



Journey to Healing

A Newsletter for Survivors of Suicide

Fourth Quarter 2018

If you attend an SOS Support Group meeting, you may be able to appreciate that sometimes meetings are good, and you leave feeling energized and supported; but other times you may think it was just okay, or perhaps it was not helpful at all. While we hope that most meetings are good and supportive we know that various factors can make the experience just okay for survivors at times. I have left my fair share of meetings wishing that I had said something different or connected with a lone member a bit more, but there have been ones I facilitated and of those exceptional meetings. I left feeling humbled, grateful and honored to be a part of the SOS program.

As the meeting started, I looked around the room and had the thought that in no other sector of life would such a diverse group of people be coming together. I wondered how this eclectic group of individuals was going to relate. The survivors in this group represented differing religions, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual identities, political affiliations, social skills, and world views. After the meeting I felt a sense of tranquility as I saw members connecting and exchanging phone numbers. At times people felt vulnerable enough to cry and at other times felt comfortable enough to joke and laugh. People seemed to connect in such a way that the social constraints of real life didn't seem to exist. There was something so awesome about the support being shared that I felt gratitude to be a part of this experience. Each suffering group member was able to share their "story" and at the same time had enough empathy to listen to others around them. This perfect combination created a safe container for the grief experience. As the meeting ended, people exchanged phone numbers and the facilitators were gently nudging survivors out of the room (facilitators know that this is a sign of a good meeting).

The facilitator and I both smiled as we debriefed because even though it was only a two-hour span of time, we knew that these individuals felt comfort in an otherwise painful grief experience. Losing a loved one to suicide can feel very isolating and many individuals have trouble finding their "tribe" or locating people with whom they can process their experience. We often hear survivors talk about being avoided at the grocery store or that they themselves avoid situations where the topic may come up. Many survivors also struggle to share how their loved one died, some feel the weight of the stigma, and others do not feel safe sharing the information. For myself, I still wonder why after 12 years it is still difficult for me to say, "Actually my father passed away, he died by suicide." It can feel like it takes too much emotional energy, it's so much easier to not go into it at all and instead talk about Hollywood gossip or funny things that my 3-year-old said. I recently found an article that put words to the feeling I was unable to articulate. The author had lost her sister to suicide and she shared that she had a difficult time sharing how her sister died because she did not know what sort of reaction she would be confronted with. Many times, after sharing she felt like she was then in a position of needing to comfort the other person and feeling embarrassed that she made this person uncomfortable. This made complete sense to me. There were times when the topic of "parents" would come up and I would share "Actually my father passed away." The person would ask, "How?" I would tell them suicide and at times it would bring a certain tension into the conversation. Although there were times that sharing the information connected me to someone who had a similar experience, those negative experiences have still left an emotional impact on me.

What I have learned from these experiences is that I must constantly assess the "safety" of the environment before sharing my experiences. I find that most people in my life (besides my beloved colleagues)

are not comfortable talking about death and most definitely not death by suicide. It took me some time to have empathy for my friends who did not tolerate my grief well. Many of them had no experience with death, specifically traumatic death, and they did not know what to do for me. I remember being angry at the time but knew that I still needed these people in my life. These friends may not have been able to tolerate my grief, but they are friends in other ways. We all have our strengths.

While the outside world may not always have a place for our grief, know that SOS and other survivors share in your pain. Even if it is a split second or moment, I hope that each survivor can experience a moment of serenity in their grief journey. A few wise SOS members have taught me that some people's lives are too painful to endure. I find peace in the thought that our loved ones are no longer suffering. To think of the pain that one must be in to take one's own life makes me shudder, and I am grateful that my father is no longer enduring that pain. I did not believe that the first few years of my journey, but after years of talking with hundreds of survivors I believe this wholeheartedly. When asked why I choose to do this work, I often say that working with survivors has given me the opportunity to serve some of the nicest people in the world. As survivors, even when we feel lonely or that people don't understand our pain, we know that there are others out there who share in this feeling and can understand the depth of our experience.

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Comments from Courtney

The news that someone you love has died by [suicide](#) inevitably brings a whirlwind of emotions no one can really prepare for. *Anger. Shock. Confusion. Frustration.* None of them wrong — and all of them likely hitting at different times in the healing process. Forget the stages of [grief](#) — losing a loved one is so much more complicated than that. Losing a loved one to suicide, specifically, often leaves those left behind with more questions than answers, making it painstakingly difficult to sift through these lingering emotions.

If it brings you any comfort, you're not the only one who's gone through it. Time may not make all the pain go away, but healing is still possible. You're never the same, but you can be OK.

