



Journey to Healing

A Newsletter for Survivors of Suicide

First Quarter 2015

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Suicide Grief

Your grief after a suicide may feel quite different than the grief you have felt after other kinds of losses. Usually the death of someone from suicide has a much more intense and long lasting impact. When someone you know dies from suicide you struggle with complex social, emotional and cultural issues that can make your grief overwhelming and isolating. You will experience changes and challenges in your personal relationships, your spiritual beliefs, and in your concentration and memory. Your emotions and general health may also become unsettled and fragile. Suicide grief affects all realms of your life.

Things to Know about Suicide

- No one thing, person or event leads a person to choose suicide. In your grief you will search desperately for a reason why your loved one chose to die. It is important that you understand that this act was the result of many factors in this person's life and not one particular event or discussion. People who choose suicide feel completely hopeless about themselves and their lives. Suicide is seen as the only release from a life full of chaos and despair.

- Often the person who chooses suicide has withdrawn from friends and family. Sometimes once a decision about suicide has been made the person seems preoccupied, remote or even really happy. In the days before the suicide you

may have felt out of touch with this person, or had trouble reaching her, either in person or by phone. It is as though life stops before it stops.

- The suicide note only reflects the person's state of mind at the time that it was written. Suicide notes are generally left to: identify or explain the person's level of despair; accuse or blame someone else; give away personal belongings; alleviate any responsibility that others might assume; or say goodbye. If there was a suicide note you may hope that it will explain why this happened. However, the person's

frame of mind when he composed the note doesn't necessarily reflect his frame of mind when he developed a plan for suicide and followed through with it.

- People who die from suicide are not necessarily mentally ill or from abusive and neglectful families. Although the person's mental and social stability is something that friends and family may question intensely, it is important not to assume that because the person chose suicide, she was unloved or 'crazy'. People who die from suicide are more likely to be perfectionists who are highly critical of themselves and have low self-esteem. They often fear that they will not be able to cope with a major life change or feel that they cannot live up to their own, or others' expectations.

Your feelings

- You may experience intense anger. This may be directed at people whom you perceive to have been negligent: such as counsellors, friends, doctors, and yourself. Survivors of suicide often feel in hindsight that they missed or ignored some earlier call for help or warning signal. It is common to feel angry with the person who died: it seems now that he did not value his life and your relationship as you did. You may feel angry that he just gave up or that he didn't consider how devastating this loss would be for the people who cared about him.

- You may feel tremendous guilt and blame. You may feel that something you did or didn't do contributed to the despair that she felt when she chose suicide. If your relationship with the person who died was conflicted you may accuse yourself of being the cause of her unhappiness. Or you may have been aware of this person's history of mental illness or risky behavior, such as previous suicide attempts, drug or alcohol abuse, but given up trying to help her for reasons of your own health or happiness.

- You may feel ashamed or judged by others. Many people think that people who die from suicide must have been mentally ill or from dysfunctional families. Although this isn't generally true, some people may still be critical of you and your family. Others, who genuinely care about you, may stay away because they don't know what to say or how to be helpful.

- You may fear that other friends or family will choose suicide. When someone you care about makes a choice to die in this way, you may worry that other people in distress will follow suit. 'Copycat' suicides have been a concern in schools and other close communities.

- You may feel betrayed or abandoned by the person who died. You may have thought that she was living a normal and reasonably happy life. Now, you wonder whether your entire relationship was based on false beliefs and lies. You may feel hurt and wonder why she didn't share her troubles with you.

- You will experience deep sadness. The feeling that someone you cared about felt hopeless and desperate enough to believe that suicide was his only option will magnify your sadness.

- You may feel relief. If your relationship with her was difficult and draining, part of you may be relieved that she will no longer be causing you distress.

- You may feel peace or acceptance. If she had been suffering for some time and it seemed as though nothing would ever improve, you may understand her desperation and her decision.

Your thoughts

- You may make up false stories about what happened. You may want to say that the person had a heart attack or was in an accident. This dishonesty may be because of feelings of shame, discomfort or fear about the reactions of other people. Rather than protecting yourself and others, this denial keeps everyone silent and isolated. Family and friends may have some intuition or suspicion that the death was a suicide, or they will hear rumors. Telling a false story will only make your grief, and that of others, more conflicted and prolonged.
- You will be flooded with WHY? Questions. You may have an insatiable need to examine every possible reason why your loved one chose suicide. You are trying to answer unanswerable questions, trying to understand how he could have chosen this traumatic final way to solve his problems. You may find that the why questions replay over and over in your head so that you are unable to focus on anything else.
- You may be haunted by thoughts about the death. Whether you actually witnessed the death or not, you may find that your mind keeps replaying the moments before, during and after it took place. You may be thinking about the things that you saw, smelled or heard, or you could be imagining these details. You may even want to go to the place of death and try to 'act out' the series of events that occurred. Horrible as this process is, it is normal and purposeful. Your mind is trying to understand, accept and desensitize you to what happened. You may also be trying to find a way to feel connected with the person who died or to say goodbye.

