



SOLACE

A Publication for Survivors of Suicide
Sponsored by the Alachua County Crisis Center
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To the Newly Bereaved Suicide Survivor

Someone you loved has ended their own life – and yours is forever changed. You are a “suicide survivor,” and as that unwelcome designation implies, your survival – your *emotional* survival – will depend on how well you learn to cope with your tragedy. The bad news: Surviving this will be the second worst experience of your life. The good news: The worst is already over. What you’re enduring is one of the most horrific ordeals possible in human experience. In the weeks and months after a suicide, survivors ride a roller coaster of emotions unlike any other. Suicide is different. On top of all the grief that people experience after a “conventional” death, you must walk a gauntlet of guilt, confusion and emotional turmoil that is in many ways unique to survivors of suicide.

“How long will it take to get over this,” you may ask yourself. The truth is that you will never “get over” it, but don’t let that thought discourage you. After all, what kind of people would we be if we truly got over it, as if it were something as trivial as a virus? Your hope lies in getting *through* it, putting your loss in its proper perspective, and accepting your life as it now lies before you, forever changed. If you can do that, the peace you seek will follow.

Death touches all of our lives sooner or later. Sometimes it is expected, as with the passing of an elderly relative; sometimes it comes suddenly in the form of a tragic accident. But suicide is different. The person you have lost seems to have chosen death, and that simple fact makes a world of difference for those left to grieve. The suicide survivor faces all the same emotions as anyone who mourns a death, but they also face a somewhat unique set of painful feelings on top of their grief. . .

- **Guilt.** Rarely in other deaths do we encounter any feelings of responsibility. Disease, accidents, old age... we know instinctively that we cannot cause or control these things. But the suicide survivor– even if they were only on the periphery of the deceased’s life – invariably feels that they might have, could have, or should have done something to prevent the suicide. This mistaken assumption is the suicide survivor’s greatest enemy.
- **Stigma.** Society still attaches a stigma to suicide, and it is largely misunderstood. While mourners usually receive sympathy and compassion, the suicide survivor may encounter blame, judgement, or exclusion.
- **Anger.** It’s not uncommon to feel some form of anger toward a lost loved one, but it’s intensified for survivors of suicide. For us, the person we lost is also the murderer of the person we lost, bringing new meaning to the term “love-hate” relationship.
- **Disconnection.** When we lose a loved one to disease or an accident, it is easier to retain happy memories of them. We know that, if they could choose, they would still be here with us. But it’s not as easy for the suicide survivor. Because our loved one seems to have made a choice that is abhorrent to us, we feel disconnected and “divorced” from their memory. We are in a state of conflict with them, and we are left to resolve that conflict alone.

The challenge of coping with a loved one’s suicide is one of the most trying ordeals anyone ever has to face, but make no mistake – you must confront it. If you attempt to ignore it – sweep it under the carpet or your life – you may only be delaying an even deeper pain. There are people who have suffered breakdowns *decades* after a suicide, because they refused or were forbidden to ever talk about it. Time heals, but time alone cannot heal the suicide survivor. You must use that time to heal yourself and lean on the help and support of others. It might take years to truly restore your emotional well-being, but you can be assured one thing: it will get better.

By Jeffrey Jackson, ©2004, reprinted from *A Handbook for Survivors of Suicide*, published by the American Association of Suicidology. *Dedicated to the life of immeasurable value that was lived by Gail Beth Levine Jackson.*

Welcome to Solace, a publication for survivors of suicide sponsored by the Alachua County Crisis Center. Solace is defined as “comfort or consolation in times of distress.” Via this publication and its bimonthly newsletter as well as the monthly Survivors of Suicide support group, we strive to provide all survivors of suicide - individuals who have been touched in any manner by suicide - with comfort, support, and information. You are not alone! It is estimated that more than 50,000 deaths by suicide occur in the United States each year. Each suicide death leaves multiple survivors, individuals who must deal with their grief while also dealing with a myriad of other overwhelming feelings, such as guilt, anger, confusion, shame, hurt. One’s ability to cope may also be confounded by the responses of friends, family members and others in the community - well-meaning people who may say hurtful things or place unrealistic expectations upon survivors, or who may deny the event in its entirety. As a result, survivors are typically overwhelmed and frequently feel very much alone. This is the hardest thing you’ll ever have to do. Be patient with yourself. Though you may not think so now, you can survive. We hope that this newsletter will help you in your journey. And we hope you will consider joining us in the support group, to receive the comfort, understanding, and encouragement that connection with fellow survivors can provide. You are not alone! We’d like to help.

