



Journey to Healing

A newsletter for survivors of suicide

Third Quarter 2012

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.

Support Groups

We recently began having two groups for after care for people who have lost loved ones to suicide. These meetings are on the first and third Tuesday of each month. I thought this article would be beneficial to you for the reason we have and should attend support groups.

It can be so powerful to connect with other survivors. And such a relief to be able to talk openly about suicide with people who really understand.

For so many survivors, a crucial part of their healing process is the support and sense of connection they feel through sharing their grief with other survivors. The most common way this sharing occurs is through survivor support groups.

These groups provide a safe place where survivors can share their experiences and support each other.

It is natural to feel a bit unsure about going to your first support group meeting. In *No Time to Say Goodbye*, one facilitator explains what you can expect: We sit in a circle, with each person giving a brief introduction: first name, who was lost, when it was, and how it happened. I then ask the people who are attending for the first time to begin, because they usually have an urgent need to talk. The rest of the group reaches out to them by describing their own experiences and how they are feeling. The new people realize they are not alone with their nightmare. By comparing their situations with others, they also begin to understand that they don't have a monopoly on pain.

Some survivors attend a support group almost immediately, some wait for years; others attend for a year or two and then go only occasionally — on anniversaries, holidays, or particularly difficult days. You may find that it takes a few meetings before you begin to feel comfortable. Or, you may find that the group setting isn't quite right for you, but can still be a useful way to meet one or two fellow survivors who become new, lifelong friends based on the common bond of understanding the pain and tragedy of suicide loss.

For a listing of suicide survivor support groups throughout the country, visit www.mhagc.org or call CRISISline at 864-271-8888. If you need a call-back, someone from the group will return your call and make certain you feel okay about attending the groups at St. Michael Lutheran Church, Augusta Street, Greenville.

We hope you will take this to heart and reach out for help....it does help us get through this horrific maze of grief that we can get stuck in.

SUICIDE 101

Mort Schrag

YOUR CHILD HAS DIEDThe death of anyone you love can be devastating. The death of a child can be overwhelming and incomprehensible; after all, the natural order of things is for children to bury parents, not the reverse. A parent's job is to care for and protect his child. In the final analysis, you and I were unable to do this. In failing to meet expectations we have for ourselves, we feel guilt.

BY SUICIDE: But the death of a child by suicide adds yet another dimension that can dramatically increase the already excruciating pain. Any parent whose child has died may find that people grow distant, almost as if the catastrophe that has engulfed his life is somehow catching, like a virus-borne disease. Even relatives and long-time friends frequently may stay away, saying, in essence, "Don't brush off on me."

Add to this common phenomenon society's abhorrence of suicide (which even in 21st century American remains a great taboo), and the result is a heaping of blame, guilt and shame on the already distraught parent – an action that is not only unenlightened, but in the vast majority of cases, undeserved. Typically, the parent of the suicide asks himself, "Why?" If he understands why, he still wrestles with another demon: "Why this child?" This is enough of a burden without people questioning his role as parent and implying that his behavior somehow led the child to suicide.

GUILT: Many people assume that any survivor of a suicide is a member of a dysfunctional family, someone who must feel intense guilt for doing "bad" things that caused the child to kill himself. Self-righteous, ignorant accusations (more often implied than stated) may strengthen the accuser's perception of himself as an upholder of society's traditional mindset and provide a rationale for his shunning the "guilty" parent. Wracked with pain and anguish, it may take all the energy you can muster, but such an accusation must be confronted honestly. In all likelihood, you loved your child and tried in every way you could to understand what he was going through and to help him. The love and support you offered your child, the doctors and other knowledgeable people you consulted, the efforts you made to intervene – all demonstrate the depth of your love and caring. While it is natural to feel you could have done more, and to wish the outcome had been different, you did your very best. You have nothing to be ashamed of, or to feel guilty about.

