



# Journey to Healing

*A newsletter for survivors of suicide*

**Holiday Edition 2011**

Journey to Healing is a newsletter for survivors of suicide. Survivors are those of us whose lives have been changed by the completion of suicide by someone we knew. Journey to Healing is intended to let survivors know that you are not alone. If you would like to contribute an article or story for this newsletter, please send it to: Becky Kay, c/o Mental Health America of Greenville County 429 North Main Street, Suite 2, Greenville, SC 29601.

Survivors of Suicide Support Group – this group meets the 1<sup>st</sup> Tuesday 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.

## ***Grieving During the Holidays***

*Grieving during the Holidays is difficult....especially the first Holiday cycle after the passing of a loved one.*

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

Familiar songs, once so comforting, may catch in your throat or bring tears to your eyes. All this happens against a backdrop of significant questions you may find yourself asking: What exactly is happening to me? Can I possibly survive this, and do I even want to? How long will this turmoil last? Is what I am feeling normal? Am I losing touch with my sanity?

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

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

Keeping in mind there has never been a loss precisely like yours, there are still some general guidelines bereaved people have found helpful through the years. I will propose twelve of them. I hope you will treat them as suggestions rather than as prescriptions. Use them as ideas you can expand upon. Shape them to fit your distinct circumstances and to serve your personal needs.

Above all else, remember that others, *many* others, have faced something similar to what you're facing right now. They have learned what it is like to endure and to survive and often even to grow through their experience. What they have learned is what you can learn, too. The ways they have persevered are ways you can adopt as well.

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

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

When you're facing your first holiday without the one who has been so close to you, a good starting point is with this awareness: chances are it will be a painful time. You may wonder how you will ever make it through. This may or may not comfort you, but it is true: your pain is a sign you have been blessed to draw very close to another. You have loved and you have been loved. The hurt you feel is an indication of your wonderful humanness, your sensitivity, your openness. It is a proof that another has touched you deeply, even as you have touched them. While



you may wish you did not hurt as much as you do, you dare not forget that your pain is none other than the result of your joy. Even so, you may feel you would like to bypass the entire holiday period and not participate in it at all. That's a common response. During the final two months of the calendar year, however, holiday reminders are visible almost everywhere you look and audible in almost everything you hear. It's impossible to avoid the impact of this season. The energy you would spend evading what is going on all around you will be more creatively spent adapting to the reality of what this particular season holds for you.

Similarly, it is probably unwise to pretend everything is perfectly normal, and that this year's festivities will be no different than any other years. The death of this important person in your life has created a conspicuous void. You may feel that, of course, any time of the year. But this is especially the case during the holidays. You expect to include those you love in your holiday celebrations -- with the cards you write, the gifts you give, the meals you share, the rituals you re-enact. The Loved One who has died, however, cannot be included, at least in the way you wish. And you're reminded of this time after time in the way families are portrayed on television, in the way loved ones are referred to in holiday songs, in the idealistic images everyone carries inside about these special times.

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

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

You may be learning what many others have learned: some people will try to hurry you through your grief. Some may insist on continually cheering you up. Others may give you advice about what you should and shouldn't do or how you should and shouldn't feel. Whatever else you do this holiday time, do your best to claim your own feelings. As much as you are able, own up to the fact that something terribly important has happened in your life, that this naturally causes a reaction within you. You're not a robot -- you're a responsive human being who is capable of all sorts of emotions. No one else will feel what you do, in the same way, at the same time, with the same intensity. But some of the general feelings people in your situation often report include these:

\*Sadness. It's sad to think about what you've lost, what can never happen again, what you'll have to learn to live without. It's doubly sad to experience this at such a happy time of the year.

\*Depression. More than feeling glum, you may feel desolate or despairing. You may feel depleted of all energy, listless and alone. You may doubt you'll ever feel any better.

\*Anxiety. You may feel nervous and jittery, ill at ease and full of uncertainty. Fear. You may be afraid of how you'll cope, what you'll do, even if you'll survive.

\*Anger. Being mad is a common response -- mad at people who don't understand you or support you, angry about how the death happened and who was involved, even provoked at the Loved One who died. You may be upset with yourself, or with God, or with the whole world.

\*Guilt. You may dwell upon what you did or didn't do while the Loved One was alive. You may feel guilty you're living or that you have moments of happiness in the midst of your grief.

\*Apathy. You may find that you experience almost no feelings at all. You may feel numb and impassive. Or you may feel confused and disoriented. There are many other feelings, of course: relief, respect, pride, joy, compassion, and love all come to mind as well. Whatever it is you're feeling these days, remind yourself that feelings are normal, whatever they happen to be. They're a sign that you're human, that you care deeply, and that whatever you feel today, you can feel differently tomorrow. Your feelings seldom lead you astray. They usually lead you to yourself.