Asking the Question Why?

Tracy T. Dean, M.S.

Asking "Why did my loved one do this?" is the question that haunts most survivors of suicide. The outside world demands to know from us, and we don't know ourselves. For some of us there were definite clues that our loved ones were depressed or that something was wrong. We either knew that they were in pain and did not know the extent of it, or we did know and tried everything we knew to get help for them. For others the suicide was completely out of character. Many people who end their lives are extremely good actors and actresses. They only allow us to see what they want us to see. In either instance, for many, we never thought it could really happen to us, to our loved ones, and to our families. It doesn't make sense.

So we search, trying to put the pieces of the puzzle together. Hindsight is 20x20, and sometimes we find bits and pieces, clues to what might have happened to allow our loved ones to lose hope and give up on life. We often want a specific reason, a direct cause and effect. If we can understand exactly why our loved ones ended their lives, maybe we can keep it from happening again to someone else we love.

For years I struggled with this question myself, following the suicide of my boyfriend. The best explanation was described to me by Iris Bolton, the Executive Director of The Link Counselor Center in Atlanta, Georgia and a survivor of her son's suicide. Iris went to Emory University and received a Masters in Suicidology in an attempt to answer this question for herself. She did not find it. Later, Iris found as close to an answer as she will have. It did not come from a Doctor, Professor, or a Therapist. It came from another mother who had lost her son by suicide. This is how it was described to me, and I share it with you.

The Cup Analogy - There is a cup of water sitting on a table. It is so full, it is rounded at the top. One or two drops of water are added to the cup and it spills over. What caused the water to spill? We want to blame the last one or two drops, but in an empty cup it would not spill. It was not the water in the cup prior to the drops being added, because if left alone, it would not have spilled. It was a combination of all the drops of water in the cup that came before and the last one or two drops that caused the water to spill.

In a person's life, the water in the cup is symbolic of all the hurt, pain, shame, humiliation, and loss not dealt with along the way. The last couple of drops symbolize the "trigger events," "the last straw," the event or situation that preceded the final act of taking one's own life. Often we want to blame the trigger event, but this does not make sense to us. Like the water, these events all by themselves would not cause someone to end their life. It is the combination of everything in that person's life not dealt with and the last one or two things that caused our loved ones to lose hope.

For us, we must find a way to pour out the water along the way. This may be through talking it out, writing it out, sometimes yelling it out, whatever works for you. We must learn to deal with our pain in a way our loved ones could not.

This analogy does not give us the concrete answer many of us are looking for, but I know it made sense for me and has been helpful for many survivors. It allowed me to let go of the search for "why," and to find a different way of dealing with my pain.

©Tracy Dean is a Program Coordinator at the National Resource Center for Suicide Prevention and Aftercare

I don't know why.

I'll never know why.

I don't have to know why.

I don't like it.

I don't have to like it.

What I do have to do is make a choice about my living.

What I do want to do is accept it and go on living.

The choice is mine.

I can go on living, valuing every moment in a way I never did before, or I can be destroyed by it and, in turn, destroy others.

I thought I was immortal.

That my family and my children were also.

That tragedy happened only to others.

But I know now that life is tenuous and valuable.

So I am choosing to go on living, making the most of the time I have, valuing my family and friends in a way never possible before.

From the book *My Son, My Son*, by Iris Bolton
©Bolton Press Atlanta 1983

"Now death has shaken your faith, 'Why?' 'Why must life be one of sorrow?' 'Why?' There are no pat answers. No one completely understands the mystery of death. Even if the question were answered, Would your pain be eased, your loneliness less terrible?"

'Why' may be more than a question. It may be an agonizing cry for a heart-breaking loss, an expression of distress, disappointment, bewilderment, alienation, and betrayal. There is no answer that bridges the chasm of irreparable separation. There is no satisfactory response for an unresolvable dilemma. Not all questions have complete answers. Unanswered 'Why's' are part of life. The search may continue but the real question might be 'How [do I] pick up the pieces and go on living as meaningful as possible?'"