"IF ONLY..." If only I had done something differently, the suicide might not have occurred." Every survivor of suicide thinks this, but there is no way of knowing if it is true. You can think of a hundred "if only" scenarios, but they are all expressions of guilt over the unrealistic assumption that you could have been omnipotent and prevented the suicide. Distorted though his thinking may have been the decision to die was your child's. He searched for a solution, but ultimately found the extreme pain of daily living too great to bear.

In most cases, as in those who suffered from major depression or other uncontrollable mental illness, the death was not the fault of the child. And it certainly was not YOUR fault. "If only's" cannot bring back your child, and even if it were possible to go back in time and substitute an "if only" scenario for the actual situation, there probably would have been a similar outcome. Dwelling too long on "if only" can defer the healing process and keep you stalled on the road to recovery. We all do things on occasion that make our child unhappy, but any guilt feelings must be weighed against our many acts of outreach and love. Forgiving yourself is the only way to relieve the guilt and allow healing to begin.

TERMINOLOGY: When a person dies by suicide, it is commonly said that he "committed suicide." This phrase is particularly hurtful to survivors because of the stigma that it perpetuates. People "commit" crimes, deliberately unlawful acts. People are "committed" to institutions because they presumably are unable to care for themselves properly. But our children have not committed crimes they have taken their own lives out of desperation and feelings of hopelessness. It is terrible enough that they died in this way; we should not stand idly by as people add to our burden the sense that our children committed criminal acts. Recently bereaved people often have a great difficulty expressing feelings publicly. But as they regain a degree of strength and start out on the long journey toward recovery, one of the feelings they might want to express is resentment over the additional unwarranted insult contained in the expression "committed suicide"...thus my working "completed suicide" because they chose to complete their lives.

ABOUT MENTAL ILLNESS: Suicide often results from mental illness that, more often than not, was not diagnosed. Society is reluctant to recognize that the brain can become just as sick as any other part of the body. Because a chemical imbalance in the brain is harder to detect than a broken leg or heart disease, this most important underlying cause of suicide frequently goes undetected. A brain disorder is a matter of biochemistry and genetics. It has nothing to do with willpower, how a person was raised, or failure of character. Most people who attempt suicide are not acting on sudden impulse or out of moral or physical frailty. They are neither cowards nor heroes. They are engulfed in an illness that causes unceasing pain, an illness that generates an urge to self-destruction as the only escape from that pain.

Failure of a marriage, a reprimand by a parent, or the loss of a job may trigger suicide, but the most common cause is major depression, the most pervasive form of mental illness. Events in a person's life and his psychological makeup combine with the biology of his brain and his genetic inheritance to create an unmanageable problem; unbearable emotional stress, causing constant pain, with no relief in sight. Of her struggles to overcome depression, my daughter wrote, "It's like trying to draw a rainbow with a black pen."

If depression is diagnosed, it most often can be treated with medication. But when it is not diagnosed, or the patient's body is resistant to medication, the ensuing months of insomnia, anger, lack of appetite, inability to enjoy anything and feelings of unhappiness and futility can lead to giving up hope and to suicide.

Reprinted with permission of the author. Mort Schrag is a retired social worker who lost his daughter Becky to suicide in 1983. He is a founding member of Compassionate Friends of Los Angeles Excerpted from the pamphlet *Recovering From Your Child's Suicide* by Mort Schrag. To obtain a copy contact Mort at sabamortla@aol.com.



Suggestions For Coping As A Family

It is important to sit down together to talk, cry, rage, feel guilty and even to be silent. Communication is the key to survival in the aftermath of suicide. At the same time there should be respect for each person's individual way of handling grief. Some family members will grieve privately, others openly, and others a combination of these two styles. In many ways each family member must grieve alone. Here are some suggestions to help with family grief.

