



# Journey to Healing

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

***Fourth Quarter 2015***

Grieving during the holidays is difficult, especially the first holiday cycle after the passing of a loved one.

Whatever your age, holidays lived in the absence of a Loved One can be a very difficult time. Customary routines are ended, never to be repeated in quite the same way. Easy-going laughter, once flowing so naturally, may become awkward or even altogether missing. Gift-giving, once so filled with fun, may seem somehow empty and sad. Familiar songs, once so comforting, may catch in your throat or bring tears to your eyes.

All this happens against a backdrop of significant questions you may find yourself asking: What exactly is happening to me? Can I possibly survive this, and do I even want to? How long will this turmoil last? Is what I am feeling normal? Am I losing touch with my sanity?

The holiday period itself adds its own share of questions: How can I make it through all the events of the holidays while missing so desperately the one I love? Would I be better off to ignore the holidays this year? Should I act as if everything were normal? Should I make major changes in my holiday rituals?

If you're like most people in grief, you will have many questions. It's important for you to know at the outset there are few universal "right" and "wrong" answers. There may be various answers, depending upon the unique factors of your situation: who you are as a person, what your family is like, who it was who died, when and how they died, what your relationship with the departed was, and the role that person played in your holiday rituals, to name only a few. It's also important to remember that not all your questions will have ready answers. Sometimes you must learn by doing, and then learn even better by trying it another way.

Keeping in mind there has never been a loss precisely like yours, there are still some general guidelines bereaved people have found helpful through the years. I will propose twelve of them. I hope you will treat them as suggestions rather than as prescriptions. Use them as ideas you can expand upon. Shape them to fit your distinct circumstances and to serve your personal needs. Above all else, remember that others, *many* others, have faced something similar to what you're facing right now. They have learned what it is like to endure and to survive and often even to grow through their experience. What they have learned is what you can learn, too. The ways they have persevered are ways you can adopt as well.

Most of all, I hope you'll choose to believe this: your holidays can still be a significant time for you. They will be different, but they can still be meaningful. They may hurt, but they can also hold hope ~ even great hope.

### **1. Accept the likelihood of your pain.**

When you're facing your first holiday without the one who has been so close to you, a good starting point is with this awareness: chances are it will be a painful time. You may wonder how you will ever make it through.

This may or may not comfort you, but it is true: your pain is a sign you have been blessed to draw very close to another. You have loved and you have been loved. The hurt you feel is an indication of your wonderful humanness, your sensitivity, your openness. It is a proof that another has touched you deeply, even as you have touched them. While you may wish you did not hurt as much as you do, you dare not forget that your pain is none other than the result of your joy.

Even so, you may feel you would like to bypass the entire holiday period and not participate in it at all. That's a common response. During the final two months of the calendar year, however, holiday reminders are visible almost everywhere you look and audible in almost everything you hear. It's impossible to avoid the impact of this season. The energy you would spend evading what is going on all around you will be more creatively spent adapting to the reality of what this particular season holds for you.

Similarly, it is probably unwise to pretend everything is perfectly normal, and that this year's festivities will be no different than any other years. The death of this important person in your life has created a conspicuous void. You may feel that, of course, any time of the year. But this is especially the case during the holidays. You expect to include those you love in our holiday celebrations -- with the cards you write, the gifts you give, the meals you share, the rituals you re-enact.

The loved one who has died, however, cannot be included, at least in the way you wish. And you're reminded of this time after time in the way families are portrayed on television, in the way loved ones are referred to in holiday songs, in the idealistic images everyone carries inside about these special times.

Remember this: few holidays are as picture-perfect as we'd like to believe. It may help to admit that from the start.

It is equally important not to decide in advance that the approaching holidays will necessarily be horrendous. While it may have its difficult moments, the approaching holiday time does not have to be an absolute catastrophe. More often than not, people report that the experience itself did not turn out to be as trying as they feared. Chances are good that can be your experience, too. Yes, you will probably feel pain. Yes, you may wish this year's calendar would skip over November and December. But, no, it does not have to be awful. There are things you can do to help.

### **2. Feel whatever it is you feel.**

You may be learning what many others have learned: some people will try to hurry you through your grief. Some may insist on continually cheering you up. Others may give you advice about what you should and shouldn't do or how you should and shouldn't feel.