Rabbi Earl Grollman

Bearing The Special Grief of Suicide

Arnaldo Pangrazzi

The suicide of someone you care about is a devastating tragedy. It happens in the best of families and to the best of people, shattering the lives of the shocked survivors.

In many ways, suicide is one of the most difficult deaths to mourn. As you mourn the death of your friend or loved one, you probably feel a sense of betrayal. You have invested years of caring, loyalty, and patience with the deceased. Suddenly you are abandoned and rejected. Perhaps you have had such thought as: "How could she do this to me?" "Couldn't he think about the children? Weren't we enough for him?"

Because you are bewildered by what has happened, you search for whys. A message left may help interpret what went on in the person's mind before the suicide. Yet the painful questions remain: "Why did he do it?" "Was she angry at me?"

You may also be filled with guilt, for suicide seems like not just a loss but also an accusation. You may feel that somehow you did not love enough, or that your relationship was not good enough. You keep rehearsing all the "if onlys:" "Why didn't I realize how sick he was?" "If only I had been home on time."

Recovery from the suicide of someone close is a monumental task, for the process of mending a broken heart is painful and slow. The road to recovery requires you to accept your feelings, to draw from your inner resources, and to develop positive attitudes toward the past, present, and future. The journey of healing starts with small steps leading from darkness to hope, from death to a renewed commitment to life.

Learn to live with unanswered questions. We do have some clues why people choose suicide. We know that suicide is often the response to some kind of loss; to real or perceived failure; to physical, psychological, or spiritual pain. The person's problem becomes the only thing that exists, and he or she cannot conceive that life will ever become any better.

But even knowing all this intellectually, you can still feel very confused emotionally. Behind your questions is a broken heart that can't be healed with simple answers. Struggling through the not knowing is extremely difficult. Your whys may never be answered, the puzzle never resolved. People who commit suicide often take with them the mystery of their life and death. You must gradually let go of the whys, accept what has happened, and go on living.

Allow time for bad memories. In the early stages of grief, survivors often experience playback of the suicide scene in their thoughts or in nightmares. You may feel robbed of pleasant memories and oppressed by this replay of the details surrounding the final event. You need to own and deal with these negative images before you can get in touch with your good memories. As the hurt gradually becomes less intense, positive feelings will surface and become more frequent and longer lasting.

Acknowledge your feelings of anger. Instinctively, survivors tend to reject the way their loved one chose to end his or her life. They may resent the deceased for checking out of the relationship on his or her own terms. They may also resent God for having allowed this to happen, or others for not preventing it. Anger is an investment. We never get angry at someone we do not care about. Anger, therefore, is not the opposite of love but a dimension of it - a sign of a love deeply wounded. Your anger can help you survive and reenter life or it can become destructive: It depends on how you channel it. You might try discussing your anger with an understanding friend. Or talking about it with God. Or writing a letter expressing it to the deceased. Ultimately, anger needs to be healed through a willingness to forgive.

Turn guilt into forgiveness. Most survivors blame themselves for what they did or did not do. They have the sense of something left unfinished, something suddenly interrupted. They find it hard to let go of their rescue fantasies. Guilt accompanies many of our experiences of powerlessness and imperfection. It can paralyze and demoralize us, or we can transform it into self-forgiveness and a greater capacity for loving those that are still around us.

Healing takes place when you realize that 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.

Accept the loneliness. Loneliness is the price we pay for loving. When a loved one dies, a part of us dies too. To some degree, the loneliness may last a lifetime, because no one can ever replace that person. An anniversary, a place, a song, a flower may bring back the memories, the aching pain. We feel the keen disappointment of not having that special person there to share in the family's changes, surprises, sorrows. Loneliness can help you realize the depths of your love. From it, you can learn to become more sensitive to other's losses and to turn to God, who is always there.

"The person who completes suicide dies once. Those left behind die a thousand deaths, trying to relive those terrible moments and understand."