- Pay attention to your family members when you're with them. Let them know that you love them.
- Be sensitive to how other family members feel.
- Listen to what is meant as well as what is being said.
- Accept the other person and what they say.
- Don't give each other the silent treatment. This has many negative effects.
- Sit back and listen. Let other family members have an opportunity to talk.
- Be sure to hug and touch each other at every opportunity.
- If depression, grief, or problems in your family are getting out of control, seek the advice of a counselor.
- Recognize that anniversaries, birthdays and special holidays will be difficult for the family and each member of the family.
- Remember you can't help anyone if you are falling apart. Do what you can do, get help for what you can't do, and trust in the help that God gives.
- Studies show that a bereaved person's self-esteem is extremely low. Survivors should work on their image of themselves and help each family member to think and feel good about themselves.
- If there is a suicide note, discuss as a family what to do with it. If you think it will only bring you pain, then have a private burning and commit its contents to God.



Inspirational

I am sure that many of you read about the recent suicide of a woman who was married into the Kennedy family. I thought that the coverage was very sensitive to the issue of mental illness and suicide. According to the article Mary Kennedy attended Alcoholics Anonymous but alcohol was just part of the problem. Mary also suffered from depression and had talked about suicide in the past. According to friends she had fought with every ounce of her being to overcome the disease of depression. It was not something that she asked for but it was something that she was. Those treating Mary were very well meaning and were trying desperately to find the right mix of medication to help her. They failed. Repeatedly they failed. As so many people who suffer from mental illness, she was unable to do the things that she so desperately wanted to do and she fought with every ounce of her being to beat the illness and in the end the illness won out. Does this sound familiar? I am sure that the same could be said about most if not all those loved ones in the LOSS family who finally found that life had become intolerable.

One of the poignant phrases in the coverage was that “Mary did not ask for the illness. This was something that she was.” No one asks to suffer from the ravages of mental illness but the illness does descend upon people through no fault of their own. People who suffer from this type of pain would do anything to be free from the pain. Such people try various methods to free themselves of this unspeakable nightmare. Sometimes there is a brief respite from the pain and then it starts all over again. The pain becomes the constant recurring theme. People suffering from such pain ask themselves, “Is this pain ever going to stop plaguing me?” And the beat goes on.

People who suffer from this unrelenting pain do get discouraged after repeatedly seeking interventions that repeatedly fail them. There does not seem to be anything that gives these hurting souls relief from the mental torture that engulfs their minds and souls. They feel trapped in this web of pain. They are trapped in the pain. There is no getting out from under the spell of the pain from mental illness. Those of us who do not suffer such agony cannot possibly comprehend the horrors of this unending cycle of pain, pain and more pain. I am sure that people who are in this kind of a cycle get very discouraged at the prospect of life being a continual rollercoaster ride of more of the same. There are countless avenues that are traversed seeking some comfort and help in the seemingly endless search for the end of the pain and the end result is the same –more pain. Who wouldn't get discouraged with a prospect like that? There are thousands of people like Mary Kennedy who open their eyes each morning with the prospect that this day is going to be like the previous day –another day to struggle with this inexorable pain. That is the reason why such people deserve all of our admiration because of the yeoman battles that they face each day. These people are not cowards or selfish. They are heroes because they battle the silent ravages of mental illness.

Unfortunately, there are segments of our society who are of the opinion that people who complete suicide are cowards and selfish. Such people don't have the foggiest idea of the pain that these people have endured. They also don't have a clue of the duration of the pain. Oftentimes people who are plagued with mental illness have struggled with this pain for years. They suffer quietly and to themselves because the world at large does not understand mental illness and the resulting pain. Another reason is that there is a stigma attached to this

type of illness. People are embarrassed or ashamed to come forward and express how much pain they are in because they fear being misunderstood or being subjected to further rejection because of the misperceptions about mental illness. No wonder that they suffer in silence. Who wants to be judged erroneously?