Whatever else you do this holiday time, do your best to claim your own feelings.

As much as you are able, own up to the fact that something terribly important has happened in your life, that this naturally causes a reaction within you. You're not a robot – you're a responsive human being who is capable of all sorts of emotions.

No one else will feel what you do, in the same way, at the same time, with the same intensity. But some of the general feelings people in your situation often report include these:

- *Sadness.* It's sad to think about what you've lost, what can never happen again, what you'll have to learn to live without. It's doubly sad to experience this at such a happy time of the year.
- *Depression.* More than feeling glum, you may feel desolate or despairing. You may feel depleted of all energy, listless and alone. You may find doubt you'll ever feel any better.
- *Anxiety.* You may feel nervous and jittery, ill at ease and full of uncertainty.
- *Fear.* You may be afraid of how you'll cope, what you'll do, even if you'll survive.
- *Anger.* Being mad is a common response – mad at people who don't understand you or support you, angry about how the death happened and who was involved, even provoked at the Loved One who died. You may be upset with yourself, or with God, or with the whole world.
- *Guilt.* You may dwell upon what you did or didn't do while the Loved One was alive. You may feel guilty you're living or that you have moments of happiness in the midst of your grief.
- *Apathy.* You may find that you experience almost no feelings at all. You may feel numb and impassive. Or you may feel confused and disoriented.

There are many other feelings, of course: relief, respect, pride, joy, compassion, and love all come to mind as well. Whatever it is you're feeling these days, remind yourself that feelings are normal, whatever they happen to be. They're a sign that you're human, that you care deeply, and that whatever you feel today, you can feel differently tomorrow.

Your feelings seldom lead you astray. They usually lead you to yourself.

### **3. Take charge where you can.**

There is much in your life, of course, that has moved beyond your command. The loss you've experienced and the resulting inescapable changes have robbed you of a power you may have taken for granted. Yet there are some actions you can take and some decisions you can make that are within your authority. Begin to take control of your life in specific ways, even if those ways seem small.

If the death you've experienced isn't too recent, this may be a good time to evaluate the holiday traditions you've established through the years. Which ones are meaningful, ones you want to keep? Which ones have outgrown their usefulness? Which ones might you forego for a year or two, and which ones are so important to you that you *must* perform them, even if it's hard to do? Which ones can you adapt to fit this year's circumstances?

Generally speaking, this is usually not the best time to make drastic changes, like starting life over in a new town, or celebrating the holidays in a faraway place among people who do not appreciate what has happened to you. But some changes can be healthy and even important to make. It might make sense to change your holiday meal routine, by dining out at a restaurant rather than at home, or by having the main meal in another's home. Changes might be made in how holiday decorations are done. Or how gifts are given out, or when, or where. Consider designing new rituals --

ones that will include opportunities to remember the past while acknowledging that the present has changed.

Keep in mind there are other ways for you to assume some control over your life. Eating healthful and drinking wisely is a good start. Maintain your exercise program, or begin one if you've not been in the habit. Research has demonstrated this will help you feel better, mentally as well as physically. A brisk walk each day is one of the best exercises you can perform, especially if you can do it out of doors. Consult your physician if you have any questions.

Another action you can take is to try to get your proper amount of sleep. Go to bed early enough to get the rest you need. If you're sleeping too much, limit your time in bed. It's not unusual, however, for your sleep patterns to change for a while, even a long while.

In general, choose life in all the ways you can. Be among people who offer you vitality. Practice those disciplines that bring you energy. Do those things that give you satisfaction. Take charge in little ways and you'll find they're not so little – they're important.

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### **Memories of.....**



### **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*

During the month of October Halloween has become a major holiday, second only to Christmas for decorations around people's homes and in their yards. It is also a time when there are all sorts of ghoulish figures that are supposed to scare people. It is also a situation that can be viewed as in poor taste for people who are grieving the loss of a loved one from suicide. People erect fake cemeteries with tombstones that are supposed to be humorous, but for survivors of a suicide these are painful reminders of the final resting place for dear loved ones who found life too painful to continue living. There are also all types of dummies hanging from trees and this is a painful reminder for those survivors whose loved ones died from hanging. This is anything but funny for those survivors. My suggestion during this time of the year is to be prepared to have the pain of suicide stirred up as a result of decorations that are meant to be humorous, but that are quite offensive for those who are survivors of suicide.

