



Journey to Healing

A Newsletter for Survivors of Suicide

Fourth Quarter 2013

Stages of Grieving a Loss Through Suicide

So many of our holiday traditions are family-centered, making it painful to face the holidays after a loved one dies. Despite the pain, some people find it comforting to continue the old traditions that they've enjoyed. Since grief in itself is exhausting, it can be too overwhelming to try and build new traditions when mourning a loved one.

How you choose to handle holidays is a highly personal decision. In the first few months or years, you alone know whether it's comfortable or painful to bake the cookies, make that signature dinner, or hold the annual picnic. As time passes, you may find that life in itself has changed and it feels more comfortable to modify or integrate some new and different traditions.

One friend is widowed and lives with her widowed mom. Their holiday celebrations are much smaller now that it's just the two of them. Rather than cooking a holiday meal, they usually have dinner with friends or go out to eat. An enormous fresh tree was central to their Christmas celebration, but my friend finds it's too difficult for her alone, so they have a small artificial tree. But they keep the tradition of the Christmas lights, hiring a handyman to put them up.

Another friend was widowed when his two children were teens. He found it helpful that first year to ask his children, "How do you want to do this holiday?" There were holiday traditions that they kept intact because it was just natural to do things they enjoyed. When one child left for college the following year and the family of four became a family of two, life and holidays changed. But the changes felt like a more natural transition. Six years after his wife's death, my friend integrates some of the old traditions into his holidays, just because it feels comfortable.

Memories may be your best guide to the holidays. Determine what makes you feel good and what makes you feel uncomfortable. But there's a difference between being uncomfortable and being sad. As one friend says, "Some people are so concerned about feeling sad. It's okay to feel sad; you've just lost your loved one."



Holiday Reminders:

On Saturday, November 23rd, we will be part of a world-wide participation in National Survivor's Day. This event will be held at Ellenburg Hall, Providence Presbyterian Church, 4000 Highway 153, Greenville, South Carolina from 11:00 – 3:00 PM. Lunch will be provided. Please feel free to bring a remembrance of your loved one to share with the group. This is a most helpful day for us to gather together and know throughout the nation, survivors are getting strength through the support of their groups. We hope to see you there.

On Tuesday, December 17th, we will be hosting our Holiday Remembrance Service. This, too, will be held at Providence Presbyterian Church's Ellenburg Hall, beginning at 7:00 PM. Please bring your favorite comfort food, or that of your loved one, and we will remember Christmas' past with the presence of a speaker and reminders of the ones we have loved and who have found their peace, as imperfect as it is for us.

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

A woman described how deeply horrified she was by what her loved one had done to his body, his life, and to the lives of those who loved him. Underneath her pain and the tragedy of her loss was the question, "Should I have been more aware of his severe depression?" She had believed he would get through the depressive episode, as he had done so many times before. She reviewed the details of the events leading to his suicide, wondering why she did not see things more clearly or have the power to save him. She described how, after learning that her loved one had taken his life, she went into mental and physical shock, moving back and forth between denying and accepting the news of his death. She said, "I thought at first that it couldn't be true; he couldn't have done what he promised not to do." She began to share parts of her story, as much as she could bear, reserving the whole story for another point in time, when she felt she could deal with the rest of it.

Survivors frequently bring up difficult questions about what they or other family members might have done differently to have saved their loved one from suicide. They doubt themselves, the professionals involved in their loved one's care, and quite often God. It is not uncommon when meeting with survivors of loss, to hear them refer to their religious faith as they tell their story. "Where was God?" is a question I have heard many times. This is a point in the grief process where the person is revealing another dimension of their pain, their deep spiritual woundedness. This type of questioning of one's religious beliefs is an opening in the therapy process to connect on the deepest levels of faith, belief, and meaning. Other questions asked are: "What kind of God would allow this to happen to my loved one? Why didn't God intervene? and/or Why did this have to happen?" There are no quick answers to their questions that are filled with fears, doubts, and anxieties. Regardless of religion, people who believe in a universal presence often benefit greatly from addressing issues around their own spirituality. Reconnecting with our spirituality can be another way to move through the dark place of grief and back into life.