We often hear about certain maladies referred as the “silent killer”. Such conditions are called thus because they sneak up on people without any warning or outward signs. Suicide can appropriately be called a “silent killer”. It does not sneak up on the person who suffers from mental illness. They are well aware of their illness but have chosen to remain silent because of the obvious reasons stated above. In the vast number of completed suicides survivors had no idea that their loved ones were in such desperate straits that they wanted to die. These deaths come as a complete surprise to the survivors. Mental illness has become a silent killer to the survivors.

An important lesson to be learned is that none of us knows the pain that people carry in their souls. It behooves us to be gentle with the people that we encounter on a daily basis because we don't know what anyone is struggling within the confines of their souls. Unfortunately, people are reluctant to share mental pain with other people because they don't want to be misunderstood or misjudged. The world needs to be more understanding and more gentle because of the silent suffering some people endure and sometimes this silent suffering becomes the silent killer. Unfortunately, it happens way too often and leaves a wake of suffering and pain and questions in the lives of those surviving a completed suicide.

Always, always, remember there is help and someone to listen – if you need our help, reach out to SOS – we are here from all points of life to be of help to you through this horrific loss.



Reminder: *Don't forget that we are now meeting twice a month – the first and third Tuesday of each month from 7:00 – 8:30 PM at St. Michael Lutheran Church. Mark your calendar and help us spread the word to those who may not know this. The first Tuesday we will meet in the Green Room and the third Tuesday we will have someone at the same door and we will meet upstairs. We hope this will bring more comfort and encouragement to all of you, especially the newer members who have just joined our group. You are encouraged to attend both groups to get the most help as you travel this difficult journey. You will have different facilitators at each meeting, so you can meet and here stories from people who have traveled this road and regained strength to reach out and find the gifts and imperfect peace that comes only from a loss to suicide.*

Also remember that we are available to talk if you wish a call back ~ this is particularly helpful to newly bereaved people and families.

You are held close and we hope to see you at both meetings.



TO whom shall we turn in our sorrow? We have many choices and need different kinds of comfort and reassurance at different times. Sometimes we need other people. Sometimes we need our own solitude. And sometimes the world of nature speaks a healing word. Seasons follow upon one another and return – with new leaves, new blossoms. Water is drawn up into the sky becomes clouds, and then returns to us as rain and snow to fill our rivers and lakes. Stars sprinkle the sky in discernible patterns, though they are light-years away. Something is going on here that speaks of a wisdom greater than we know. The breath of the Creator is all around us, wrapping us in warmth and life...” O Great Spirit, whose voice I hear in the winds, and whose breath gives life to all of the world, hear me! I am small and weak. I need your strength and wisdom.

~ Native American Prayer



Reflections by Becky

On July 25, 1998, my eldest son, Bobby, killed himself. We were totally shocked and devastated. There were no reasons that we knew of, but he had recently gone through a break up with his girlfriend, was moving into a different state and had suffered the sudden death of one youngest brother, Mike, eight months earlier. Certainly, I thought, he was dealing as well as could be expected with all that was happening to him. We were talking, he was sharing some. So, yes, he was sad, upset and now, I know, depressed. We had no idea of the depth of what he was experiencing.

For his whole life he was super sensitive, more so than his brother, sister and peers. However, we didn't know the intensity of his pain.

The Thursday before his death on Saturday, he stood in our yard and told me I didn't have to worry about him – he was taking better care of himself than he had in years....he loved me, was looking forward to the opportunities this new job would afford him and he was grieving – but was “surviving it.”

The brutal blow of losing him is impossible to describe. I had no earthly idea how I was going to get through it. Having to learn to live without Mike, and now Bobby, was going to be an insurmountable task. I did not want to go on living, but I had a daughter, two stepchildren and my husband. It wasn't that I wanted to die in the same way; it was that I didn't know how my body could go on functioning with this immense sorrow and despair. I really believed that my body would expire.

In the blur of those first days, friends and family were there to help and someone kept a note pad with messages. A call came from a support group for bereaved parents offering friendship and understanding, explaining that expressing thoughts and feelings are part of the healing and that we could share and learn from other parents.