Your relationships you may find it difficult to be with other people for a number of reasons

- Your friends and family may be uncomfortable with your grief and so they either stay away or try to cheer you up. You may think that they couldn't possibly understand what you feel and you are finding it very difficult to talk about this loss. The absence of the friends or family, who can be with you, may feel like another loss.
- Your grief may be so intense that you are distracted by it. It may be impossible for you to focus on anything other than this death. When you are with others you may find that thoughts, feelings and sensations about the death invade most of your interactions with others. •You may find it difficult to be with other people because you think or detect that they blame you or your family. Some people may unjustly blame you out of ignorance or their own suffering. They may be trying to make sense of the death and wanting to deflect the blame from themselves. It may have been easier to make you the scapegoat than face their own feelings of guilt. Also, if you are blaming yourself, you may wrongly assume that other people are too.
- You may find it difficult to be with other people because you doubt your ability to see relationships as they really are. When someone close to you dies from suicide, you may suffer from low self-esteem and a lack of confidence in your own judgment. You may fear that you will experience more hurt if you continue to love and care about people.

Your spiritual or religious beliefs

- You may fear that suicide will be unforgivable in the eyes of God or your religious community. Consequently you may worry about her salvation and fear that your religious or other spiritual community will also reject or condemn you because of this death.
- You may find yourself wondering what, if anything, you believe. Any spiritual beliefs or values that you previously had may no longer feel true. Anger and disbelief may make it difficult for you to find

comfort in the spiritual or religious values that you once held. You may be troubled by the lack of solace you find in the words of God or other spiritual mentors.

- You may have questions about the value and meaning of life. When someone you know dies by suicide, confidence in your own perceptions and ideals can be deeply shattered. You may wonder what your purpose in this life really is and doubt your ability to meet future challenges.

- You may consider suicide. The intensity and suffering of your present grief may drive you to question whether your own life, which now includes the trauma of this loss, is worth living. You will question how you could endure so many struggles when it seems these feelings will always be there. If you are feeling suicidal it is important that you get help immediately.

Your body

- You may experience physical pain or discomfort related to how the person died. For example, if the person died after an overdose you may feel nauseous and light-headed. You also may experience physical symptoms that are characteristic of normal grief. This may include: nausea, headache, stomachache, chest pains, shortness of breath or general weakness and fatigue.

Strategies for Living with Suicide Grief

- Gather the facts as soon as you are ready. Because it is likely that you will go over and over the suicide in your mind, it is important that you have as much concrete information as possible. It may be necessary to talk with emergency response personnel, the police or the coroner. You may want to ask a friend to be with you when you hear this information.

- Be honest about what happened. Explore what you believe to be true about your relationship with the person who died and the reasons for his death.

- Identify people with whom you are able to be honest and vulnerable. Usually these are people who won't grill you for details or overload you with their own opinions or 'quick fixes'. You may find that friends who can share in the questions rather than give you their answers are most helpful now.

- Talk with others who have experienced a suicide loss. Sometimes others who have been there or are working through similar tragedies are able to understand your sorrow and aren't threatened by your volatility. Check out whether there is a support group for suicide griever in your area. You may also search the Internet for relevant discussions groups.

- Go over and over the why questions, the suicide note and anything else, as often as you need to. Sometimes writing these questions and the answers that you discover in a journal is helpful. You will come to a time when the partial answers are enough.

- You may want to see a counsellor. Sometimes talking things through with an experienced professional helps. A counsellor will provide you with the safety, support and information that you need to fully explore and understand what is happening for you.

- Accept your feelings. Find helpful ways to express them.

- Understand that your grief will be intense and sustained. You are struggling to come to terms with a devastating death and its impact on your life. There is no 'quick fix' that will lessen or speed up your grief journey.

•It is important that you 'get real' about guilt and blame. When someone dies in this way you will struggle with issues of responsibility, guilt and blame. It might be helpful to make three lists: one about what the person who died is responsible for, another about what you are responsible for and another about what others are responsible for. You may want to share these lists with a friend who is able to be more objective. The part that you feel responsible for is the only part that you can do anything about.

