



Patient & Family Guide
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Grief After Suicide



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Grief After Suicide

Grief after a suicide may feel quite different than grief you have felt after other kinds of losses. The death of someone from suicide usually has a much more intense and long-lasting effect. This is totally normal.

When someone you know dies from suicide, you may struggle with complicated social and emotional issues. This can make your grief feel overwhelming and make you feel alone. You may have changes and challenges in your:

- › personal relationships
- › spiritual beliefs
- › concentration and memory
- › emotions
- › general health

Grief affects all areas of your life.

Things to Know About Suicide

No one thing, person, or event leads a person to choose suicide.

Your grief may cause you to search desperately for a reason why your loved one chose to die. It is important to understand that their choice was the result of many factors in their life, and not one particular event or thing. People who choose suicide feel completely hopeless about themselves and their lives. Suicide is seen as the only way out of a life full of chaos and despair.

Often the person who chooses suicide has withdrawn from friends and family.

Once a decision about suicide has been made, the person may seem distracted, distant, or even really happy. In the days before the suicide, you may have felt out of touch with this person, or had trouble reaching them in person, by phone, or in other ways you usually connected, like online. It is as though life stops before it stops.

A suicide note only reflects the person's state of mind at the time that it was written.

Suicide notes may be left to:

- › identify or explain the person's despair
- › remove any responsibility that others might feel

- › accuse or blame someone else
- › give away personal belongings
- › say goodbye

If there was a suicide note, you may hope that it will give you some answers. However, the person's frame of mind when they wrote the note isn't necessarily the same as it was when they developed a plan for suicide and followed through with it.

People who die from suicide are not necessarily mentally ill, or from abusive or neglectful families.

Although you may question the person's mental and social stability, it is important not to assume that because the person chose suicide, they were unloved or in mental distress. People who die 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 have strong feelings of anger.

You may feel angry at people who you feel didn't do enough to stop the suicide, such as counsellors, friends, doctors, and yourself. Survivors of suicide often feel that they missed or ignored calls for help or warning signs. It is also common to feel angry with the person who died. It seems that they did not value their life and your relationship as much as you did. You may feel angry that they just gave up, or that they didn't think about how devastating this loss would be for the people who cared about them.

You may feel a lot of guilt and blame.

You may feel that something you did or didn't do added to the despair that the person felt when they chose suicide. If your relationship with the person was conflicted, you may feel like you were the cause of their unhappiness. You may have been aware of the person's history of mental illness or risky behaviour, such as previous suicide attempts, or drug or alcohol abuse, but gave up trying to help them for reasons of your own health or happiness.

You may feel ashamed or judged by others.

Many people think that people who die 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. Other people who genuinely care about you may stay away because they don't know what to say or how to help.

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 do the same. 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 the person was living a normal and reasonably happy life. Now you may wonder whether your whole relationship was based on false beliefs and lies. You may feel hurt and wonder why they didn't share their troubles with you.

You will feel deep sadness.

Knowing that someone you cared about felt hopeless and desperate enough to believe that suicide was their only option will increase your sadness.

You may feel relief.

If your relationship with the person was difficult and draining, part of you may be relieved that they will no longer be causing you distress.

You may feel peace or acceptance.

If the person was suffering for some time and it seemed as though nothing would ever get better, you may understand their desperation and their decision.

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 other people's reactions. This denial does not protect you or anyone else. It keeps everyone silent and isolated. Family and friends may have some intuition or suspicion that the death was a suicide, or they may hear rumours.

Telling a false story will only make everyone's grief more conflicted and last longer.

You will be flooded with “why?” questions.

You may feel the need to examine every possible reason why your loved one may have chosen suicide. This need cannot be satisfied, as you are trying to answer questions that do not have answers. You may find that these “why?” questions replay over and over in your head so that you are not able to focus on anything else.

You may be haunted by thoughts about the death.

Whether you witnessed the death or not, you may find that your mind keeps replaying the moments before, during, and after it happened. 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 events. This is normal. Your mind is trying to understand, accept, and cope with what happened. You may also be trying to find a way to feel connected with the person or to say goodbye.

Your Relationships

You may find it hard to be with other people for a number of reasons:

Your friends and family may be uncomfortable with your grief, so they either stay away or try to cheer you up.

You may think that your friends and family couldn't possibly understand what you are feeling. This may make it very hard for you to talk about your loss. The absence of your friends or family who could be with you may feel like another loss.

Your grief may be distracting.

It may be impossible for you to focus on anything other than this death. When you are with others, you may find that your thoughts and feelings about the death take over most of your interactions.

You may find it hard to be with other people because you know or suspect that they blame you or your family.

Although it is not fair, some people may blame you because they don't understand or because of their own suffering. They may be trying to make sense of the death and move the blame away from themselves. It may be easier for them to blame you than to 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 hard to be with other people because you worry that you cannot see relationships as they really are.

When someone close to you dies from suicide, you may suffer from low self-esteem and lose confidence in your own judgment. You may be afraid of experiencing more hurt if you keep loving and caring about people.

Your Spiritual or Religious Beliefs

You may be afraid that God or your religious community will not forgive the suicide.

You may worry about the person's salvation. You may also be afraid that your religious or spiritual community will reject or condemn you because of the suicide.

You may find yourself wondering what, if anything, you believe.

Any spiritual beliefs or values that you had before may no longer feel true. Anger and disbelief may make it hard for you to find comfort in the spiritual or religious values you once had. You may be troubled because you do not find comfort in the words of God or other spiritual mentors.

