in the life of a survivor can come close to grieving the loss of a loved one from suicide. Survivors are challenged to scale this Dawn Wall of grief. The two climbers had a roadmap of the climb but they had to scale each foot of the climb slowly and painfully and sometimes go inch by inch. There were rough edges on the rocky surface of the climb and it wore their fingers to the bone. It was true grit that got them through this endeavor. They both had climbed before but never did they accomplish something like mastering the Dawn Wall. This was their first attempt.

When survivors first experience their loss there is no roadmap to help them get through this awful time in their lives. They begin their journey wondering if they are going to be able to endure the pain and get through this challenge without losing their minds. Literally, survivors feel as if they are going crazy because their lives have been so disrupted that they don't know if they can continue to live –or if they want to continue to live without this loved one. This loved one was such an important part of the life of the survivor that one can't imagine a life without this person. For the survivor life has ended and in a way their life has ended. Life with this loved one is over and now survivors have to discover the life that will be evolving over time. This experience becomes the Dawn Wall for the survivor.

In May, we celebrate Mother's Day. This is an especially painful day for mothers who are grieving the loss of a child from suicide or a child who is grieving the loss of a mother or a grandmother from suicide. Mother's Day has always been a day when the role of mother is celebrated and family members give gifts and treat this mother in a very special way. She literally becomes "Queen for a Day". When this woman is suddenly taken away from a family in such a tragic and unforeseen way the rest of the family is completely devastated and flounders away like a ship lost at sea in a wild storm. For weeks and months the survivors are struggling trying to find answers as to why this very vital person of the family would do such a thing to the family. Survivors might descend into an almost bottomless pit of guilt and despair. This is a very normal reaction to losing a loved one from suicide. Then June brings Father's Day where we honor dads everywhere. There are a myriad number of feelings that come over the survivor. These feelings become the Dawn Wall for survivors. These survivors struggle with looking for answers to their many questions. Sometimes there are answers and sometimes there are no answers to satisfy the queries of survivors. One thing is certain and that is that a person does not complete suicide to hurt family members. When anyone completes suicide it sends a message to the world that the pain of living has become unbearable. Suicide is the direct result of unbearable mental pain –pain that has gripped the mind and soul of this person.

Sometimes there are signs and more often than not there are no signs that this person is thinking of doing something to harm themselves. Seeking answers for why a loved one takes their life becomes a mission in life. Ultimately in the vast majority of situations there are no adequate answers to the question of why this loved one took their life. The most common response by survivors is the fact that this person was so loved in life and didn't they know that they were so loved. Unfortunately love is not enough to keep someone alive. Their ability to experience and feel the love of family members has become so blurred by the pain of mental illness, that their ability to experience and respond to this love becomes a Dawn Wall for them. In this instance the Dawn Wall has become an impossibility and has defeated the person. The pain in the person's life has won out and they have found the peace that eluded them in life.

The Dawn Wall that survivors are asked to climb is a very lengthy and treacherous climb. Maybe the fingers of survivors are not worn to the bone but the pain of the soul and the emotional life is worn very thin and almost destroyed. The life of survivors seems as if it is not worth living. A major void has been created in these lives. It is true that the life that the survivor had with this deceased loved one is over but there is a new and different life on the horizon that is there waiting to be discovered and enriched. No one can predict what this new life is like. It takes the courage of survivors to discover and be willing to allow this new life to unfold and evolve. For the survivor life is not over. Who knows what is in store in the hereafter? No one here knows. We have to wait to cross the threshold and then we will see. In the meantime, survivors are challenged to forge ahead and see what is on the horizon for them. This takes courage and a willingness to climb the Dawn Wall and see what is in store for them.

I want to assure each and every member of the survivors of a suicide of my thoughts and prayers on a regular basis and I encourage you to do the same for each other –especially for those who have recently joined our family. I also encourage everyone to remember those members of our family for whom all holidays are especially painful.

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Reflections by Becky

As a family, we often visited the beach on vacation....actually, we did this yearly. I always was in search of the perfect shell, but my daughter gently reminded me one day that some of the most beautiful shells were broken. It reminded me of my life after losing two sons, one in an automobile accident and eight months later, one to suicide. If there was a blessing in Bobby's death to suicide and by his hand, it was not in our home, but where he lived.

Sometimes in life, a tragic event occurs that fractures the very foundation on which we stand. Survivors of suicide navigate in a world that is profoundly and irrevocably different and challenging from the world they once knew. Survivors now find themselves in an unexpected and life long struggle with the tragic loss of a loved one to suicide. Grief and its complications manifest as painful thoughts, feelings and behaviors that can derail the natural process of healing. Survivors who experience complicated grief go through deep, acute, and intense levels of pain, that often leave them feeling "stuck" and left behind.

Recently, I met in the home of a grieving family, the survivors of a tragic loss to suicide. The mother, father, and brother, overwrought with grief, sadness, disbelief, and pain, shared their memories of their beloved son and brother. The family, through many flowing tears, expressed the devastation they felt when they discovered the body of their loved one shortly after his tragic death. It is now excruciatingly painful for the family members to enter the place in the home where the eldest son ended his life.