•Find a way to atone for mistakes that you made. Even if you cannot undo the mistakes that you've made, you can change your behavior and ask for forgiveness. You may find it helpful to pray to God, or talk with a spiritual or religious leader in your community. You may also want to ask the person who died for forgiveness by writing a letter or doing something that you believe she would accept as a symbol of your regret or remorse about what you've done.

•When you are ready, forgive yourself. If you did make mistakes you must ask yourself how long and hard you deserve to be punished. Is this self-inflicted punishment serving any useful purpose or does it only keep you stuck in painful patterns? It may be helpful to create a ritual of self forgiveness that helps you to let go of your guilt.

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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. *Incident Weather Policy: If the weather is severe, your well-being is our main concern. Please watch for e-mails, call CRISISline at 864-271-8888 or check the website of Mental Health America at MHAGC.org for cancellations. Please stay alert with these notices and take care of yourself.*



Inspirational

During February we celebrate Valentine's Day, and this can be a very painful day for people grieving the loss of a loved one from suicide. The symbol for this day is the heart, which is a symbol for the love that people have for one another. If someone is grieving the death of a spouse, partner, fiancée, parent, child or anyone else for whom there is a bond of love, this is an especially painful day because there is not a Valentine's card from this special person. Survivors can feel betrayed because of the death from suicide.

Survivors often express that there was so much love between them and the loved one who completed suicide. Survivors query whether their love was not enough to satisfy the longings of this loved one. I don't think that this loved one completed suicide because they did not feel loved or that they did not love those who are left behind. There is absolutely no connection between the love that existed between these people and the fact that someone completes suicide. The act of suicide is completely separated from love. Suicide is all about the pain that this loved one was experiencing at one particular time in their life. People feel loved by the many acts of kindness that are showered on them by family and friends. Unfortunately, the love that exists between people has limitations and one of those limitations is that this love is incapable of penetrating into an individual's soul and healing them from their inner pain. One question to be asked is whether love has the possibility of healing someone from the ravages of cancer? Someone who is in the final stages of cancer cannot be healed by the loved ones who are surrounding them trying to comfort them as they are making the transition from the here to the hereafter. Granted, there is sometimes a lot of time from the moment the cancer is discovered to the time when the cancer is in the final stages of ending this loved one's life. There may be time to make amends and say all of those things that need to be said before the person departs from this life. The point is that all of the love in the world is not capable of healing this loved one from cancer. The illness takes its course and ends with the death of this loved one.

Mental illness progresses like any other type of illness. Sometimes those suffering from mental illness die from this disease. It catches survivors by surprise due to the fact that their loved one may never have expressed the depth of the pain that they were experiencing. This could have been due to the fact that those suffering souls might have been confused as to what was going on within their souls or their minds. They sought relief from their pain. They may have tried different tactics to relieve the pain that was engulfing them. Sometimes there can be respite from the pain and life may return to normal. Sometimes people suffering from mental illness seek the help of a professional such as a psychiatrist, psychologist or a clinical social worker. Medications might be prescribed and there may be relief from the pain. Sometimes there is success with such an intervention and the person is able to live a relatively normal life. There are times when the pain returns and ravages the mind and soul of the person. The person struggles with this illness and with their lives. They are seeking an end to their pain. All along they are trying to live as normal a life as possible –going to work and interacting with family and friends and all of the other activities that go with life. They continue to be distracted by the

pain of their illness. It keeps getting worse and more severe and there seems to be no end to the pain, until finally this suffering soul finds that the only way out of this pain is to end their life. Could the outcome have been different? Yes, it is very possible that the outcome could have been different if the person stayed the course of treatment or remained on the medication that was prescribed. However, there is no guarantee that the outcome would be different. There are certain forms of mental illness that are so virulent that death is the only answer and the only respite. For those who complete suicide that was their view of their life. There was no intervention or treatment that was going to solve the pain or end the pain. For those suffering souls, death was the only answer to their pain. They wanted to rid their lives of this inexorable and excruciating pain. The love of their families and friends had no bearing on their decision to end their lives. It is all about the pain in their lives that would not let up. They literally could not bear another minute of their pain.

I recently read an inscription that was on a headstone in an Irish cemetery, "Death leaves a heartache no one can heal. Love leaves a memory that no one can steal." I think that quote says it all. That is one of the reasons that I think rituals are so important during the grieving process. Rituals are ways to remember this loved one who found life too painful to be able to continue living. They were people who were loved deeply and are sorely missed. Their deaths had nothing to do with not being loved. Their deaths were a result of experiencing pain that was literally unbearable. They knew that they were loved by family and friends but this love was incapable of being a conduit whereby their pain would be assuaged. With death they were freed from the pain that had imprisoned them and would continue to imprison them until they broke the bonds and were released of their torture by dying. Those who complete suicide had great love for their families and friends. Again, their suicide is not an indicator that they did not love those close to them. The love that they had for their loved ones was incapable of stamping out the pain that had ravaged their minds, souls and brains.