So, a month after Bobby's death, we found ourselves going to our first meeting. When we walked in, I had a strange feeling that I didn't belong there, that I was out of place, and how dare these people laugh and eat doughnuts and drink coffee? Clearly, I was in the deepest denial that this had even happened! It's difficult to explain, but my feelings did not match my thinking in the beginning, and the confusion of emotions made me feel like I was going insane.

We found out very early on that the meetings were the only place that we could talk about Bobby freely and openly because the rest of the world, by and large, did not want to hear about him, or about our pain and anguish. To mention his name made most people more than a little uncomfortable. There were precious few friends who were willing just to sit and be with us while we grieved and cried. Washington Irving wrote, *“There is sacredness in tears. They are not the mark of weakness, but of power. They speak more eloquently than 10,000 tongues. They are messengers of overwhelming grief, of deep contrition and unspeakable love.”* Grief is not a weakness! It takes strength to mourn.

At the support group, we gathered together to share our experiences and to exhaust ourselves reliving and retelling our stories, listening to the stories of others, and asking the ever-present inevitable question: why? Why God? Why Mike and now Bobby? Why Us?

While they were our lifeline and we continued to go to meetings, for us, as survivors of our son's suicide, we needed something more, but we didn't know what that “something” was. Although we had all lost children in the group, suicide has other dimensions and burdens, like the guilt that engulfs us. Other parents had lost children to illness, accidents and murder, but Bobby had chosen to take his life, as one mother pointed out to me. Her son had died of an illness; she could not comprehend my agony. I might have been able to grasp the idea of his death to an accident or some other external cause, but Chris did the taking of his life. That was unfathomable. My psyche could not conceive that act.

Suicide is a different kind of death and only survivors understand. Other kinds of death are treated with sympathy and compassion. Ours is treated with reaction of horror, questions and distancing, blank stares. Our challenge is to mourn without understanding, without knowing why and learning to live without answers.

An abnormal reaction to an abnormal situation is normal. I'm not sure that some Mental Health Counselors who have not gone through this would approve. A therapist I know thought there was something very wrong with her client because she was still going to the cemetery six months after her child had died.

Sometimes, when survivors seek professional help, they may be expected to grieve within a neat time frame of one or two years maximum. It does not help to hear that. It might, in fact, put that already vulnerable survivor in yet a more vulnerable position to ask, "What is wrong with me that I'm not getting on like my counselor says I'm supposed to?" As survivors of suicide, we do not fit the models of grief that are found in psychology books. Our grief is life long. Our task is to learn how to live with it and to become able to resume a meaningful life. This will take a very long time, longer for some than others. In my opinion, being in the physical presence of other survivors has therapeutic value beyond any other way of resolving grief of psychologically healthy people. Grief is the common denominator that connects us all. Thomas Jefferson said, "*Who, then, can so softly bind up the wounds of another, as he, who felt the same wound himself?*"

The survivors group didn't lessen my suffering psychologically and emotionally, but listening to those who had been living with their loss much longer than I helped me intellectually to know that I was not going crazy, that I was not alone, that what I was doing was grieving naturally, yet in my own individual way. It helped, also to be able to call someone between meetings for reassurance. That was very sustaining. Sharing my grief experience and having it validated and normalized by those who have made the journey before me has been one of the single most important factor in my healing. To me, grieving is sacred work and the support group is a most valuable instrument in facilitating that work. My pain has been transformed into a kind of wisdom I could not have gained in any other way. I think that's what one would call a gift.

I am a survivor. I have walked through the fire without being consumed by it. I have earned the status of "elder" in this tribe. I'll never get "over it," and yet I've adapted to living with my loss much as an amputee learns to live without a limb. It's a poor comparison, I know.

Love never dies. Bobby and Mike live in my heart and in my memories. They are my sons today as much as they were in life.