Halloween is also a time when people dress up, put on masks and pretend to be some famous person who is either currently living or someone from history. It is a time when costume parties are the rage. People become a different persona and pretend to be someone that they are not. There is a lot of hilarity and jesting at such gatherings. People are pretending to be someone else. Survivors of a suicide often wear a mask to pretend that everything is alright when in fact their hearts are broken because of the ensuing grief and sadness that has become a part of their life. While survivors might not want to bare their hearts and souls to each person they meet during the grieving process, they do themselves a disservice to pretend that everything is fine when in fact they are downright miserable. It is alright to admit that the grief process is a painful experience and to say something such as, "this grief is very hard and painful." I am not suggesting that you share your pain with every person that you meet, but it is alright to let people know that you are in a lot of pain and you miss this loved one beyond imagination. Survivors do not have to go into all of the details of what their feelings are all about, but it is alright to admit that the pain is quite intense. Otherwise people are under the impression that everything is fine when in fact everything is not fine. Above all, survivors need to be discreet when deciding with whom to share their inner feelings. People want nothing more than to see survivors move on with their lives. Life is moving along and survivors are part of that movement but it is also important that survivors get the message out that life is not the same without this loved one and it does take time to make the adjustment to this new and different life that is unfolding as the survivor moves forward. It is alright to take the mask off to those people who count in the life of the survivor. It is alright to let the world around the survivor know that the pain of grief is excruciating and it lasts a long time. This is not something that is going to go away in a few weeks or months. The grief process is very lengthy. People in the world around the survivor want nothing more than to see the survivor get over this experience, but such people need to learn that surviving the suicide of a loved one is not something one gets over; it is something that survivors learn to live with. This education will take place as survivors take off the mask that everything is alright and let people know that the journey is lengthy and painful but the survivor will survive and thrive –in time.

Survivors often mention that their loved one who died from suicide did not appear to be troubled. The fact of the matter is that these loved ones wore a mask that everything was fine in their lives. These loved ones went about their lives as if nothing was wrong when in fact their life was unraveling as they went about their business. Survivors beat themselves up trying to figure out how they could have missed signs that might not have been there or were there but were not viewed as very important. These loved ones wore masks most likely because of the stigma that is attached to mental illness or because these loved ones did not see any other way out except to end their life. There was no psychotherapy or medication that was going to end their pain. It was only by ending their life that their pain would go away. No intervention was going to work. Ending their life was going to work and end the pain –finally. No one knows how long these loved ones carried the burden of mental illness and the ensuing pain. It could have been months or years but because the mask was worn very effectively there were no signs that these loved ones were in such a desperate state of mind. It is only after the suicide that survivors come to realize the extent of the pain. The mask came off but then it was too late. The pain was gone and the life of this much loved person ended and they finally found peace –at last.

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## ***Reflections by Becky***

*Regardless of when the loss occurred, the holidays can bring sadness to the surface and intensify your grief. While there is no way to avoid grief, there are steps you can take that can help you cope during the holiday season.*

### ***Accept Your Emotions***

*You may experience sadness, anger or frustration, not only that the person who passed is gone, but that you are unable to enjoy the holidays as you have in the past. You may be angry that others are celebrating while you're missing a loved one, or you may even feel numb and simply go through the motions, especially if this is your first holiday without the deceased.*

*Your grief may even change over time, depending on the circumstances. For example, intense feelings of sadness over the loss of your mother may reappear when you celebrate your first holiday season with your child, as you wish for your mother's love and support.*

*Whatever your emotions, embrace them. Allowing yourself to feel them is the best way to move past them.*

### ***Eliminate Unnecessary Stress***

*In the past, perhaps you held a lavish party to ring in the New Year. Following the loss of someone close to you, you may not have the desire or energy to do all this. It's okay to take a step back and allow somebody else to host the party, or to make it a much smaller affair with close family and friends.*

### **Talk About Your Loved One**

*Reminisce about the good times and old memories with family and friends. Pull out pictures from holidays past. Share your sadness with those who were also close to the person who passed.*

### **Celebrate Small Joys**

*Start small on your road toward embracing the holidays by celebrating small moments of happiness. Savor a cup of warm apple cider. Sit back and watch the smile on a child's face as they delight in family traditions.*