Bearing the Special Grief of Suicide, Cont'd

Draw from your own spiritual resources. You may be struggling with questions like "Will God forgive her, or has he condemned her to hell?" While the act of suicide continues to be objectively wrong, contemporary theologians emphasize that individual circumstances may make it subjectively guiltless. Those who take their life may be so disturbed that they act compulsively; their perception of reality may be so distorted that their responsibility is greatly reduced. Only God knows what is in the heart of each person. Obviously, it does not take your grief away simply believing that God will view your loved one's action compassionately. But faith will help you live with your loss and grieve it well. And it will help you discover redeeming values in the midst of your suffering. Trust that God will sustain you through the stages of your bereavement.

Rebuild your self-esteem. The suicide of a friend or a loved one is a terrible blow to one's self-image. Rationally or irrationally, the survivors may feel judged by the community for having failed. They may feel that the suicide is a disgrace to the family or the school or even the community. Some have a strong urge to escape to a place where they are not known. And, unfortunately, the shame many survivors feel keeps them from acknowledging the suicide and talking about it - an important part of the recovery process.

After the shattering experience of a suicide, you need to pick up the pieces, reaffirm your commitment to life, and rebuild confidence in yourself. Be patient with yourself. Remember that time, by itself, does not heal. It is how you use the time that's important. When you can stare less frequently at the past and can recognize the value of small steps, you develop a framework within which the passage of time makes the loss not easier, but at least less hard.

Reach out to others. You can choose to let your broken-ness defeat you, or you can decide to get up and get going. Once you have the courage to place your hurt, your sensitivity, and your compassion at the service of others, you have discovered the key to help yourself. For when pain is used to reach out to others, it becomes creative and transforming love.

Take heart. Suicide leaves deep scars on the survivors. But there is no turning back: You cannot change what has happened. You can, however, change your outlook - from backward to forward, from death to life.

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 for the solidarity they have experienced with others, and with a deep awareness 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.

(Father Arnaldo Pangrazzi resides in Rome as the international coordinator for ministry for the Order of St. Camillus. He has conducted seminars and founded support groups for the bereaved, cancer patients, and suicide survivors.)



Suicide is not chosen; it happens when pain exceeds resources for coping with pain.

Nothing can make up for the absence of someone whom we love, and it would be wrong to try to find a substitute It is nonsense to say that God fills the gap; he does not fill it, but on the contrary, he keeps it empty and so helps us to keep alive our former communion with each other, even at the cost of pain.

~~Dietrich Bonhoeffer~~



The publication *Surviving a Suicide Loss: A Resource and Healing Guide* is available from the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. The booklet is designed to help survivors navigate the experience of losing a loved one to suicide. The guide includes practical information about coping with suicide loss, personal survivor stories, articles on bereavement, resource listings and an extensive bibliography. You can order this guide through the [AFSP Store](#), or by calling 1-888-333-AFSP Ext. 10. The guide is also available as a [download \(746 KB\)](#).

Suicide Grief



Your grief after a 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. Suicide grief affects all realms of your life.

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 one 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 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 he composed the note doesn't necessarily reflect his frame of mind when he developed a plan for suicide and followed through with it.
- People who die 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 question intensely, it is important not to assume that because the person choose suicide, she was unloved or 'crazy'. 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 Suicide Grief

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

*The human heart is
exquisitely fragile. Our
judgments need to be
gentle, our understanding
deep, and our forgiveness
wide.*

~~Ron Rolheiser~~



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 judgment. 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 words of God or other spiritual mentors.
- You may have questions about the value and meaning of life. When someone you know dies by suicide, 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, stomachache, chest pains, shortness of breath or general weakness and fatigue.

Strategies for Living with Suicide Grief

- 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.
- 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.



- 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.

- 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 griever in your area. You may also search the Internet for relevant

discussions groups.

- 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.
- 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.
- Accept your feelings. Find helpful ways to express them.
- 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.

- 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.
- 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 to God, or talk with a spiritual or religious 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.
- 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.

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In the final analysis, the questions of why bad things happen to good people transmutes itself into some very different questions, no longer asking why something happened, but asking how we will respond, what we intend to do now that it happened.

