

Survivors of Suicide: Living with Loss

Losing someone you know to suicide is a uniquely difficult experience. Although survivors may experience grief reactions common to other forms of loss, they also may experience a host of other difficult and powerful emotions. Some common reactions to suicide may be:

Confusion

Suicide is so sudden that there is confusion as to what has really happened. Confusion is greater when it may be unclear whether the suicide was intentional or not. Questions about what happened and how it happened remain, and survivors may struggle with reconciling the person they knew and the actions they took. Confusion is particularly great when the person had recently appeared to be feeling better or more hopeful.

Shame

One of the most prominent feelings is that of shame. There is such stigma around suicide in our society that survivors may not feel comfortable or able to acknowledge their loved one took his/her own life. They may also worry that the suicide may imply to others that they were a horrible partner/family member/friend. This may manifest in pressure to keep the death a secret or to pretend as if it had never happened. This can cause serious emotional strain, particularly if there is conflict about keeping the secret.

Guilt

Survivors may experience feelings of guilt for not being able to do something for their loved one to prevent their death. They may think, "If only I'd done X...". They may feel a powerful sense of responsibility, that their death was somehow their fault. Some survivors may also feel guilty if they feel any sense of relief, particularly if their relationship with the person who died was ambivalent or painful, or if there had been previous suicide attempts. Survivors may fear being seen as insensitive or uncaring.

Anger

Survivors often become angry with the person who died, wondering, "Why? Why did you do this to me?" Underlying this sense of anger may be feelings of rejection and inadequacy (e.g. "I wasn't enough to live for.") and guilt at being angry. There may well be anger at God or oneself.

Blame

It is not uncommon to search for blame in others, especially if survivors are feeling their own sense of personal responsibility. Finding someone to blame also enables survivors to direct anger toward the person who died (anger they may feel is inappropriate or wrong to have) to someone else. Blame helps survivors feel a sense of control, attempting to find answers to questions that may never be answered.

Trauma

It is not uncommon to have disturbing and graphic images from a loved one's suicide play in one's head. If the survivor witnessed the suicide, the images may play over and over in his/her mind. If the survivor did not witness the suicide, his/her imagined fantasies of the event may be even more disturbing. These reactions can be likened to PTSD symptoms people experience after a traumatic event.

How to Cope with Suicide Loss

There is no “right way” to grieve your loss. Grief is intensely personal and individual. You may be experiencing a wide range of powerful emotions, no emotions at all, or somewhere in between. The following guidelines may be helpful as you deal in your own unique way...

- * Most people struggle with what to tell other people. Do what feels right for you. Many survivors find it helpful simply to acknowledge their loved one died by suicide.
- * Keeping contact with others is important, even if it is very difficult. Friends and family may feel that they don't know what to say or how to help. It may be important to share with them as much as you can about your thoughts and feelings. If you have a sense of what you need from them, ask for it.
- * Joining a support group with other survivors can be very helpful. Counseling is another option. Talking with a trusted member of your community (e.g. clergy) can also be helpful.
- * Having your own suicidal thoughts is common. This does not mean you will act on them.
- * Anniversaries, birthdays, and holidays can be particularly difficult. Think about whether you'd like to continue old traditions or start new ones. Symbolic remembrances of your loved one may be helpful.
- * Take the tasks of daily living at your own pace. You may feel unusually exhausted, nervous, or restless. Physical reactions to grief, like headaches and loss of appetite, are common.
- * Expect setbacks. Grieving is a process. So is healing. Try to be kind to yourself if you feel like you're not “getting over it” or if you think you're not “dealing” well with your loss. If you're in doubt, seek help.
- * It's also okay not to know what you need or not be able to articulate it to yourself or to others.

Helping a Friend Cope with Suicide Loss

If you have a friend who has lost someone to suicide, reading over the above guidelines can help you understand what they may be going through. In addition...

- Surround them with as much love and understanding as you can.
- Give them private time. Be there, but don't smother them.
- Let them talk. Most of the time they just need to express what's going on in their head and in their heart.
- Most of the time, they're not looking for advice or expecting you to make them feel better.
- Show love, not control.
- Let them talk about their loved one as much as they need to. Don't be afraid to use his or her name.

Resources

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, www.afsp.org, 1-888-333-AFSP