As we begin another year, we want to wish each and every one of you the best in 2015. I also want to assure all of you of my thoughts and prayers on a daily basis during my quiet time and I encourage you to do the same for each other – especially for those people who have recently joined our family.

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"Now death has shaken your faith, 'Why?' 'Why must life be one of sorrow?' 'Why?' There are no pat answers. No one completely understands the mystery of death. Even if the question were answered, would your pain be eased, your loneliness less terrible?

'Why' may be more than a question. It may be an agonizing cry for a heart-breaking loss, an expression of distress, disappointment, bewilderment, alienation, and betrayal. There is no answer that bridges the chasm of irreparable separation. There is no satisfactory response for an unresolvable dilemma. Not all questions have complete answers. Unanswered 'Why's' are part of life. The search may continue but the real question might be 'How [do I] pick up the pieces and go on living as meaningful as possible?'"

Rabbi Earl Grollman



*R*eflections by Becky

Bearing the Special Grief of Suicide...

The suicide of someone you care about is a devastating tragedy. It happens in the best of families and to the best of people, shattering the lives of the shocked survivors.

In many ways, suicide is one of the most difficult deaths to mourn. As you mourn the death of your friend or loved one, you probably feel a sense of betrayal. You have invested years of caring, loyalty, and patience with the deceased. Suddenly you are abandoned and rejected. Perhaps you have had such thought as: "How could she do this to me?" "Couldn't he think about the children? Weren't we enough for him?"

Because you are bewildered by what has happened, you search for whys. A message left may help interpret what went on in the person's mind before the suicide. Yet the painful questions remain: "Why did he do it?" "Was she angry at me?"

You may also be filled with guilt, for suicide seems like not just a loss but also an accusation. You may feel that somehow you did not love enough, or that your relationship was not good enough. You keep rehearsing all the "if onlys:" "Why didn't I realize how sick he was?" "If only I had been home on time."

Recovery from the suicide of someone close is a monumental task, for the process of mending a broken heart is painful and slow. The road to recovery requires you to accept your feelings, to draw from your inner resources, and to develop positive attitudes toward the past,

present, and future. The journey of healing starts with small steps leading from darkness to hope, from death to a renewed commitment to life.

Learn to live with unanswered questions. We do have some clues why people choose suicide. We know that suicide is often the response to some kind of loss; to real or perceived failure; to physical, psychological, or spiritual pain. The person's problem becomes the only thing that exists, and he or she cannot conceive that life will ever become any better.

But even knowing all this intellectually, you can still feel very confused emotionally. Behind your questions is a broken heart that can't be healed with simple answers. Struggling through the not knowing is extremely difficult. Your whys may never be answered, the puzzle never resolved. People who commit suicide often take with them the mystery of their life and death. You must gradually let go of the whys, accept what has happened, and go on living.

Allow time for bad memories. In the early stages of grief, survivors often experience playback of the suicide scene in their thoughts or in nightmares. You may feel robbed of pleasant memories and oppressed by this replay of the details surrounding the final event. You need to own and deal with these negative images before you can get in touch with your good memories. As the hurt gradually becomes less intense, positive feelings will surface and become more frequent and longer lasting.

Acknowledge your feelings of anger. Instinctively, survivors tend to reject the way their loved one chose to end his or her life. They may resent the deceased for checking out of the

relationship on his or her own terms. They may also resent God for having allowed this to happen, or others for not preventing it. Anger is an investment. We never get angry at someone we do not care about. Anger, therefore, is not the opposite of love but a dimension of it - a sign of a love deeply wounded. Your anger can help you survive and reenter life or it can become destructive: It depends on how you channel it. You might try discussing your anger with an understanding friend. Or talking about it with God. Or writing a letter expressing it to the deceased. Ultimately, anger needs to be healed through a willingness to forgive.

Turn guilt into forgiveness. Most survivors blame themselves for what they did or did not do. They have the sense of something left unfinished, something suddenly interrupted. They find it hard to let go of their rescue fantasies. Guilt accompanies many of our experiences of powerlessness and imperfection. It can paralyze and demoralize us, or we can transform it into self-forgiveness and a greater capacity for loving those that are still around us. Healing takes place when you realize that you cannot judge your yesterday with the knowledge of today, that love alone may not be enough to save another's life, that there are limits to your power and responsibility, that you were not the only influence in the life of the deceased.