~~Pierre Teilhard de Chardin SJ~~

Beyond Surviving: Suggestions for Survivors

1. Know you can survive; you may not think so, but you can.
2. Struggle with "why" it happened until you no longer need to know "why" or until YOU are satisfied with partial answers.
3. Know you may feel overwhelmed by the intensity of your feelings but that all your feelings are normal.
4. Anger, guilt, confusion, forgetfulness are common responses. You are not crazy, you are in mourning.
5. Be aware you may feel appropriate anger at the person, at the world, at God, at yourself. It's okay to express it.
6. You may feel guilty for what you think you did or did not do. Guilt can turn into regret, through forgiveness.
7. Having suicidal thoughts is common. It does not mean that you will act on those thoughts.
8. Remember to take one moment or one day at a time.
9. Find a good listener with whom to share. Call someone if you need to talk.
10. Give yourself time to heal.
11. Remember, the choice was not yours. No one is the sole influence on another's life.
12. Be aware of the pain in your family and friends.
13. Be patient with yourself and others who may not understand.
14. Set your own limits and learn to say no.
15. Steer clear of people who want to tell you what or how to feel.
16. Know that there are support groups that can be helpful, such as Compassionate Friends or Survivors of Suicide groups.

By Iris M. Bolton

The Wailing Psalm

"I want to wail and scream in pain,
and not wash my face or comb my hair.
I want to fast from food and drink,
to abstain from music and fun.
I want to kick the walls and beat my breast,
and even tear out the telephone.
I'd throw away my mail and speak to no one.
but I am ashamed to grieve.

O God, how can I ever be the same again
or feel the earth solidly beneath my feet,
for ripped to shreds are my daily rituals,
my patterns of living, loving and sharing.
My heart feels full not of blood but of pain,
my lungs filled with screams, not breath.
My eyes are blinded to all by my bitter tears,
but I am ashamed of my lack of Easter hope.

O God, I know how you felt
on that terrible Good Friday.
So I ask you to say nothing to me now,
for nothing can be said.
Only hold me in your love, O God,
till the pain passes, if it ever will.
And pardon, I pray, my feeble faith
as I mourn like one without hope."

~~Edward Hays~~

*Psalms for Zero Gravity:
Prayers for Life's Emigrants*

I was shocked that I did not die from grief. And I know now that I will not die from grief because I choose not to. I may run--or shake wildly--or lie paralyzed on the ground for a while, but I will not ultimately succumb. Whatever gives us an increase sense of control--whether it be love or faith or cognitive coping--seems to mobilize our self healing system.

C.S. Lewis
A Grief Observed



When Someone Takes His Own Life

Norman Vincent Peale



In many ways, this seems to be the most tragic form of death. Often the stigma of suicide is what rests most heavily on those left behind...

The Bible warns us not to judge, if we ourselves hope to escape judgment. And I believe that this is the one area that Biblical command especially should be heeded. For how do we know how many valiant battles such a person may have fought and won before he loses that one particular battle? And is it fair that all the good acts and impulses of such a person should be forgotten or blotted out by his final tragic act?

I think our reaction should be one of love and pity, not of condemnation. Perhaps the person was not thinking clearly in his final moments; perhaps he was so driven by emotional whirlwinds that he was incapable of thinking at all. This is terribly sad. But surely it is understandable. All of us have moments when we lose control of ourselves, flashes of temper, or irritation, or selfishness that we later regret. Each one of us, probably, has a final breaking point - or would have if our faith did not sustain us. Life puts far more pressure on some of us than it does on others. Some people have more stamina than others...

My heart goes out to those who are left behind, because I know they suffer terribly...The immediate family of the victim is left wide open to tidal waves of guilt: "What did I fail to do that I should have done? What did I do that was wrong?" To such grieving persons I can only say, "Lift up your heads and your hearts. Surely you did your best. And surely the loved one who is gone did his best, for as long as he could. Remember, now, that his battles and torments are over. Do not judge him, and do not presume to fathom the mind of God where this one of His children is concerned."

A few years ago, when a young man died by his own hand, a service for him was conducted by his pastor, the Reverend West Stephens. What he said that day expresses far more eloquently than I can, the message that I'm trying to convey. Here are some of his words:

"Our friend died on his own battlefield. He was killed in action fighting a civil war. He fought against adversaries that were as real to him as his casket is real to us. They were powerful adversaries. They took toll of his energies and endurance. They exhausted the last vestiges of his courage and his strength. At last these adversaries overwhelmed him. And it appeared that he had lost the war. But did he? I see a host of victories that he has won!