To explore some of these complex feelings that suicide loss survivors may feel, we checked in with our [mental health](#) community and [asked those who've lost a loved one to suicide](#) to share an unexpected or surprising emotion they felt after their loss. We want you to know if you felt — or still feel — any of the emotions listed below, you're not alone. There's nothing wrong with how you feel and allowing yourself to feel these emotions can sometimes be a first step to healing. A first step of many, but a first step nonetheless.

If you've lost a loved one to suicide and need support, you can find resources [here](#).

Here are the complicated emotions of suicide loss people in our community shared with us:

1. Anger

"I was angry at him. I felt so much rage and a type of hatred towards my once best friend who I adored deeply. It was super conflicting, and I had many people who haven't even been through the same situation try to tell me it was cruel of me to be so angry at him. But I was. I spent months guilty that I was angry at him. I looked at the sky and screamed at him outside in the middle of the night, asking him why he left me here alone. I screamed and screamed and told him how of all people in the world, he made me happy and he took that away from me. Finally, I realized... it was OK to be so angry. I was angry because I loved him so much. My anger and grief were really all the love I have for him, stuck, with nowhere to go." — Kellyann N.

RESOURCES FROM [AMERICAN FOUNDATION FOR SUICIDE PREVENTION](#)

"I was angry. I was angry at her for leaving me. I was angry at myself for not trying harder to die. I was angry at the residential treatment center we met at because it worked for me but not for her. I was angry at God for taking her and leaving me behind. After crying out the anger, I was left with just a numb sense of disbelief and unfairness. I go through this at least twice a year every year since she left, on her birthday and the [anniversary of her suicide](#) (it'll be five years this November). It always hits me with despair." — Julie C.

"I was so angry. And not just at the person I lost. I was just furious at literally everything around me. I had to 'put myself in time out' so to speak for the first couple of months to keep from lashing out at the people around me. Driving made me angry, people made me angry, living made me angry. Everything just made me so angry. The feeling eventually went away, and I was able to connect it back to the loss of my loved one, but it was a complicated emotion to deal with." — Sydney W.

2. Confusion

"Confused. My mom was about to be a grandma for the first time. I didn't understand." — Rachel N.

"I was struggling to *understand why!* Why he did it and why at that time. How long had he been planning it or was it just an impulse? Why didn't he ask for help? ... Why didn't someone try harder to get him some help for his mood swings? He didn't *have* to die! So many unanswered questions that will remain unanswered for this lifetime." — Angie A.

"I don't know if I was surprised by it but confused. I just couldn't seem to understand why. She was such an amazing person in my eyes, the world was a better place with her in it. I just wish she could have realized that herself. I was also very young when my friend ended her life, being 17 and losing a friend this way was earth-shattering." — Tammy T.

3. Guilt

"I was angry he left, and I also felt an overwhelming sense of guilt. I felt like it was my fault he killed himself. I was angry at myself because I felt like I should have done something. I felt like I should have known he wasn't OK, even without him telling me, or showing how he really wasn't OK. And I'm still angry and still feel guilty." — Sabrina J.

"Complete denial and guilt. When I got the text that she had killed herself, I sat there for 15 minutes saying, 'No, this can't be true. This isn't real. This isn't happening.' Then I started to cry continuously, screaming that this was all my fault. I felt I should have done more, texted her more often." — Keira W.

4. Denial

"Denial. I found his body. I knew he was dead. Yet I didn't quite understand it. I asked the police officer if he was dead." — Becky O.

"I had utter disbelief. I had this feeling for months afterward that she was just on vacation and she would come back. **I just waited for her to come back.**" — Chris W.

5. Relief

"Honestly, and this is going to sound terrible, but I felt happy for them. Happy they are no longer struggling, happy they are in a better place (wherever that place may be) and are free from everything." — Talia H.

"My answer will sound awful. However, you need to know they had attempted suicide so many times before. I was always worried, was always on edge walking on eggshells, just hoping not to be/do the thing that makes them break. So, when I received the phone call... it was not quite relief, but it was done and there was nothing I could do. Then the ever-crushing guilt flooded over me. I felt guilty for feeling that and then guilty for all the what-ifs. I did everything I could, but it wasn't enough. Soon the pain engulfed everything until I became numb." — Heather E.

6. Jealousy

"I lost a co-worker to suicide and my immediate feeling was jealousy. I was jealous they had died, that they no longer had to deal with life... then I felt guilty for thinking that." — Ashleigh W.

"I was jealous. I had gone to him multiple times when I was feeling suicidal and he had talked me out of it. He never mentioned he was suicidal. And he just left me here to face this world on my own. And after seeing how hard it affected everyone else, I couldn't go through with it myself. I was so jealous that he got out so easy and I'm stuck here now." — Danielle S.

