

Grief after Suicide

Your grief after 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. Grief affects all realms of your life.

Each person's experience on the journey of grief will be different. This is a reflection of our personal style of grieving, our relationship with the person who died, our internal and social resources, and our past history of coping. AS you journey through your own grief process, there will likely be unexpected turns and insights.

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 on 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- **Often the person who chooses suicide has withdrawn from friends and family.**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 him/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 she/he composed the note doesn't necessarily reflect his/her frame of mind when he/she developed a plan for suicide and followed through with it.

- **People who died 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 questions intensely, it is important not to assume that because the person chose suicide, she/he was unloved or 'crazy.' People who died 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.

Things to Know about Grief after Suicide

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/she just gave up or that he didn't consider how devastating this loss would be for the people who cared about him/her.

- **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 behaviours, 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 died 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 decisions.

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 rumours. 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 judgement. 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 worlds of God or others spiritual mentors.

- **You may have questions about the value and meaning of life.**

When someone you know dies by suicide, your 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, stomach ache, chest pains, shortness of breath or general weakness and fatigue.

Strategies for Living with Grief after Suicide

1. 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.

2. 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.

3. 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.

4. 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 grieverers in your area. You may also search the Internet for relevant discussion groups.

5. 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.

6. 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.

7. Accept your feelings.

Find helpful ways to express them.

8. 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.

9. 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.

10. 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 behaviour and ask for forgiveness. You may find it helpful to pray or talk with a spiritual 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.

11. 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.