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

When someone you know dies from suicide, it can shatter your confidence in your own beliefs and ideals. You may wonder what your purpose in life is and doubt your ability to meet future challenges.

You may consider suicide.

The strength of your grief and suffering may lead you to question whether your own life is worth living. You may question how you can keep going through so many struggles when it seems these feelings will never go away. If you are feeling suicidal, it is important that you get help right away (see the Resources section at the end of this booklet). If it is an emergency, call 911, or call the Mental Health Crisis Line at 1-888-429-8167 (toll-free).

Your Physical Pain

You may have physical pain or discomfort related to how the person died.

For example, if the person died after an overdose you may feel nauseous (sick to your stomach) and light-headed. You also may have physical symptoms that are common with grief, such as nausea, headache, stomachache, chest pains, shortness of breath, or general weakness and fatigue (tiredness).

Tips for Living with Grief After Suicide

Ask for info about the death as soon as you are ready.

Since you will likely keep going over the suicide in your mind, it is important that you have as much concrete info as possible. You may need 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 info.

Be honest about what happened.

Explore what you believe to be true about your relationship with the person and the reasons for their death.

Find people with whom you can be honest and vulnerable.

These people will not ask for details or push their own opinions or quick fixes on you. Friends who can share in the questions rather than give you answers may be the most helpful.

Talk with others who have experienced a suicide loss.

Others who have been there or are working through similar tragedies may be able to understand your sorrow. They may also be less likely to feel threatened by your volatility

(unpredictable behaviour). Find out if there is a support group in your area. You can also search online for discussion groups.

Go over and over the “why?” questions, the suicide note, and anything else, as often as you need to.

Writing your questions and the answers that you discover in a journal may help. Over time, the partial (incomplete) answers will be enough.

It can help to talk with a counsellor.

Talking things through with an experienced professional may help. A counsellor will give you the safety, support, and info you need to fully explore and understand what is happening.

Accept your feelings.

Find helpful ways to express your feelings.

Understand that your grief will be very strong and ongoing.

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.

It is important to be realistic about guilt and blame.

Your loved one’s death will likely cause you to struggle with issues of responsibility, guilt, and

blame. It may help to make 3 lists:

1. What the person who died is responsible for
2. What you are responsible for
3. What others are responsible for

The part that you are responsible for is the only part that you can do anything about. The other two lists are not your responsibility. You may want to share these lists with a friend who is able to be more objective.

Find a way to make up for mistakes you have made.

Even if you cannot undo mistakes that you have made, you can change your behaviour and ask for forgiveness. You may find it helpful to pray, or talk with a spiritual or religious leader in your community. You may also want to ask the person who died for forgiveness. You can do this by writing them a letter or doing something that you believe they would accept as a symbol of your remorse.

When you are ready, forgive yourself.

If you made mistakes, ask yourself how long and hard you deserve to be punished. Is punishing yourself serving a purpose or does it only keep you stuck in painful patterns? It may help to create a ritual of self-forgiveness that helps you to let go of your guilt.

Resources

Online resources

- Living with Suicide: Shared Experiences and Voices of Loss
 - › www.pbs.org/weblab/living
 - › This site sponsored by PBS is easy to use and has info and a place to read other people's stories. You can also include your own story if you choose. There is a message board where you can post a question or issue that you are dealing with and others can respond.
- Healing for Survivors of Suicide
 - › <http://survivingsuicide.com>
 - › This site is hosted by a suicide bereaved mom. It provides easy access to info organized by topic, as well as links to many other websites for suicide griever.

Book resources for adults

- **No Time to Say Goodbye: Surviving the Suicide of a Loved One** by Carla Fine
 - › Carla Fine wrote this book after her husband committed suicide in 1989. She offers her own insights and experience, along with interviews with other people who have grieved a suicide death. This book addresses issues that are specific to suicide, such as stigma and social isolation, as well as the range of powerful emotions that are likely to follow. An extensive bibliography and appendix contain references to other books and resources.
- **Healing after the Suicide of a Loved One** by Ann Smolin and John Guinan
 - › This guide for people navigating the painful path of grief after suicide is based on the authors' experience in facilitating support groups. There is a chapter devoted to guilt (the 'what ifs?'), as well as chapters on different emotions and relationships with the person who died, and challenges in healing. Recommended readings and resources are included.

- **Beyond Grief: A Guide for Recovering from the Death of a Loved One** by Carol Staudacher
 - › This book has something for everyone who is grieving or wants to know about grief. There are general chapters about the emotional, physical, social, thought, and spiritual struggles that bereaved people commonly face. There is also an excellent chapter on suicide grief.

Book Resources for Children

- **After a Suicide: A Workbook for Grieving Kids** by The Dougy Center: The National Center for Grieving Children & Families
 - › This activity book includes advice from other children about how to navigate the journey of grief after a suicide.
- **But I Didn't Say Goodbye: For Parents and Professionals Helping Child Suicide Survivors** by Barbara Rubel
 - › This is both a storybook and a workbook for children.

- **Someone I Loved Died by Suicide: A Story for Child Survivors and Those Who Care for Them** by Doreen Cammarata
 - › This book explains that suicide is not anyone's fault. It also suggests practical ways to cope with grief after suicide.
- **Living When a Young Friend Commits Suicide: Or Even Starts Talking about It** by Earl A. Grollman and Max Malikow
 - › This book is written for teens who are grieving after a suicide death. It is written in point form and is very easy to read. It addresses most, if not all, of the questions that teens will have about suicide.

If you or someone you know has concerns or questions about grief, please contact us.

This pamphlet is just a guide. If you have questions, please talk to your health care provider. We are here to help you.

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