



# Journey to Healing

***A Newsletter for Survivors of Suicide***

***Second Quarter 2017***

---

## ***Getting Back to Normal***

After a suicide, how does a family with children think about “normal again?” What is the time involved? How do children and adults work at this?

In the acute phase of grief, there is no normal. Bodies and minds may be dysregulated. Meals may no longer be cooked at home. Spouses may feel somewhat estranged because everyone grieves differently. Because they are alarmed by your grief, children and teens may fearfully watch your emotions and delay coming to you with complaints or wishes. As we have emphasized many times, suicide can strip a family of the assumptive world. A sense of unreality may be pervasive. The need for closeness may sometimes be replaced with a numbing aloofness. Part of you may want to reject the world and be consumed with the grief process because pain keeps bereaved people closer to the person who died. Another part may want to avoid the actively painful thoughts and memories. The question for caregivers and those who must return to responsibilities after a suicide loss becomes, “How can I authentically grieve while dealing with the ongoing needs of my family?”

The response lies with skill sets that enhance ordinary coping with stress. After a life-changing loss the response seems other than natural, because the body-mind wants to stay busy with the grief and the loss of the loved one. The response is intentional. It will become available as you identify your reasons for staying engaged. Usually, this is about your surviving children. Your instinct to attend to your children takes you beyond the pain you are experiencing. There is no exact time for this, because resilience varies in individuals based on previous experiences. Normal will be different, a “new normal.” But it must suggest safety and a secure base.

**Compartmentalize:** This refers to your ability to temporarily put your grief in the back of your mind as you function at work or attending to your children. It is a practice, and sometimes grief will intrude anyway, as grief activity is very powerful. But with strengths you may not know you had, you will be able to put the loss away in order to get necessary things done and present yourself to the world. As a therapist, I am amazed that our grieving adults and children often greet us with a smile in the midst of profound loss.

**Designate grief time:** Allow yourself the intense experience of grief whenever it seems safe and appropriate. Attend our SOS groups and/or see a therapist. Weep in the shower or in your bed, and even with your children if you can assure them that tears are a normal survival response. One grieving mother stepped into her walk-in closet to cry intensively before rejoining her surviving family members. She wisely identified when her grief was too intense to share with her children present.

**Routine:** Doing basic things at approximately the same time of day is healing for you and your children. Routine is, in this therapist’s opinion, the cornerstone to the new normal. It is your structure for operating individually and with your children over the course of the day. Routine supports regulation of sleep, nutrition and body functions while building a sense of security. You and your children will know what comes next for each step of the day.

Flexibility: The follow-up to routine, flexibility relaxes the discipline that moves your family forward. Fatigue, stress and trauma states find comfort in wise use of flexibility. It is another expression of your strength and nurturance. Flexibility recognizes individual needs on the part of you and your children.

Simplify: Whatever you can do to reduce clutter, high stimulation, driving, laundry, cooking.... You will know what feels unmanageable. Ask for help with the intention to cut back on whatever contributes to feeling over-whelmed.

Enlist help and support: Can you pay for new services that will help you find calm and order during a time of dysregulation? If not, who can you ask to help with shopping, driving, cleaning, etc.? This allows you to reserve energy for yourself and your children. While it may be difficult to ask, know that friends and relatives are experiencing helplessness in response to your loss. Often, friends and family feel relieved to assume responsibility for a necessary task while you are healing. In one family, the grandfather came every morning to drive the children to school. Asking for help is one of the most under-utilized coping skills.

Create pleasure: Think about how music and movies and down-time for the family resemble the old normal. Pleasure is bitter-sweet after the loss of someone who once shared these experiences with you. But with the intentional reinstatement of pleasure in your routine you are affirming the life-force that supports survival. These experiences might trigger positive memories and foster grief conversations that can heal and keep you close. This category of coping includes self-care, couple-care and child-care. It involves lots of rest, even mild exercise and fresh air, personal care and medical appointments. It may feel somewhat odd to engage in focused self-care during grief, yet pleasure may have to be relearned with practice and reawakened. Stroke the hair of your young children, speak softly, treat yourself gently. Finally, learn about child and adolescent grief. Your children have different grief responses than adults, and appearing normal is a priority for them that can't be overstated. They are likely to continue to seek out friends and sports and sleep-overs. They may find a certain kind of relief outside the house that is not possible at home, so try to respect this. We invite you to consult with the SOS Program for Children and Youth about your children's unique grief needs.