For one thing - he has won our admiration - because even if he lost the war, we give him credit for his bravery on the battlefield. And we give him credit for the courage and pride and hope that he used as his weapons as long as he could. We shall remember not his death, but his daily victories gained through his kindnesses and thoughtfulness, through his love for his family and friends...for all things beautiful, lovely, and honorable. We shall remember not his last day of defeat, but we shall remember the many days that he was victorious over overwhelming odds. We shall remember not the years we thought he had left, but the intensity with which he lived the years that he had. Only God knows what this child of His suffered in the silent skirmishes that took place in his soul. But our consolation is that God does know, and understands."

Support Groups

For so many survivors, a crucial part of their healing process is the support and sense of connection they feel through sharing their grief with other survivors. The most common way this sharing occurs is through survivor support groups. These groups provide a safe place where survivors can share their experiences and support each other.

It is natural to feel a bit unsure about going to your first support group meeting. In *No Time to Say Goodbye* (see Bibliography), one facilitator explains what you can expect:

We sit in a circle, with each person giving a brief introduction: first name, who was lost, when it was, and how it happened. I then ask the people who are attending for the first time to begin, because they usually have an urgent need to talk. The rest of the group reaches out to them by describing their own experiences and how they are feeling. The new people realize they are not alone with their nightmare. By comparing their situations with others, they also begin to understand that they don't have a monopoly on pain.



Some survivors attend a support group almost immediately, some wait for years; others attend for a year or two and then go only occasionally — on anniversaries, holidays, or particularly difficult days. You may find that it takes a few meetings before you begin to feel comfortable. Or, you may find that the group setting isn't quite right for you, but can still be a useful way to meet one or two fellow survivors who become new, lifelong friends based on the common bond of understanding the pain and tragedy of suicide loss.

Seeking Counseling After the Suicide of a Loved One

After my husband took his own life, I knew almost immediately that I needed to see a therapist. Looking back on it today, I can't say that I knew exactly what I expected, I just knew *I had to see a therapist*. I knew that I needed to talk. And I knew that I needed to talk with someone who was knowledgeable about suicide and its aftermath. Beyond that, I had no preconceptions. I know today that seeking therapy in the wake of my husband's death was one of the most important things I've ever done for myself. But is it right for you? In the survivors of suicide support group I've heard survivors advise others to see a counselor. And I've heard some of the recipients of such advice question why, asking what benefit they might receive. Here are some thoughts.

My grief seems bigger than it should; My grief feels unmanageable; My grief scares me; The things I'm doing scare me.

Loss of a loved one to suicide rocks our world, turns it upside down, sometimes shatters it into pieces then scatters the pieces far and wide. In its wake we may find ourselves thinking or doing things that feel, well, "crazy," that cause us to worry about ourselves and our sanity. I have a friend who, in the aftermath of her son's death by suicide, would stand at her kitchen counter for hours, not noticing the passing of time. Other friends report experiencing endless crying jags, from which they thought they might never recover. After my husband's death I wrote in my journal that I was scared of the pain I was feeling, that it was "dangerous pain." Some of the things we think and feel and do in our grief are so beyond "normal" that we hesitate to share them with others, in fear of divulging what may not be understood and in fear of being judged. At times like these we might find it helpful to talk with a counselor who can assess our thoughts and feelings and determine if some intervention is necessary or who can simply assure us that what we are experiencing is not abnormal, given the circumstances, but is the result of the unfathomable pain we are feeling.



Why did she do it? What did I miss? How could I not know he was in such pain?

For many suicide survivors, the suicide death came as a complete shock. They did not know that their loved one was in such pain; they had no idea that he or she was contemplating suicide. Sometimes survivors wish to talk with a professional about their loved one's death - and life - in search of answers to the question why, "Why did he do it?" They also sometimes wish to explore their own actions, to deal with those other, guilt-filled, questions of why - "Why didn't I know?" "Why didn't I see the signs?" - in the presence of a nonjudgmental therapist who is also knowledgeable of suicidal persons and their behaviors.

My friends don't really understand, and their efforts to comfort me are making me angry.

