



Journey to

Healing

A Newsletter for Survivors of Suicide

Third Quarter 2013

Stages of Grieving a Loss Through Suicide

There are an estimated 32,000 suicides a year and every death has a profound effect on approximately six people, according to the American Association of Suicidology. For survivors of suicide--those who have lost a loved one--grief can be overwhelming and the healing process particularly challenging. While grief can lack a predictable pattern or timetable, there are elements that are often shared by survivors as they work through the trauma.

Shock

Often survivors' initial reaction is shock and disbelief. Denial is a common defense mechanism to buffer traumatic events that overwhelm coping mechanisms. Gradually, recognition and acceptance that the event is real sets in, though for some, shock is experienced repeatedly as the survivor

revolves back and forth between recognition and denial.

Anger

Many survivors feel angry at the loved one who has committed suicide for leaving them and for the emotional pain inflicted by their death. Understanding that anger is a normal and acceptable reaction can help survivors avoid self-blame and [depression](#), according to a review of studies published in *Crisis: The Journal of Crisis Intervention and Suicide Prevention*. Moving toward forgiveness is an important step in the healing process.

Guilt

Guilt can be one of the most difficult emotions associated with a loved one's suicide. Survivors may blame themselves for not recognizing warning signs, not providing the person with the help and support they needed or not having taken steps to prevent the suicide. The extent of guilt is often dependent on the nature of the relationship the bereaved had with the victim prior to the suicide. Experts stress that it is

important to recognize that you are not responsible for the person's actions. For survivors whose loved one had a long struggle with suicide attempts, depression or [mental illness](#), they may feel some relief after the suicide, accompanied by guilt for feeling this way.

Depression

Intense sadness and depression often follow the death of a loved one. The stigma and misconceptions associated with suicide can prevent the survivor from seeking needed support. Studies have shown survivors to be more prone to depression than those not affected by a suicide, which places them at greater risk of suicide themselves. Survivors are also more prone to "complicated grief"--in which the normal grieving process becomes more debilitating, long-lasting, and severe--according to a study published in Crisis: The

Journal of Crisis Intervention and Suicide Prevention. Finding meaning or purpose in the life of the loved one and the grieving process can help survivors make sense of the trauma and work through depression. However, remember, there is no order for the stages of grief and how we grieve the loss ~ it depends on each individual person's life.....so don't expect too much too soon.

The main thing is to take care of yourself and to grieve as you personally need to grieve.....there is no format for any of us, other than to care for ourselves and be gentle.

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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. Additionally, CRISISline is available 24/7 at 864-271-8888.



Inspirational

As we enter the autumn part of the year, Labor Day is the last of the summer season celebrations and the beginning of autumn. There can be a letdown feeling as we prepare for the shorter days and colder weather. Actually, autumn can be quite nice with warm weather and the changing of the colors. People love to be outdoors and soak up the crisp air and see all of the wonders of nature as the leaves change into vibrant and rich colors. This time of the year is truly a wonder to behold. I hope that many of you are able to enjoy the outdoors and witness the nature that is all around us –the wonders of creation.

One of the issues that survivors of a suicide often express is that their loved one had so many friends and supporters around them, and why was this not enough to ward off suicide? One of the reasons is that these tortured souls were unable to appreciate or realize how loved they were. Even though they were loved by many people, they were unable to realize and feel the love and support of these people. These loved ones were totally consumed by the pain from their illness. This pain prevented any other feelings to register, such as the feeling of being loved and admired by legions of people. It is not that these people were ungrateful for all of the support and admiration of people, it was due to the fact that their psyche had been clogged up due to the pain that had engulfed them.

Survivors oftentimes ask themselves "wasn't my love enough to prevent this suicide?" The answer to that question is that this loved one was unable to absorb or appreciate the love and support of those people who cared greatly for this person. During this time of desperation these souls are absolutely consumed by the intolerable pain resulting from mental illness. Nothing can prevent this desperation, and the only relief that is possible is to do something very drastic to end the pain. There is no other solution to this excruciating and intolerable pain except to take one's life. Does this mean that these loved ones wanted to die? Not really but the only way to end the pain is to either jump in front of this train or to take this lethal amount of pills or to do some other lethal means to get out of this pain. It does not necessarily mean that they wanted to die, but they just wanted to be rid of the pain. Were they thinking logically that the way out of their pain would mean their death? Not necessarily, but they were so desperate they just wanted the pain to end. It is very important to realize that these desperate souls are not capable of thinking through in a logical fashion. They are very troubled and this severe pain has blocked any logical thought process. They are truly panic stricken and they just want to end the pain. There can be a room filled with friends and people who have great admiration for this person but these loved ones have one thing in mind and that is to escape the pain. They are literally on a path to end the pain. They are on a mission to end the pain and their mission will not be completed until they accomplish what they have set out to do.