Constructing a new normal after a devastating suicide loss is a thoughtful process. Sometimes it includes moving, especially if the death occurred at home. But even if you stay in your current home, the familiar terrain may now feel strange. Wherever your recovery after profound loss takes place, your intention and efforts gradually restore home and the world to yourself and children, the new normal.

*Printer with permission from Catholic Charities  
Cynthia Waderlow MSE, LCSW*

### ***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 and gently guide them into the group. Additionally, CRISISline is available 24/7 at 864-271-8888 and a call-back can be returned by a survivor as close to the type of death you have experienced.



## ***Inspirational***

We have the opportunity to co-facilitate one of our monthly grief support groups. Fully half of the group members were totally new to SOS, having lost their loved ones to suicide just a couple of months ago. Many different relationship losses were represented and the ages of those who had died reached across the life span. Some group members had prior awareness of their loved one's struggles and vulnerabilities, while others had absolutely no idea that this tragedy could ever be a possibility in their family. And while they told different stories of their loved ones' path to suicide, they shared similar concerns and questions. I imagine that some were also wrestling with questions or doubts that they may not have wanted to voice, yet.

Survivors come to SOS groups seeking many things: solace, understanding, hope, perhaps some guidance and a bit of wisdom from those who are further down the path. We know that the psychological pain that grievers experience in the aftermath of their loved one's death is like nothing previously experienced. Most survivors find themselves trying to walk in their loved one's shoes, as an attempt to get inside the mind of their loved one, to answer the question, "Why?" What could possibly have led to this deadly behavior? And many survivors wrestle with the questions about what the death means for their relationship. "Was she trying to tell me something?" "It feels very much like she was telling me something about our relationship; about the kind of brother or sister I was, the kind of mother or father I was, the kind of husband or wife I was. These questions strike at the heart of our fragile identities and intensify the already painful thoughts that arise about who we thought we were. Many survivors tell us that in the first months they sometimes feel like they are coming unhinged. Many report experiencing a roller coaster of emotions that they take as evidence of coming unhinged. Survivors who are further down the road would assure newcomers that this is how it feels to lose a loved one to suicide. It just comes with the territory. Hearing this is not much comfort for the newly bereaved who want to know, "So how am I supposed to survive this?" It's true that every survivor needs a way to get through it. And because every griever is unique we can't prescribe anything specific that is guaranteed to relieve the pain or shorten the journey. But we can accompany you as you explore and wrestle with your grief.