### **Incorporate Your Loved One in the Celebration**

*Purchase a special ornament for the tree in memory or continue to make her favorite dish for Hanukkah. Have a mass said in memory. If you donate to an organization that recognizes the contribution publicly in some way, write "In memory of" and include the deceased's name.*

### **Volunteer in Meaningful Ways**

*Volunteer your time or resources to help others in a way that relates to the person you lost. If your mother died after a lengthy hospital stay, have her favorite flowers delivered to the ward for the other patients to enjoy. If you lost a child, donate gifts to your local synagogue or church to distribute to children who otherwise may not receive Hanukkah or Christmas gifts. Bring warm clothing or blankets to a Kwanzaa unity celebration to be distributed to those in need. Though they may seem like small things, they can help you feel connected to the person who has passed during the holidays.*

### **Continue Old Traditions and Make New Ones**

*If Grandma bought all the grandchildren matching pajamas to wear during the holidays, continue the tradition by taking over and buying pajamas for your nieces and nephews. Serve meals at a homeless shelter or soup kitchen rather than prepare a lavish meal. Taking over old traditions maintains a link to the deceased, and creating new ones helps to remind you that life goes on.*

### **Avoid Quick Fixes**

*Avoid the temptation to drown your grief in excessive alcohol consumption or the use of prescription drugs like sleeping aids. This may only increase your feelings of sadness and minimize your ability to work through your grief.*

### **Put Yourself First**

*This is especially true for women, who tend to put their needs last. Be sure to eat healthy meals and get the rest you need. Allow yourself to feel whatever emotions the holidays elicit. Say no to invitations that you don't have the emotional or physical energy to deal with.*

## ***Do Your Best***

*There is no right or wrong way to deal with your grief. Handle the holidays the best you can. If you choose not to participate in a particular service or outing due to your grief, do not judge or be critical of yourself.*

*Grace and peace,*

*Becky*

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## *Mark Your Calendar - Saturday, November 21<sup>st</sup>*

*On Saturday, November 21<sup>st</sup>, we will gather together at Ellenburg Hall, on the grounds of Providence Presbyterian Church, 4000 Highway 153, Greenville, South Carolina 29611 (in Powdersville) to remember our loved ones along with everyone in the world. This is a time we gather as survivors. 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.*

*This is sponsored by AFSP (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention) and it will begin at 11:00 am until 2:00 pm with lunch provided. We will share stories, you may bring a remembrance of your loved one and there will be a video that we will watch that will be shown world-wide. Please RSVP to Jennifer Piver at [jennifer.piver@mhagc.org](mailto:jennifer.piver@mhagc.org).*

*This is a most meaningful time and you will gain some strength for the upcoming Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays.*



*Last night, I dreamed that my beautiful sons were alive. But morning renewed my mourning for them: Christmas trees, snow globes, and music greeted my grieving heart. Relate?*

*I understand that people cannot compare grief, but I believe we all know that the holidays challenge the grieving.*

*Christmas arrives like a pretty package full of grief triggers: Empty chairs, missing faces, and silent voices seem to haunt the holidays.*

### *Ways of Christmas for the Grieving*

*Don't put excessive expectations on yourself; rest; rearrange furniture to reduce "absence" reminders; avoid sugar highs and lows because they naturally induce emotional lows; admit grief. Trying to move forward while denying the reality of grief causes one to fall face forward. Does your face smile while your heart weeps? Give yourself permission to cry.*

*These are just a few of the "tried and true" recommendations we offer during the year, but more at Christmas. We ask that you join us at Ellenburg Hall on December 15<sup>th</sup> at 7:00 pm and bring a snack, favorite of your loved one and we will have dinner together and have a short program to help you during this time. Please note on your calendar that this will be the 3<sup>rd</sup> meeting of SOS, but at a different place and with a different agenda.*

*You will also take home a remembrance of this evening in loving and tender memory of your loved one. Please RSVP to [jennifer.piver@mhagc.org](mailto:jennifer.piver@mhagc.org) so we can prepare the items for you and the drinks and meat tray.*

*If you have questions concerning any of the two special dates in November or December, please call Becky Kay at 864-616-9413.*

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!



*“What cannot be said  
will be wept.”*

*~ Sappho*

Mental Health America of Greenville County  
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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 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 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.