



Survivors of Suicide

Startled by a loud, middle-of-the-night noise that sounded like a gunshot, Maria and Carlos jumped out of bed. When they opened the door to the second floor bedroom they were horrified. Their 17-year-old son lay on the floor in a pool of splattered blood—dead of a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head.

That same week, on the other side of town, a 42-year-old woman named Diane ended her life with a lethal dose of drugs. Though she had struggled with depression the last two years, no one ever thought she would take her life. Her husband, the minister of a large church, is tormented with embarrassment, regrets, nagging questions, and intense anger. Feeling like a failure, he plans to resign.



Grief following a suicide is difficult and complex. Survivors typically struggle with a wide range of painful feelings, including emotions that may be frightening and explosive.

In the words of suicide survivor Geri Couchman: “Survivors of suicide are the walking wounded. Someone they loved—a friend, a parent, a sibling, a spouse, or perhaps the most painful, a child—killed themselves. Most of them have gone through psychological and physical torture that is difficult to describe. Many seek counseling because of the trauma of losing someone to suicide. Regardless, they will struggle for years to accept the consequences of these tragic deaths. These survivors feel not only grief or anger but also guilt, depression, exhaustion, hostility, terror and vulnerability.”

OPEN TO YOUR GRIEF

If you have just experienced the suicide of a loved one, your recovery will not be an easy task. But you *can* do it. If you allow and express your feelings, if you reach out and share with those who care and can help, and if you draw upon your inner resources, you will survive. At times the going will be rough, but you’ll make it. The pain will lessen; you *will* heal and grow. The clouds of grief and the emotional storms will gradually pass, and once again the sun of a new day will brighten and warm your life.

Remember that the only way out of your grief is through it. Time alone will not heal your grief. You need to surrender into the experience and learn from it. Don’t fight your feelings, no matter how painful or how inappropriate they may seem. Grief is a



natural process that you cannot rush. Allow it; trust it. It's nature's way of healing a broken heart.

Don't try to hide the suicide or keep it a secret. Don't tell half-truths. For the wounds to heal, you must talk about the death openly. As William Shakespeare wisely counseled, "Give sorrow words." Talk about the person who committed suicide. Openly express your thoughts and feelings, even when they are so confused that it's hard to give them words.

IF YOU ARE A FRIEND WHO WANTS TO HELP

Because of their difficult and mixed emotions, and because of social stigma and embarrassment, suicide survivors often feel alone and isolated at a time when they desperately need comfort, understanding and love. The grief of a survivor is so complex and intense that it may be next to impossible for him or her to reach out for help. As a caring friend, go ahead and take the lead, but do so gently and humbly.

Simply be there as a friend, trusting your own impulses about what to say or do. Know that a loving touch and caring silence can speak louder than words. It may take a while before your friend begins to open up. Shy away from simplistic answers and advice giving; instead, focus on listening and trying to understand your friend's thoughts and feelings. Let your friend teach you what he or she is experiencing, and how you can help.

Stay away from well-intentioned clichés such as, "Time will take care of everything," or "You are holding up so well." While you can't make the hurt go away, your friendship *can* make a big difference, particularly in the long months following the death. Your friend will need *continuing* acceptance, love and encouragement—just as you or I would in similar circumstances. Telephone, stop by, take the children on an outing, invite the family over for a backyard picnic.



WHEN TO SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP

While many people in bereavement choose to visit with a trained counselor and benefit greatly, sometimes professional assistance is a must. According to author and bereavement expert Rabbi Earl Grollman, seek professional help if:

- *You continually feel hostile toward people you once cared about.*
- *You are uninterested in anything and everyone.*
- *Your health is suffering markedly.*
- *You are relying more and more on drugs, including alcohol.*
- *You avoid all social activities, wishing to be alone most of the time.*
- *You are preoccupied with thoughts of suicide.*

Hospice bereavement counselors, the clergy, mental health professionals, and family therapists are among the trained professionals who can assist you. At times we all need a helping hand. Reaching out for professional guidance is a mark of courage and intelligence.

CONSIDER A SUPPORT GROUP

We highly recommend that you try to find and join a support group for survivors of suicide. The support of others who know what you are going through is invaluable. Your local hospice or mental health center can probably put you in touch with any existing groups. Your local crisis hotline or suicide prevention hotline may have useful information. If a local group does not exist, you may wish to ask for help in starting one. The American Association of Suicidology (202-237-2280) provides information on local support groups.

SUGGESTIONS FOR YOUR JOURNEY OF HEALING

As you move into and through your grief, these guidelines may ease your way:

- **Breathe!** In the stress of grieving, we often tighten our muscles, particularly in the lower stomach area. Thus we fail to breathe deeply, smoothly and freely. Occasionally take in a

slow, deep breath, allowing your belly to expand as if it were a balloon filling with air. Then relax as your breath gently, naturally flows out. As you go through the day, notice your breathing. Avoid tensing the muscles of your stomach. Breathe with a soft belly.