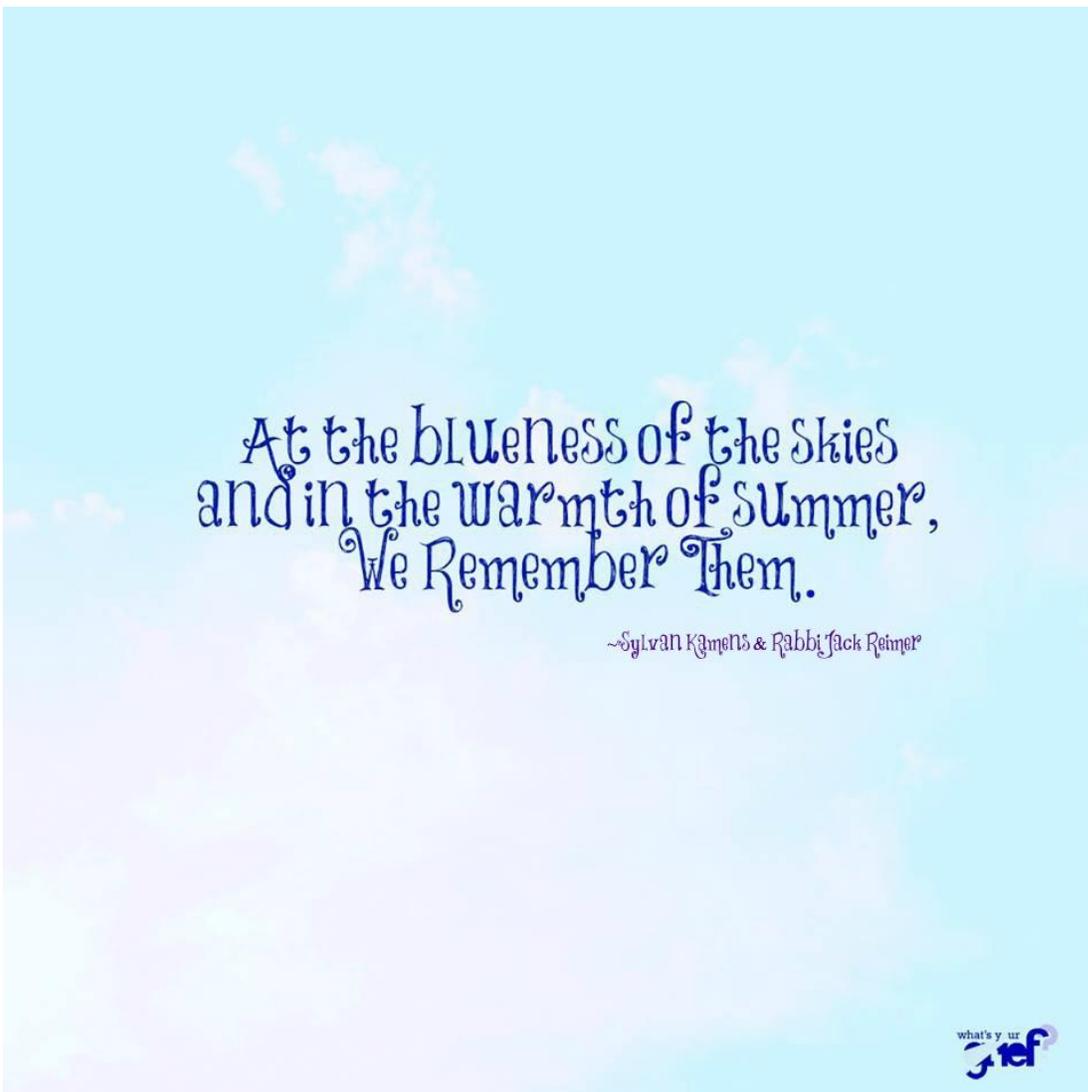
Cindy Waderlow recently wrote a piece (Obelisk, March 2017) about the use of metaphor as a way to explore, embody, share and transform grief. We often refer to the experience as a journey, which metaphorically suggests a path, ideally forward movement (although not necessarily straight and not necessarily rapid), an opportunity to see new sights, to grow, to learn and to change. As I meet new grievers I reflect on what they might use to make their way down the path. I am reminded of a gentleman who called us from the east coast asking whether there was a SOS Program near his town. During that call, he spontaneously recited poem after poem that he had written about his son's death and about his relationship with his son. The poems practically tumbled out of his mouth as he spoke about his loss. I could hear that they were for him a vehicle for his journey, the way that he explored, shared and transformed his grief at this point along the way. They also confirmed for him that he still had within him a spark of creativity that had not died, and that could be pressed into service for this very painful work. I don't hold this out as an exemplar for others to try (unless writing poetry holds a special appeal). I do hope to suggest that each griever brings something to this experience that can be used to construct a seaworthy vessel for the journey. It may be something that taps into existing interests, or skills, or it might mean learning a new skill or getting involved with something new.