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

There is much in your life, of course, that has moved beyond your command. The loss you've experienced and the resulting inescapable changes have robbed you of a power you may have taken for granted. Yet there are some actions you can take and some decisions you can make that are within your authority. Begin to take control of your life in specific ways, even if those ways seem small. If the death you've experienced isn't too recent, this may be a good time to evaluate the holiday traditions you've established through the years. Which ones are meaningful, ones you want to keep? Which ones have outgrown their usefulness? Which ones might you forego for a year or two, and which ones are so important to you that you *must* perform them, even if it's hard to do? Which ones can you adapt to fit this year's circumstances?

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

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

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

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

### *Coping with Suicide Loss: Handling the Holidays*

Do what you think will be comfortable for you. Remember, you can always choose to do things differently next time.

♥Think about your family's holiday traditions. Consider whether you want to continue them or create some new ones.

♥Remember that family members may feel differently about continuing to do things the way they've been done in the past. Try to talk openly with each other about your expectations.

♥Consider whether you want to be with your family and friends for the holiday, or whether it would be more healing for you to be by yourself or go away (this year).

♥Keep in mind that sometimes the anticipation of an event can be more difficult than the event itself.

♥If you find it comforting to talk about your loved one, let your family and friends know that; tell them not to be afraid to mention your loved one's name.

♥Some survivors find it comforting to acknowledge the birthday of their loved ones by gathering with his/her friends and family; others prefer to spend it privately.

♥Some survivors have found the following ritual helpful for a variety of occasions: *Light two candles, and then blow one out. Explain that the extinguished candle represents those we've lost, while the one that continues to burn represents those of us who go on despite our loss and pain. Simply leave the one candle burning (you can put it off to one side) for the duration of the holiday meal or event. The glowing flame acts as a quiet reminder of those who are missing.*

♥Above all, bear in mind that there is no "right" way to handle holidays, anniversaries, or birthdays. You and your family may decide to try several different approaches before finding one that feels best for you.



“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*~~



## *Within Our Circle – A Broken Heart Still Beats*

### *Write Yourself a Script*

Suicide survivors often find themselves faced with uncomfortable questions from outsiders. It will help if you can anticipate some of these and write yourself a “script” of answers that you can mentally keep ready. For example, when someone probes for details of the suicide that you are not comfortable discussing with them, you might simply say, “I don’t really want to talk about it right now,” or “I’m sure we can find something happier to discuss.” When new acquaintances learn of your loss, they may ask, “How did they die?” You should have no reservations about saying plainly, “They took their own life,” or a straightforward, “They completed suicide.” But if this is a casual acquaintance that you wish to deny this information, you would be equally justified in saying, “They suffered a long illness,” which may very much be the truth. The more you fear these kinds of inquiries, the better a prepared “script” of answers will serve you.

We, as a support group, must come together to help one another. In sharing your pain, you give me permission to share mine with you. To talk about your loved one who completed suicide, I can talk about mine....and know that even though our grief is different...it is the same on so many levels.

We must bond together and have our script ready when people ask questions we are comfortable or uncomfortable with, so don’t be ashamed to do this. You are not alone – you have everyone in the group standing beside you and with you. Be a part of our group as we learn and grow together through the most horrific loss there can be – it isn’t easy, but it can be accomplished, and together we can stand against the wind.

Make an entry on your 2012 calendar and be a part of our group the first Tuesday of each month at 7:00 – 8:30 PM at St. Michael. Your soul will welcome the balm of healing that is given.



*Something quite unexpected has happened. It came this morning early. For various reasons, not in themselves at all mysterious, my heart was lighter than it had been for many weeks... And suddenly, at the very moment when, so far, I mourned [her] least, I remembered her best. Indeed it was something [almost] better than memory; an instantaneous, unanswerable impression. To say it was like a meeting would be going too far. Yet there was that in it which tempts one to use those words. It was as though the lightening of the sorrow removed a barrier.*

*~~C.S. Lewis~~*



## *Reflections by Becky*

I asked those who had gathered what emotions they feel during the holidays after the loss of their loved one to suicide. Heads nodded as we ticked through a list that included fear, anxiety and loneliness. Then I asked if anyone feels a sense of loss while the world bustles around them. Hands shot up.

We have these expectations that everyone is supposed to be happy over the holidays. We continued talking, hoping to help those who have recently suffered the death of a loved one learn to cope with their loss during the holiday season. But a death doesn't have to be recent for the pain to resurface - especially during the holidays, when advertisements showcase gleaming smiles and happy families.

One of the things that happens during the holidays is the culture tells you about the importance of family. And when there's a loss, simple things - a family tradition, favorite Christmas carol, and a glimpse of someone who resembles the person who died - can renew the sadness.

You never really get over grief. Grief doesn't go away. The intensity lessens, but only after time. But there's not specific time. However, there are things that can help when dealing with grief during the holidays.

Start with taking care of yourself physically, which includes getting a good night's sleep, exercising and eating well. They're all seemingly little things, but have a big impact on how you think, feel and your psychological state. Grieve in your own way. And don't let anyone tell you how to grieve or thrust a "get over it" timeline on you. Make future plans, a trip, for instance, that you can look forward to. On the traditions and holiday front here are some tips to help with coping. Create a new tradition or do an old one differently. If shopping conjures up difficult memories, shop online or from a catalog. If music helps, listen to it. If it hurts, turn it off. Speak the person's name, share a memory and have a toast in their honor. Setting a place at the table can honor the person, too. Don't pretend that you're not feeling that loss.