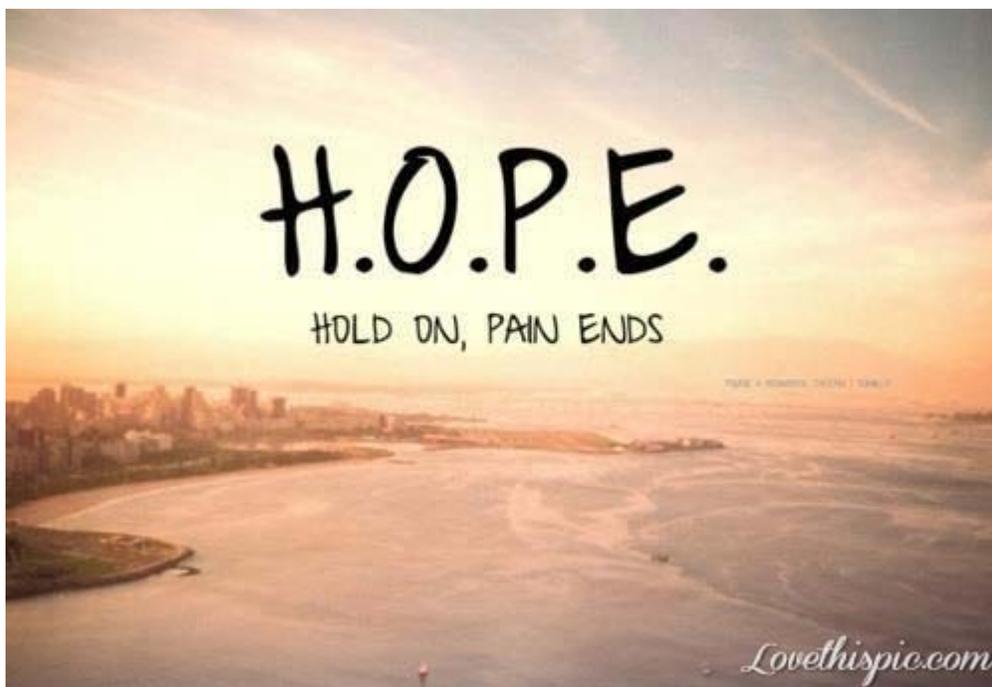
As the family and I stood together on the last step leading to the room where their son lost his life to suicide, family members began to cry and tremble. Going any further into the room became an unnerving and complicated process. The room, which had previously offered many comforting and joyful memories, now invoked only pain and sorrow. The family was seeking a blessing of the space where their loved one had ended his life. They were hoping to find healing and new meaning.

As the family and I prayed together, praying for God's blessing in this room, I felt the support, faith, and empowerment of God's presence. Each of us has a higher power that comes to us in times of distress and where I call mine God, others may call their higher power by another name. The blessing became for me a deep encounter with God, a personal story of the family's faith, their loving bonds, and an expression of kindness and compassion. In that moment, I saw and felt that I was part of a unity that encompassed me. The prayer of blessing, shared at a time of complicated grief, reshaped, transformed, and integrated a touch with the sacred. The new perspective I gained that night helped me to acknowledge these invisible mysteries. In a deeply personal and prayerful manner, the undertaking of the house blessing became for me an outward expression of the family's inner love, hope, and wish for peace.

I will continue to pray for the intentions of this loving family, and all families touched by suicide. Prayer and the participation of a house blessing can provide comfort and ongoing assurance of God's peace for their loved one. This is not only because God is already in those places where a loved one died to suicide; it is also because God travels there to be with us and in us. This is beautifully echoed in Psalm 139: 7-8: *"Where can I escape from Your spirit? Where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend to heaven, You are there; if I descend to Sheol, You are there too."* May the blessing of homes, vacation homes and places where a loved one died to suicide provide healing, support, and peace to the survivors.....and I always look for my beautiful broken shells as a reminder of where I was and where I have arrived in my life's journey.

Grace and peace,

Becky



Masking: Our loved one did not want to show that he or she was feeling extreme sadness and worry.

Intolerance for the pain of depression: Our loved one was so very worried and sad that he or she only wanted the pain to end right away. Sometimes, suicide can happen all of a sudden. Because he or she could not think clearly, there was no way to think about how it would affect you and me. This does not mean that our loved one did not love us, and it does not mean that our loved one did not love life.

You will use your own words to explain the difficult concept of suicide to a young person. Stay open to questions. Don't discuss graphic details. When children ask about the method in which your loved one ended his or her life, limit your answer to, "He took pills. He used a rope. She jumped from a bridge." If your loved one was under psychiatric care, you can explain that, like other serious illnesses, sometimes doctors can fix the illness, and sometimes they cannot.

Your child will need to feel the sadness and loss as the result of mental illness, not as a result of character or craziness, or with lack of love for the family. With time, you will find ways to celebrate your loved one's life.