Survivors have done many things as part of their journey toward healing. Some have created new prevention programs, drafted new laws to protect children, left jobs that felt unsatisfying, changed careers, engaged in meaningful volunteer work, become foster parents, gone back to school, given psychoeducational talks about suicide, etc. These examples are not meant to suggest that some huge sweeping life change is required in order to heal. Grievers do things large and small to keep moving forward. Just continuing to move forward one step at a time brings about a kind of transformation. This might mean coming to SOS groups and sharing

hard won gains with those more newly bereaved; or joining a walk, or getting involved as an advocate for prevention efforts. Whatever you choose will hopefully have personal meaning for you. In the same way that trying on your loved one's shoes as a way of trying to understand the death seems to be virtually universal, the eventual ability to take off the shoes and to disentangle feelings about the manner of death from the fullness of your loved one's life can be seen as a significant sign of growth. Finding private or public ways to honor your loved one's life and rediscovering gratitude for your own life and for the life of your loved one are also important signs of healing. We haven't found a shortcut through the pain yet. We recognize this as an intensely challenging process that presents opportunities for transformative growth. We think it helps to set an intention to heal, to be willing to challenge old values and assumptions that no longer fit, and to open to the possibility of accepting support from your fellow grievers and others who can help you navigate the storm. The SOS Program has existed many years with the unique mission of providing grief support to those who have lost a loved one to suicide. Our goal remains to help you find community, direction and resources for healing.

*Printed with permission from Catholic Charities*

---



At the blueness of the skies  
and in the warmth of summer,  
We Remember Them.

~Sylvan Kamens & Rabbi Jack Reimer



"And once the storm is over you won't remember how you made it through, how you managed to survive. You won't even be sure, in fact, whether the storm is really over. But one thing is certain. When you come out of the storm you won't be the same person who walked in. That's what this storm's all about."

~ Haruki Murakami, *Kafka on the Shore*



[www.whatsyourgrief.com](http://www.whatsyourgrief.com)



## ***Reflections by Becky***

During the intense grieving process, feelings such as guilt and remorse are magnified, exaggerated and blown out of proportion. They are larger than life proportions. Because the grieving process is not based on reason and cannot be intellectually figured out, it is an emotional thunderstorm, hurricane typhoon and tornado all wrapped into one.

**“I was a lousy parent.”**

**“I was a poor spouse.”**

During other periods when the intense grief is on a more even keel, then these feelings of guilt or remorse or other feelings are deflated and are looked upon in a more reasonable and logical light. One can say, “I was a good parent” or, “I was a good spouse.”

“During these periods, the grieving process is more similar to a summer shower or, in the words of the Irish, “A soft day.” The grieving process is like a roller coaster, it ebbs and flows during different periods of our lives. It waxes and wanes. The storm can rage out of control and around an anniversary, a birthday or holidays, or it can begin to rage for no known cause.

It is like that sudden tornado or hurricane that can devastate a community with no forewarning. It is during those times that the pain becomes overwhelming and unbearable. This is not a retrenching, this is not a setback, this is nothing more than the normal grieving process running its course. There is no time when a survivor can say, “The grieving process is over”, “I am finished grieving.” When the storm of grief is raging, it is very frightening.

It is during those times that we recommend that you call us so that we can assist you during this time. You will always find an understanding ear with our SOS facilitators. These times are not a permanent retrenching, but only a temporary, and hopefully, a short-lived return of the intense grief. Call us; we are here to help you and assist you.

As always, let us remember in thought and prayer our SOS family – especially those family members who are observing an anniversary of death or a birthday or other significant date.

Grace and peace, *Becky*



### *Inclement Weather Policy*

*We are at the beginning of spring and summer to follow ~ with that comes storms. 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, you may look on MHA's website at [www.mentalhealthamerica.org](http://www.mentalhealthamerica.org) or feel free to e-mail or call us if you are uncertain of our meetings.*

*The main priority is to care for you, and you to care for yourself.*

*Your Facilitators,  
Becky  
Alice  
Deb*

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!



*“God gave us memories so we could  
have roses in December!”  
— Stephen Levine*

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

*Bringing wellness home.....B4 Stage 4*

### ***In this Issue:***

*Getting Back to Normal*  
*Inspirational*  
*Poem*  
*Reflections from Becky*  
*Inclement Weather*  
*Closing*

*Pages 1, 2*  
*Pages 3, 4*  
*Page 5*  
*Page 6*  
*Page 7*  
*Page 8*

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> and 3<sup>rd</sup> 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 for our 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.