Accept the loneliness. Loneliness is the price we pay for loving. When a loved one dies, a part of us dies too. To some degree, the loneliness may last a lifetime, because no one can ever replace that person. An anniversary, a place, a song, a flower may bring back the memories, the aching pain. We feel the keen disappointment of not having that special person there to share in the family's changes, surprises, and sorrows. Loneliness can help you realize the depths of your love. From it, you can learn to become more sensitive to other's losses and to turn to God, who is always there.

"The person who completes suicide dies once. Those left behind die a thousand deaths, trying to relive those terrible moments and understand."

Draw from your own spiritual resources. You may be struggling with questions like "Will

God forgive her, or has he condemned her to hell?" While the act of suicide continues to be objectively wrong, contemporary theologians emphasize that individual circumstances may make it subjectively guiltless. Those who take their life may be so disturbed that they act compulsively; their perception of reality may be so distorted that their responsibility is greatly reduced. Only God knows what is in the heart of each person. Obviously, it does not take your grief away simply believing that God will view your loved one's action compassionately. But faith will help you live with your loss and grieve it well. And it will help you discover redeeming values in the midst of your suffering. Trust that God will sustain you through the stages of your bereavement.

Rebuild your self-esteem. The suicide of a friend or a loved one is a terrible blow to one's self-image. Rationally or irrationally, the survivors may feel judged by the community for having failed. They may feel that the suicide is a disgrace to the family or the school or even the community. Some have a strong urge to escape to a place where they are not known. And, unfortunately, the shame many survivors feel keeps them from acknowledging the suicide and talking about it - an important part of the recovery process.

After the shattering experience of a suicide, you need to pick up the pieces, reaffirm your commitment to life, and rebuild confidence in yourself. Be patient with yourself. Remember that time, by itself, does not heal. It is how you use the time that's important. When you can stare less frequently at the past and can recognize the value of small steps, you develop a framework within which the passage of time makes the loss not easier, but at least less hard.

Reach out to others. You can choose to let your broken-ness defeat you, or you can decide to get up and get going. Once you have the courage to place your hurt, your sensitivity, and your compassion at the service of others, you have discovered the key to help yourself. For when pain is used to reach out to others, it becomes creative and transforming love.

Take heart. Suicide leaves deep scars on the survivors. But there is no turning back: You

cannot change what has happened. You can, however, change your outlook - from backward to forward, from death to life.

Those who have experienced the suicide of a loved one can learn to let go of blaming themselves or the deceased for their unhappiness. They can learn to live for themselves, and to take responsibility for their own future. They can emerge from their sorrow with a profound appreciation for the solidarity they have experienced with others, and with a deep awareness of the beauty and fragility of life. And they can begin to see life not so much as a problem to be solved, but as a mystery to be discovered each day.

Grace and peace,

Becky

Beyond Surviving: Suggestions for Survivors

1. Know you can survive; you may not think so, but you can.
2. Struggle with "why" it happened until you no longer need to know "why" or until YOU are satisfied with partial answers.
3. Know you may feel overwhelmed by the intensity of your feelings but that all your feelings are normal.
4. Anger, guilt, confusion, forgetfulness are common responses. You are not crazy, you are in mourning.
5. Be aware you may feel appropriate anger at the person, at the world, at God, at yourself. It's okay to express it.
6. You may feel guilty for what you think you did or did not do. Guilt can turn into regret, through forgiveness.
7. Having suicidal thoughts is common. It does not mean that you will act on those thoughts.
8. Remember to take one moment or one day at a time.
9. Find a good listener with whom to share. Call someone if you need to talk.
10. Give yourself time to heal.

11. Remember, the choice was not yours. No one is the sole influence on another's life.

12. Be aware of the pain in your family and friends.

13. Be patient with yourself and others who may not understand.

14. Set your own limits and learn to say no.

15. Steer clear of people who want to tell you what or how to feel.

16. Know that there are support groups that can be helpful, such as Survivors of Suicide groups.

By Iris M. Bolton

I was shocked that I did not die from grief. And I know now that I will not die from grief because I choose not to. I may run--or shake wildly--or lie paralyzed on the ground for a while, but I will not ultimately succumb. Whatever gives us an increase sense of control--whether it be love or faith or cognitive coping--seems to mobilize our self-healing system.

C.S. Lewis,
A Grief Observed



The Journey to Healing newsletter contains articles about suicide grief, articles specific to the suicide death of a spouse, of a child, of a parent, of a sibling, of a loved one or of a partner as well as articles about coping after a suicide loss. Current and past issues of The Journey can be read online at mhagc.org

Mental Health America of Greenville County
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Bringing wellness home.....

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.