Grief Has No Age

Submitted by NAGC Editor on Thu, 2015-07-02 12:29

"Perseverance is not a long race; it is many short races one after the other" - Walter Elliot

I remember my speech teacher giving me a book and the Elliot quote was on the first page. I have never forgotten it probably because at the age of nine it took me at least three minutes to sound out the word 'perseverance'. HA!

I had no idea how often I would return to the quote over the next 19 years.

I remember a hazy summer day in 1997 as I sat on the couch with my mom. She was sick... so all of my family came over to help her clean. This was odd, because my family usually only got together on holidays. I think their gathering was meant to happen that way. We finally convinced her to go to the ER. I remember her looking so pale and only wanting to eat banana popsicles. She finally agreed to go after battling back and forth with her sisters. Mom didn't want to go as I had my first day of fourth grade the following day and she wanted to see me off on the bus. She didn't trust my father to get me on the bus, I assume. My mom was the kindest person I have ever met, no one had a negative thing to say about her and she loved me with every ounce of her being. I loved her too; she was my best friend. I remember asking her to stand up and that I would help her. She was so weak, but she tried to stand.

Before I knew what was happening my mom collapsed to the floor and took her last breath. At that moment, my life as I knew it, would be a thing of the very distant past. My family heard the commotion and my screaming, and came running and immediately called for help. My mother's sister Anne was giving her mouth to mouth resuscitation until the paramedics arrived which seemed like a life time. When I peeked in to check on her the only thing I remember seeing was my mother's eyes roll back in her head. I knew at 9 years old that I would never hug my mom again.

I remember asking the paramedics "Did you save my mommy?" They didn't even look at me. They rushed my mom to the hospital where she was pronounced dead at 5:47pm. I didn't cry, I couldn't. I didn't know how.

Even though I had no idea what was going on, I realized how fragile life is. I remember holding a flashlight and turning it on and off. Bright to dim, and I told my family as we all sat in the living area that we were like flashlights, one minute shining bright the next minute fading away. Pretty deep thoughts for a 9 year old.

Visitation came and went, I kissed mom on the forehead. (I tell you this because it was the first time I had touched a DEAD person.)

I had questions, a lot of questions, most of which would go unanswered for years. I remember asking the funeral directors what would happen next and they told me not to worry that it would all be over soon... (easy for them to say, I was going home without my mommy!) I just went along letting people pat me on the head and continue to converse about who was going to "take care" of her little girl. I didn't have any other choice.

Now you ask, where was my father in all of this mess? He was more than likely drinking and wondering where he was going to find the money to bury her. My father was very abusive and he was a long-time alcoholic.

He didn't go to my mother's funeral (burial) so in turn neither did I.

Let me say it again, my own father didn't let me go to my mother's burial. I never got closure. I never got to say goodbye. The pastor who preached the funeral said that in his 30 plus years of preaching he had never witnessed a husband and child not attending their loved one's funeral. I didn't want anyone else to have to witness that same nightmare.

It was on August 25, 1997 that I knew my calling in life was to become a funeral director. I didn't want another person to go through what I experienced. I didn't want another **child** to be left grieving alone. I wanted to be the one with answers. I wanted to be a shoulder someone could cry on. Here I am, 19 years, 3 children, a husband and 1 pug later working with what I consider the best company in the world. I have grown so much with this company and I owe all of my future successes to them.

From my largest most painful experience came my greatest calling. I now have the opportunity to make things easier for families and children. I can help them understand the process and give them the tools to get the proper help they may need to grieve.

I was one of the lucky ones, I believe my life could have gone either way. Now don't get me wrong, it has not been easy. I sought professional help and even though I struggle daily I have not let it define me. It has, in fact, been the "wind beneath my wings". Every day I think of her and what could have been, but I also know that I would be different, my path in life would have been different. Death is a part of life, but when you experience the loss of a parent as a young child without the proper tools grief is very hard to work through.

This life was handed to me because I am strong enough to live it and if I can be of help to just one person, **one child**, then it has been worth all the pain.

This is my life's purpose, this writing (righting) here, right now.... My story. Grief has no time limit, no age. I was put on this earth to change the future for someone, and in a beautiful way I am finally finding closure -- because I too, am still a **grieving child**.

Although part of this article did not mention suicide.....it does depict the grief children experience. We are blessed at SOS to have Jennifer Piver lend her expertise in working with grieving children and to help them on this journey of learning of death with age appropriate discussions and crafts.

If you are interested in having a part in the *Journey to Healing* Newsletter we welcome your poems, articles, newspaper clippings or readings that have been helpful to you. This newsletter should be not only an instrument of healing, encouragement and education but also a reflection of who we, the survivors are and who we have become. We need your help and input to make this meaningful for everyone and invite your feedback to tell us what additional information you would like to see addressed. Thanks!

“And we wept that one so lovely should have a life so brief.”
— William Cullen Bryant

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

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.