Grace and peace,
Becky



Remember that even the best of friends cannot read your mind. Communicate clearly. If you repeatedly say, "I'm fine," how can your friends know that you need their help? Sometimes, a casual acquaintance may step in to fill the breach, help you through your despair, and become a new true friend.

Who would believe that a person I hardly knew would be more helpful than my family and friends?



Journey to Joy

Joy? You are writing about joy?

Improbable as it seems now, there will be joy beyond your journey of grief, even brief glimpses during. And, by comparison to your suffering now, it will be intense, miraculous, and a source of deepest gratitude.

During the first two years after my son's suicide, I clung to the Psalms as my daily prayer. The psalms of lamentation expressed with excruciating honesty the depths of my grief and despair. The *Miserere*, Psalm 51, was my constant companion: "*The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*" How much more broken could a person be than after the loss of a beloved child to suicide?

The Psalms, ancient as they are, supplied words for my misery that came from deep within the soul:

*For my days pass away like smoke,
and my bones burn like a furnace.
My heart is struck down like grass and has withered;
I forget to eat my bread.
Because of my loud groaning
my bones cling to my flesh.
I am like a desert owl of the wilderness,
like an owl of the waste places;
I lie awake;
I am like a lonely sparrow on the housetop.*

*All the day my enemies taunt me;
those who deride me use my name for a curse.
For I eat ashes like bread
and mingle tears with my drink,
because of your indignation and anger;
for you have taken me up and thrown me down.
My days are like an evening shadow;
I wither away like grass.
--Psalm 102*

Who, believer or not, could fail to connect with the soul-wrenching devastation expressed in these words?

The first time that I experienced a moment of joy some months after Adam died, I immediately tamped it down, feeling guilty. I had walked out onto the porch, and the sounds of birds at song gave me a moment of spontaneous pleasure. Instantly, I was horrified, as if I had personally betrayed my son. Joy, however fleeting, was definitely not to be entertained—not even to be allowed.

But as my journey of grief brought me further and further away from the day of Adam's death, and I began to gain some perspective on his *life*, not just his death, joy began slowly to creep in. At first, just in isolated incidents: holding a friend's baby, a visit with my daughter, a raunchy joke, attending the opera, receiving communion. They were little oases in the desert of my life. Eventually, though, these moments started feeling "normal," however fleetingly.

At some point, I don't know when, there began to be whole days of joy, days when I literally "forgot" to be grieving: a day on vacation visiting someplace new and different, a day spent baking Christmas cookies with a friend, a day spent weeding and planting in the garden. At the very least, it felt miraculous—and still does. The joy I experience today in friends, in making a doll or reading a book, and especially in prayer, is deep and profound. I cannot take it for granted. It inspires in me extraordinary gratitude—not at all like the brief delight of thankfulness for a surprise gift, but a gratitude that is life-affirming and full of wonder. I am grateful for my shower in the morning, for the aroma of coffee, for the western light across my lawn: everything is an occasion for joy. By comparison with the despair that preceded it, this joy of the spirit is as unexpected as it is intense.

I wish for all of you this kind of joy. I know that, for now, it is unthinkable. But it will come, and when it does, let it in. It is a gift.

With compassion,
Alice Baird

One Day at a Time.....Grief moves you to a new dimension, a world apart from the bustle and concerns of everyday life. It's hard to reenter the mainstream when you feel that you no longer belong.

Withdrawing into isolation is not the answer.

Slowly but steadily, you must find a way to reengage with the business of living.....go in search of your joy, as different as it may be.

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!

*And so we made it through those first days and days turned into week,
weeks turned into months, and months turned into a year.
But mostly we got up in the morning, often after a restless and dreamless sleep,
put one foot in front of the other, and got through what we had to do for the day.
We found slowly, we did get a little stronger and slowly we could stand and we did
not loose ground – but found imperfect peace, re-entered life and got help.*

♥ And that's what we do at SOS♥

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Bringing wellness home.....