But while remembering is good, a remembrance gesture can turn into a problem if, for instance, no one is allowed to sit in the favorite chair of a loved one who has died. Don't grieve alone. It breeds isolation and loneliness. Instead, talk with friends and family. Give yourself permission to talk about your grief. Seek professional and psychological help when you have intense feelings of guilt, your own suicide or deep feelings of worthlessness. Be guided by the reality that there is no right or wrong way to celebrate the holidays after a loved one has died. Ask yourself what you really need this Christmas to balance the rest of your life. Here are some general tips for you to consider in remembering the life of your loved one who is no longer:

- Living tree – purchase a living Christmas tree and plant it in your yard after the holiday season to commemorate a loved one's memory.
- Offer a toast with friends and family, toast the loved one.
- Light a candle – a memorial candle, extinguished before bed, can honor a loved.
- Flower pot – flowers, a symbol of love, can honor a loved one. Place an arrangement in a special place.
- Silence – set aside a special time and place to think about your loved one and rest your heavy heart. It could be a prayer or a wish of love.

May your days be wrapped in a blanket of love, Becky

May your days be wrapped in a blanket of love, *Becky*





## *Inspirational*

### *The Stewardship of Pain*

Suffering is the undercurrent and bedrock of life, the Buddha said. Life is adventure and challenge and community. To live is to taste and to touch, to smell and see and listen to the good things of the earth and to rejoice in them. It is to make friends and to be a friend. It is to create. It is to search for God if you are religiously inclined and, if you are not, to search for something in place of God to give meaning and purpose and value to your scattered days. But you become an adolescent at the moment when you begin to understand that what the Buddha meant is that beneath all of this, inextricably woven into the rich fabric of all of this, there are not just the sad things that happen one by one as they do in childhood, but there is sadness itself – the *lachrymae rerum* as Lucretius puts it, the “tears of things,” the tears that all things can bring to your eyes when you once realize that dissolution and loss are to be the end of all of them, including the happiest.

Adolescents are the ones who, whether fourteen years old or eighty years old, are in the process of growing into that knowledge, and, if they are ever to become more or less grown up human beings at last, growing by means of it. There are many ways of dealing with your pain, and perhaps the most tempting of them all is to forget about it, to hide it not just from the world but also from yourself. It is the way of the stoic, the stiff upper lip. . . . the rule is not to let yourself feel it any more than you can help, not to trust anybody with the truth of how it hurts, and maybe most of all not to talk about it, certainly not outside of the family and eventually not even there, not even to yourself.

To bury your pain is a way of surviving your pain and therefore by no means to be dismissed out of hand. It is a way that I venture to say has at one time or another served and continues to serve all of us well. But it is not a way of growing. It is not a way of moving through adolescence into adulthood. If you manage to put behind you the painful things that happen to you as if they never really happened or didn't really matter all that much when they did, then the deepest and most human things you have in you to become are not apt to happen either. . . . I think that [what it means] is that the buried pain in particular and all the other things we tend to bury along with pain, including joy, which tends to get buried too when we start burying things, that the buried life is itself darkness and weeping and gnashing of teeth and the one who casts us into it is no one other than ourselves. To bury your life is to stop growing. . . . To bury your life is to have it wither in the ground and diminish. It is to be deeply alone. It is to be less alive than you were to start with. That may sound harsh and dark and unfair, but it is the way things are. It is the truth.

What we have is essentially what we are, and what we need is essentially each other. The good and faithful servants were not life-buriers, they were life-traders. They did not close themselves off in fear, but opened themselves up in risks and hope. The trading of joy comes naturally, because it is of the nature of joy to proclaim and share itself. Joy cannot contain itself, as we say. It overflows. And so it should properly be with pain as well. . . . we are never more alive to life than when it hurts – never more aware both of our own powerlessness to save ourselves and of at least the possibility of a power beyond ourselves to save us and heal us if we can only open ourselves to it. We are never more aware of our need for each other, never more in reach of each other, if we can only bring ourselves to reach out and let ourselves be reached. .

We are never more in touch with life than when life is painful, never more in touch with hope than we are then, if only the hope of another human presence to be with us and for us. Being a good steward of your pain involves all those things, I think. It involves being alive to your life. It involves taking the risk of being open, of reaching out, of keeping in touch with the pain as well as the joy of what happens, because at no time more than at a painful time do we live out of the depths of who we are instead of out of the shallows. There is no guarantee that we will find a pearl in the depths that our pain will have a happy end, or even any end at all, but at least we stand a chance of finding in those depths who we most deeply and humanly are and who others are. At least we stand a chance of finding that we needn't live alone in our pain.

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!

*I wish that there were some wonderful place  
called "The Land of Beginning Again,"  
Where all our mistakes and all our heartaches  
and all our poor selfish grief  
Could be dropped like a shabby old coat at the door  
and never be put on again.*

♥ Louise Fletcher Tarkinton ♥



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Address Correction Requested

*Bringing wellness home.....*