- **Take good care of yourself.** You've been wounded. You need to give yourself special care. Be very gentle, understanding and kind to yourself—just as you would to a dear friend if he or she were suffering. Rest as needed, eat nutritiously, and take in adequate water and other fluids. Walk in the fresh air or engage in another form of exercise that you find pleasant. If you respect your body and its enormous wisdom, your journey toward healing will be much smoother.
- **Tune into your feelings.** Anger, guilt, betrayal, shame, fear, remorse, despair, heartache, relief, peace—whatever your feelings, let yourself experience them. Author and professor, Henri Nouwen, makes a good point: “The only feelings that do not heal are the ones you hide.” Gently pay attention to your body, to your feelings as they arise in the here and now. If you want to pound on a pillow or scream, go ahead. And let yourself cry. Sobbing promotes relaxation and the release of tension and sorrow. Tears cleanse and heal.
- **Share your grief.** Though you will need time to yourself, it's also essential that you talk about your grief. Find at least one person whom you like and trust, and pour out your heart to him or her. Do this regularly, until you no longer feel the need. Remember that a loving touch and shared laughter are part of a healthy, healing relationship.
- **Don't mentally beat yourself up.** You are probably struggling with a variety of unanswered questions as well as repetitive negative thoughts and feelings of betrayal and anger. Processing these thoughts and feelings is an important part of your grief work. However, once you have faced them, felt them, and learned from them, it's time to let them go. When unhealthy picture or word thoughts start to crowd in, mentally say “Stop!” while visualizing a large stop sign. Then immediately put your mind on more positive, constructive thoughts. Doing something physical, like taking a walk or talking to another person, can also help you to break loose from self-defeating thoughts.
- **Release your guilt.** With hindsight, we often wish we would have handled things differently. We are all human and that means we make lots of mistakes. Learn from the past, and then release it so that you can embrace today's blessings and opportunities. Father Arnaldo Pangrazzi, founder of a support group for suicide survivors, says it well: “Healing takes place when you realize 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.”
- **Forgive and let go.** In the aftermath of suicide it is common to harbor feelings of blame—blaming the deceased, blaming yourself, blaming others and society. *Forgiveness does not condone hurtful behavior*, but it does free us from self-defeating blame and resentment. Forgiveness also brings peace of mind, freedom of spirit, and an opportunity to make fresh starts. When you are ready, forgive yourself for what you did or didn't do. As necessary, forgive yourself repeatedly. Extend the same kindness to your deceased loved one and others.
- **If you are spiritually inclined, draw on this resource.** Your relationship to God or a guiding power can bring immense comfort in the wake of suicide. Nourish yourself spiritually in whatever way works best for you—prayer, being with nature, meditation, or the drinking in of sacred scripture. Pour out your soul, express your frustrations, ask questions. Then trustfully and patiently open to the inner guidance you receive. Listen to the whispers of your heart and soul.

- **Sidestep judgmental thinking.** If you are feeling self-conscious about your loved one's suicide and start worrying about what people may be thinking, mentally say to yourself, "Who cares!" Then focus on the task at hand. People who act, or even think, in a judgmental or self-righteous way are expressing their own insecurity and narrow-mindedness. Refuse to buy into their immaturity: Don't let yourself feel inferior, not even for a second!
- **Nourish your self-worth and confidence.** As a suicide survivor, you've been through more than your share of torment and distress. Naturally, your self-esteem has probably taken a jolt. So frequently remind yourself that you are a wonderful, capable person—an individual who has learned and grown a lot from a terribly hard ordeal. You are wiser, stronger, kinder, and more loving than ever. Hold your head high, knowing that you can handle with finesse whatever challenges life throws your way.
- **Look for patches of sunshine.** To complete your healing you must continue to stay open to the times of pain, but gradually balance your pain by embracing the small, simple gifts of delight that come your way—a colorful sunrise or sunset, the laughter of little children at play, the caress of a gentle breeze or the smile of a wayside flower, the co-worker who makes you chuckle, the pleasure of rest after a demanding day, or a warm hug from a dear friend. The more you look for bright spots, the more they will find you and bless you.
- **Make some fresh starts.** After you've given yourself plenty of space to grieve and heal—and only you can know how long that will take—it's time to make some fresh starts. What would you love to do? Let yourself dream; then follow your heart and take some risks. Travel, take an enjoyable class, make some new friends, launch into a hobby that fascinates you, or explore some interesting books, places and ideas. Bring your dreams to life.

A BRIGHTER DAY

Father Arnaldo Pangrazzi offers these words of hope and advice: "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 . . . 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."

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Prepared by Sam Quick, Human Development and Family Relations Specialist; and Derek Gwinn, Graduate Student, University of Minnesota. For his editorial assistance, we extend appreciation to Robert L. Kaiser, Jr., Journalist, Lexington, Kentucky. (# 18 of 33, 1996)

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