7. Emptiness

No, it's more than that. It's like a giant hole that swallows up all possible hope in the aftermath. I'm lucky that my resilience and friends pulled me through, but for some it's an emptiness that never goes away." — Adele T.

"Emptiness. Still feel it. Lost my dad when I was 8 and he was missing for several weeks. Nearly 20 years has passed, and I just don't feel deep emotion anymore. Now if someone dies, yeah it sucks, and I feel bad, but it's never as deep a pain as losing your parent to suicide. I feel like I'm broken because of this." — Sam B.

Peace, Courtney

Survivor Day

International Survivors of Suicide Loss Day is November 17, 2018

Ellenburg Hall on the grounds of Providence Presbyterian Church
4000 Highway 153
Powdersville, SC
11:00 am – 2:00 pm

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.

On Saturday, November 17, 2018, loss survivors will gather around the globe in small and large events while growing together in their grief journey.

Each event is unique and offers varied programming; however, each event site will feature an AFSP-produced documentary that offers a message of growth, resilience and connection.

We will watch a video focusing on a group of survivors and how they have navigated their journey of grief, there will be a time for sharing, and we will provide a boxed luncheon and drinks. **Please RSVP to courtney.senator@gmail.com so we will have adequate food.**

This event is sponsored by AFSP and is a wonderful opportunity for you to learn about the support that is available for you as you walk this journey. We hope to see you there ~

Christmas Potluck Dinner

December 4th – 7:00 – 8:30 pm
St. Michael Lutheran Church
Augusta Road, Greenville

We will have our annual ‘Potluck Christmas Dinner on Tuesday, December 4th at our normal time and place.

Mental Health America of Greenville will supply the meat for this time of sharing, so bring your favorite side or the favorite side of the loved one you have lost.

It would be nice if you could let us know if you will be able to attend, so **please RSVP to courtney.senator@gmail.com so we will know how much meat to prepare.**

Blessings on all as you enter this time of year that is so difficult for those of us who are grieving.





Inspirational

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 in both 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. 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 their 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 20+ 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. The Program does work. It has helped thousands of people, and it can work for each one of our SOS family members. The work is not easy, and it is fraught with moments of discouragement and despair, but between individual sessions and group sessions, the program has proven to be successful. What it takes is a commitment on the part of the grieving person to allow themselves to walk the journey in an environment of acceptance and warmth and allow themselves to be helped by people who are very nurturing and helpful. It's a very scary and lonely decision to make but the rewards and the gift are worth it.

It is a gift that will ensure a bright future and a joyful future. People whose lives have been shattered by a suicide can rightfully say, "What's the use? Life is not worth living." These attitudes are part of the grieving process and have validity. However, as the grieving process is worked at and the grief is resolved, joy does return, pleasure is experienced and one's future is bright. This will not take place automatically or with the passing of time. It takes place only as people work hard with grief. I know. I have been there, and I continue to work on the grief in my life. It is a difficult decision to make and a scary decision to make to traverse the journey of grief. The alternative is that one's life is endured but not lived. One puts up with life but does not experience joy or pleasure. One tolerates existence and misses opportunities for joy and fulfillment. There is no magical formula and there are no expressways to bypass the pain. There is a map and there is a way to go about this journey. One cannot give themselves a better gift than the gift of wanting to live again. The opportunity is there, and SOS has a track record of helping people to regain a life again. What it takes to make such a commitment is to commit one's self for the long haul and to not look for quick solutions and to be willing to grapple with some mystery and to entrust your life and your feelings to a caring and nurturing environment. SOS doesn't provide answers. SOS can't fix the past, but SOS can guarantee a brighter future. Making such a commitment could be a gift of a lifetime.

During this holiday time, I want to assure each one of our SOS members of my thoughts and prayers and encourage each of you to do the same for each other and especially for those people whose pain is very new and piercing.

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Reflections by Becky

How to Survive the Holidays after a Suicide

The holiday season can be a difficult time for those who have been touched by suicide. For me, the holidays are a reminder of my own dad's suicide. I will never forget the phone conversation I had with my dad the night before Thanksgiving, 2011. He wasn't himself; something just wasn't right. While a month would pass before his life ended, I often consider that night to be the turning point in his life. For a survivor of a suicide loss, the holidays can be a reminder of "the last time." While I have several joyful memories, there is also that memory of my dad's last Thanksgiving. I never expected it to be his last. To assist others who may be struggling with the upcoming holiday, I have put together a survival list. I hope that one or two things on this list will allow you to experience happiness next Thanksgiving.