Oftentimes in the grief process we feel all alone. Well-meaning friends may assure us that they understand how we feel, that they know what we're going through. But we discover that unless someone has lost a close loved one to death, they do not really understand. This is particularly true of survivors of suicide. Suicide grief carries with it characteristics that differentiate it from other forms of grief, including guilt, feelings of rejection, and anger toward the deceased. We oftentimes find that these distinct characteristics of our grief tend to distance us even further from those who want to love and comfort us but who don't understand some of the thoughts and feelings that send us reeling. Being able to talk in counseling with someone who *does* understand - and who can help us work our way through our newly challenged life - can provide us with an outlet that will then allow us to accept what our friends and loved ones *can* offer without our experiencing so greatly the negative feelings that the limits of their understanding may bring.



What do I tell the children?

Especially when they are in the midst of their own grief, parents may be confused about what to tell children about the death of a parent, a sibling, or other loved one, wondering how much a child can handle, how much detail should be provided. A counselor can help a parent determine what to tell the child, when to tell, what amount of detail to give, and so on.

My wife just cries all the time. My husband won't talk about it; he's shut me out. I think my daughter blames me for her father's death.

Everyone grieves in his own way, but different styles of grieving can cause problems within families when members attempt to cope as individuals *and* as a family unit. Sometimes families find it helpful to talk together with a counselor, to work through periods of grief together with an objective, neutral party who can help family members understand each other's efforts to cope and help them learn how to best help each other and themselves through this difficult time.

I can't get the picture out of my head. I awaken at night seeing her body.

Those who have witnessed a suicide or found the body may be plagued by painful, intrusive memories, including vivid visions of the scene itself. It is not unusual for such survivors to experience symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder. For these survivors especially, therapeutic assistance may be in order, helping them learn to manage the disturbing thoughts, memories, and feelings that interfere with daily life and efforts to heal. In addition, those who have witnessed the suicide or found the body may feel the need to talk about the experience but may be hesitant to share such details with friends or other relatives, out of concern for their ability to hear sometimes gruesome details. Seeing a counselor can provide a survivor the opportunity to fully talk about such details absent the fears we have of the effects the details might have on friends and family.

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Seeking Counseling, Cont'd

There may be myriad other reasons for seeing a counselor. Some persons who take their own lives may have been suicidal for a period of time before ultimately killing themselves. Survivors who lived with loved ones who talked about or made previous attempts to kill themselves may find it helpful to talk with a therapist about that time, about their efforts to love and support a suicidal person, their efforts to prevent the suicide from occurring. And survivors who are finding that the magnitude of their grief is affecting their ability to manage their current life may find it helpful to work through their grief with a skilled therapist who can provide suggestions for different ways of coping.

Not everyone who loses a loved one to suicide needs to see a counselor. But many find counseling to be beneficial. Therapists cannot take away our pain, nor would we want them to. But they can be an objective, nonjudgmental presence, a warm and comforting person with whom we can talk about our pain as well as the things we think and do and feel in the wake of a suicide death. Counselors can listen to us talk about things that we may be hesitant to talk about with others. And they can provide suggestions for ways of coping. Sharing our grief, this deep, most personal feeling, with a counselor can help us feel less alone at a time when we feel most alone. And that might be all the reason we need.

Donna Watson Lawson, ©2007



The Crisis Center

The Alachua County Crisis Center provides a variety of services to assist persons experiencing life crises, including persons contemplating suicide or persons who have suffered the death of a friend or family member due to suicide. Counseling is available - at no cost - for all survivors of suicide. Survivors can be seen individually, as couples, or as entire families, and counseling is available for children. Additionally, a Survivors of Suicide Support Group meets each month. For further information about survivor services or to schedule an appointment, call Crisis Center Director Marshall Knudson, Ph.D., at 264-6792.

Additional Crisis Center Services include:

- Crisis Line - a 24-hour telephone crisis intervention and counseling service. Phone counselors are always available.
- CARE Team - an emergency mobile outreach team which responds to people in crisis whenever face-to-face contact is essential, for example when suicide and life-threatening situations occur.
- Crisis Counseling - Short term crisis counseling is offered during regular business hours by appointment or on an emergency walk-in basis.