One individual said to me recently, "Where was God when my brother was contemplating suicide?" "Where was God when my brother was in pain?" "Why didn't God intervene?" "Why did this have to happen?" A survivor may wait to see how others will react to their questions of faith or doubt, belief or disbelief, before they allow themselves to become more vulnerable in the relationship. I have found that when I am able to sit and listen patiently to the questions and recognize their spiritual dimensions, a deeper moment of sacred presence is revealed, where even stronger emotions of loss, anger, and pain can be expressed. Faith for survivors does not look like a traditional set of faith practices. It is ultimately grounded in a person's connection and re-connection with self, others, and God. A survivor's faith journey may begin in a traumatic, fragmented way, with survivors first speaking of "losing their faith." This may launch them into a deep, empty, painful place, where the once familiar no longer makes sense. A shattered belief system can be devastating and cause cognitive and emotional problems, including an acute sense of betrayal. Any spiritual beliefs or values that a

survivor previously had may no longer feel valid or true. Anger and disbelief may make it difficult for a survivor to find comfort in the spiritual or religious values once held.

A psycho-spiritual approach to grief therapy can provide nurturance, encouragement, and openness, at a time when one's spiritual perspective is thrown into question. It accepts strong expressions of anger and rage, even those directed at God. A survivor is not corrected or contradicted in their expression of faith or doubt. All expressions are authentic and true. Including spirituality in therapy is a growing approach to treating the whole person, body, mind, and spirit. Spiritual beliefs can be seen as part of a person's healthy coping skills, offering social support, an ability to find meaning and purpose in life, and providing comfort in times of grief. Regardless of religion, people who believe in a universal presence can benefit greatly from addressing issues around their own spirituality. Acknowledging the power of one's beliefs and addressing the interrelatedness of spiritual beliefs with a person's mental and emotional recovery can foster a spirit of healing.

Looking forward, we will be discussing in our bi-monthly meetings spirituality support. This group will incorporate spiritual components into the dynamics of a group setting, using supportive and meditative techniques. The intention for group members is to be able to develop and strengthen their own inner resources, develop coping skills to live more hopefully and purposefully, and to help nurture their spirit. At its heart, the group hopes to enhance self-worth and create a safe place to share insights, experiences, and validate the worth of one another. This nondenominational group will offer support, connection, and reflection. I look forward to working with you and hope that we can discover together the spiritual direction that will bring you comfort and peace. Allowing for the spiritual component in a survivor's journey can bring health, healing, and the opportunity to raise important issues about the spiritual impact of their trauma. Dealing with the spiritual consequences of complex trauma, integrating spirituality and psychotherapy, and using spiritual techniques such as meditation, setting intentions, and spiritual reading, can complement psychotherapeutic strategies.

As you enter these holidays approaching, be aware of how some of these practices will help you cope and deal with not only Thanksgiving but Christmas and all special days to come.

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When we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives means the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a warm and tender hand. ~ Henri Nouwen



Reflections by Becky

The Christmas season is here. This cannot be denied. Stores are decked out in their holiday finest. Christmas tunes accost us everywhere we turn. *Frosty the Snowman* and *Rudolph* are showing on the television. We can get our yearly fix of *It's a Wonderful Life* on Turner Classic. Yet somehow we don't feel in the holiday spirit. We just cannot get ourselves to be jolly or merry. We don't need the Grinch to steal our Christmas; grief has done that for us.

All of those traditions and simple ways we marked the holiday now don't seem so important. The tree sits in the attic where we left it last January. The lights are in their box in the garage and the wreath has yet to make it out of the basement. We just don't have the desire to decorate. We feel like we should do something, but our hearts are just not into it this year.

Here is a radical suggestion: Don't. Don't put up the big tree this year. Maybe get a small tabletop one or a smaller easier to assemble type or don't put up a tree at all. Don't put up the lights inside or out. Leave the wreath where it is and the windows and doors bare. The fireplace mantel can remain garland free and stocking-less. There are no decorating police who will come to your house and inspect it for its Christmas cheer. Martha Stewart is not going to judge you for your lack of red and green décor. So stop putting additional pressure on yourself to do something you just don't have the energy or desire to do.

Instead visit friends' homes or drive around the neighborhood and enjoy everyone else's lights. As I watched my neighbor standing precariously on a ladder far above the ground trying to string his lights across the gable of his roof line, I was glad that it wasn't me risking my life for a few twinkling evenings. I vowed to re-visit his home at night to enjoy his labors, but I am not feeling any pressure to match his festive feats. In fact I saw a great photo on Facebook that shows a house all decked out in lights and the house next door strung some lights that simply said, "Ditto."

Ditto – that is all you need to say. I will enjoy your efforts, but I cannot bring myself to do this for myself this year. So you bring the lights, the trees, the wreaths, the blow-up Santa's and boughs of holly and I will look at it all and enjoy it and simply state that this year is my "ditto" year.

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
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.