1. Tell your friends and family what you need. I have found this one to be the most difficult for survivors of a suicide loss. I think we expect people to do more than they are capable of. Unfortunately, suicide makes people uncomfortable. Nobody knows what to do or say, leaving the survivor feeling isolated, or even worse, judged. We need to teach our loved ones how to act. How do we do this? By telling them what we need. "I need to talk about (You put the name here) today." "I need to cry, and I don't want you to try to make me feel better. Just listen." "I need to take some time for myself." I can't emphasize this enough. **TELL PEOPLE WHAT YOU NEED.** Trust me, it will be easier for them, **AND** you will get what you need.

2. Be Selfish! Yes, seriously! We often try to do everything and be everything for those around us. When do we make time for ourselves? We need to take care of ourselves, first and foremost. Do what you need to do for yourself today. If you want to skip the holiday, skip the holiday. If you want to go visit your loved one's grave, go visit. Do what you need to do. Just remember survival tip #1 and communicate why you need to do what you are doing.

3. Start a new tradition or tweak the old ones. Holidays can be difficult for several reasons, but traditions can send us spiraling down to the depths of a black hole. Traditions remind us that our loved ones are no longer with us. Often, we don't want to continue with the tradition because our loved one should be here. Traditions are for us, and our families. There is no rule that says you need to continue one. If past traditions make you sad, stop doing them, or change them. Just because your loved one isn't here in physical form doesn't mean they can't be a part of it. Or, start a new tradition. It is never too late to start a new tradition.

4. Incorporate your loved one into the day. As a society we have created this notion that relationships end when the person's life ends. This couldn't be further from the truth. Relationships don't end; they just change. I have a friend who lost her father to suicide a few years back. She continues to incorporate her father into the day but setting a place for him at the table. Since gravy was his favorite Thanksgiving "accessory," they put a gravy bowl in front of his plate. While he isn't there in physical form, he is there in spirit. Her friends and family spend time talking about her father, often laughing at all the wonderful times they spent together. Were her friends and family comfortable with this? Not initially, but she followed survival tip #1 and told them that this is what she needed. Now, it has become a new tradition.

5. Find something to be thankful for. Truly, there is ALWAYS something to be thankful for. Maybe you are thankful that the sun is shining, or you woke up feeling refreshed. Maybe you are thankful that guests cancelled, or that someone offered to bring a dish. Finding something, no matter how small, to be thankful for can instantly change our mindset and our mood.

6. Start the day off right. This is different for everyone, but for me it's all about music. If I want to change my mindset, I listen to music while I shower or get ready. There are certain songs that just put me in a good mood. Pray. Give yourself a pep talk. Talk to the person you lost (or yell at them!). Do whatever you need to do to start the day off right. We often wake up thinking, "This is going to be an awful day." And guess what, it is. Not necessarily because of anything, but because we went into the day with that mindset. Do anything and everything you can do to go into the day with a positive mindset. I promise it will help and will make survival tip #5 easier.

7. Don't try to numb yourself. Yes, a glass of wine can help ease your nerves. But five, well, that will make you feel even worse tomorrow. We often do whatever we can to numb ourselves on days like Thanksgiving. While it might get us through the day, it makes the next day, and even multiple days after, even more difficult. Do yourself a favor and allow yourself to be present. It may not be easy, but it will be worth it tomorrow.

8. Don't let others control your day. We give WAY too much power to those around us. Someone may say something incredibly rude or inconsiderate. It is not a personal attack on you, or the person you lost. They are just ignorant. I have wasted a tremendous amount of energy trying to change people. It is a battle that cannot be won. Save your energy for those that truly matter. Your great aunt is who she is; let it go. Don't let her comments, or any others control your day. I am not telling you to allow others to say what they please; I am just telling you to pick your battles. Some people just aren't worth your breath. Accept that and focus your time and energy on the ones that mean the most. And hey, maybe even be thankful for those few.

I wish you all a peaceful holiday. There are few who can say that they understand; unfortunately, I do. The day might not be easy, or maybe it will be easier than you thought. Either way, I hope my list of survival tips helps you find some enjoyment in the day. Be kind to yourself.....and sorry, my children's favorite scary day was Halloween....couldn't resist those memories.

Grace and peace, Becky

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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. 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 callback can be returned by a survivor as close to the type of death you have experienced.



Inclement Weather/National Holiday Policy

With the change in seasons 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.mhagc.org or feel free to e-mail, text or call Alice, Courtney or me if you are uncertain of our meetings. Becky's cell is 864-616-9413, Alice's cell is 864-884-3283 and Courtney's cell is 704-402-6601.

Gentle Closings: 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!



*“Leave no trace upon the earth
but the footprints of your compassion
and the echoes of your laughter.”*

Ann Oshiro-Kauwe

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

Bringing wellness home.....B4Stage4



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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, and home visits are offered as needed.

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 encourage you to keep going to meetings to help others after you 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. Or call one of our facilitators directly (see phone #s on page 9.)