They are singularly focused, and there is just one thing on their mind, and that is to end this excruciating and intolerable pain. For these tortured souls it is not a matter of choice but a matter of decision. Choice connotes an either/or situation. Decision connotes "I will do this" or "I must do this." At the final moments of decision making these people conclude that "I must do this". "There is no other way out." This person has run out of all other alternatives and taking one's life is the only other option.

For these people who complete suicide, this was the only way to solve the problem of the pain in their lives. They might have tried other types of interventions such as counseling or medication or hospitalization and none of these interventions worked. They must try something else, something more drastic and final. Unfortunately, once they have taken their lives there is no looking back or repairing the damage. Their pain problem has been solved forever. They have escaped from their pain and they are now pain free. I am convinced that had these people found another way to escape the pain, they would have tried it. Their final act gives survivors a hint at just how desperate these loved ones were.

One way that survivors can look at this is to switch places with their loved ones. I have often heard it said that the pain resulting from grieving a death from suicide is so bad that survivors wish that they were dead so as to escape this awful pain. Survivors might think of suicide as an option but then survivors catch themselves and say that they would never want anyone else to know the pain of grief from suicide. So they rule suicide out as an option. That is an example of logical thinking. Survivors would never want to pass pain on to their loved ones, so they banish these thoughts from their mind. Such thoughts generally do not last long once survivors realize that they are thinking the way of their deceased loved ones. Survivors are frightened by having such thoughts. This is a very normal reaction. As long as the reaction is one of horror at such thoughts, survivors are on the right track. It is only when such thoughts begin to make sense that someone is in trouble. That is when further help is warranted.

It is important for survivors to come to the conclusion that their loved ones suffered from some form of mental illness. These loved ones were not selfish or cowards. There are a lot of misconceptions out there about people who complete suicide. People who complete suicide are not cowards or selfish, but they are severely mentally ill, and their illness is so severe that it can be life threatening. Mental illness can be fatal. For people who complete suicide their illness was the cause of their death. We hear a lot about fatal illnesses such as cancer or heart disease and it is about time that we add mental illness to that category because mental illness has the ability to cause death. Unfortunately, there are segments of society that refuse to believe that mental illness can cause death. Such people should just talk to someone who is in the ravages of an attack from mental illness. These people just want to be free from the pain. The pain is so bad that these people just want to die. They are not cowards or selfish, and because the pain is so bad and there is no relief they want what any person wants, and that is relief from pain. When some people are suffering from excruciating pain they cry out for relief and sometimes relief comes in the form of morphine. Once the drug is administered relief comes soon. There are other people who want relief from the pain of mental illness and their form of morphine is the taking of their life. The end result is the same for both suffering people. The only difference is that for the one who finds relief from morphine the pain goes away for a time, and there might be a need for more medicine if the pain returns. For the person who seeks relief from the pain of mental illness by completing suicide the pain will never return and, unfortunately, neither will this loved one return to life as we know it. They leave this life forever. They are permanently pain free and their loved ones lives are permanently altered.

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Reflections by Becky

Grief doesn't magically end at a certain point after a loved one's death. Reminders often bring back the pain of loss. Here's help coping — and healing.

When a loved one dies, you might be faced with grief over your loss again and again — sometimes even years later. Feelings of grief might return on the anniversary of your loved one's death, birthday or other special days throughout the year.

These feelings, sometimes called an anniversary reaction, aren't necessarily a setback in the grieving process. They're a reflection that your loved one's life was important to you.

To continue on the path toward healing, know what to expect — and how to cope with reminders of your loss.

Reminders can be anywhere

Certain reminders of your loved one might be inevitable, especially on holidays, birthdays, anniversaries and other special days that follow your loved one's death.

Reminders aren't just tied to the calendar, though. They can be tied to sights, sounds and smells — and they can ambush you. You might suddenly be flooded with emotions when you drive by the restaurant your partner loved or when you hear your child's favorite song. Even memorial celebrations for others can trigger the pain of your own loss.

What to expect when grief returns

Anniversary reactions can last for days at a time or — in more extreme cases — much longer. During an anniversary reaction you might experience:

- Sadness
- Loneliness
- Anger
- Anxiety
- Trouble sleeping
- Fatigue
- Pain

Anniversary reactions can also evoke powerful memories of the feelings and events surrounding your loved one's death. For example, you might remember in great detail where you were and what you were doing when your loved one died.

Remember, grief is a journey and that is what our ministry is all about – we are here to journey beside you and always we condole with you in your loss, because, we too, have walked this jagged path and felt the pain then and some even now.

Grace and peace,

Becky

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!

Companioning is not about assessing, analyzing, fixing or resolving another's grief. Instead, it is about being totally present to the mourner, even being a temporary guardian of his soul.

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 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.