We urge anyone struggling with the death of a loved one by suicide to utilize the services of the Crisis Center:

Crisis Center
218 S.E. 24th Street
Gainesville, FL 3264

Marshall Knudson, Ph.D. 264-6792
Crisis Line 264-6789
Business Line 264-6785

- 24 Hours A Day ●

Survivors of Suicide Support Group

The Survivors of Suicide Support Group meets the second Wednesday of each month from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. at the Alachua County Crisis Center, 218 S.E. 24th Street in Gainesville. We, the survivors, have lost husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, mothers and fathers, other relatives and friends. All persons who have been touched by suicide are invited to attend support group meetings as little or as often as you wish. For additional information about the group or survivor services, please call Crisis Center Director Marshall Knudson, Ph.D., at 264-6792.



Solace Newsletter

The *Solace* newsletter contains articles about suicide grief, articles specific to the suicide death of a spouse, of a child, of a parent, and of a sibling, as well as articles about coping after a suicide loss. Current and past issues of *Solace* can be read on-line, as a link from the Alachua County Crisis Center web site: www.alachuacounty.us/government/depts/css/crisis/sos.aspx

If you would like to be placed on the mailing list for the bimonthly issues of *Solace*, please send e-mail to solaceacc@att.net or USPS mail to Donna Lawson at P.O. Box 140009, Gainesville, FL 32614

References/Links



Organizations

American Association for Suicidology
4201 Connecticut Avenue, Suite 408
Washington, D.C. 20008
(202) 237-2280; (202) 237-2282 fax
www.suicidology.org

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention
459 Blanton Road, N.W.
Atlanta, GA 30342
(404) 257-9415
www.afsp.org

Compassionate Friends
National Headquarters for Bereaved
Parents and Siblings
P.O. Box 3696
Oak Brook, IL 60521
(708) 990-0010
www.compassionatefriends.org

The Dougy Center - The National Center for
Grieving Children and Adolescents
P.O. Box 86852
Portland, OR 97286
(503) 777-3097
www.grievingchild.org

Florida Statewide Office of Suicide Prevention
2105 The Capitol
Tallahassee, FL 32399
(850) 488-9557
http://www.flgov.com/suicide_prevention

Florida Suicide Prevention Coalition (FSPC)
c/o Judy Bousquet Broward
P.O. Box 357434
Gainesville, FL 32635
(352) 213-6308
gatorjudy@yahoo.com
www.floridasuicideprevention.org

Friends for Survival, Inc.
P.O. Box 214463
Sacramento, CA 95821
(916) 392-0664
www.friendsforsurvival.org

National Resource Center for Suicide Prevention and Aftercare
The Link Counseling Center
348 Mt. Vernon Highway, N.E.
Atlanta, GA 30328
(404) 256-9797; (404) 256-3483
www.thelink.org

Samaritans
141 Tremont Street
Boston, MA 02111
(617) 536-2460
www.samaritanshope.org

Suicide and Mental Health Association
International
P.O. Box 702
Sioux Falls, SD 57101
<http://www.suicideandmentalhealthassociationinternational.org>

Suicide Awareness Voices of Education (SAVE)
8120 Penn Avenue, South, #470
Minneapolis, MN 55431
(952) 946-7998
www.save.org

Suicide Prevention Action Network, USA
1025 Vermont Avenue, N.W.
Suite 1066
Washington, DC 20005
<http://www.spanusa.org/index.cfm>

Survivors of Suicide
www.survivorsofsuicide.com



Books

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No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid. The same fluttering in the stomach, the same restlessness, the yawning. I keep on swallowing. . . It feels like being mildly drunk, or concussed. There is a sort of invisible blanket between the world and me. . . And grief still feels like fear. Perhaps, more strictly, like suspense. Or like waiting; just hanging about waiting for something to happen. It gives life a permanently provisional feeling. It doesn't seem worth starting anything. I can't settle down. I yawn. I fidget, I smoke too much. Up till this I always had too little time. Now there is nothing but time. Almost pure time, empty successiveness. . . How often – will it be for always? – how often will the vast emptiness astonish me like a complete novelty and make me say, 'I never realized my loss till this moment?' The same leg is cut off time after time, The first plunge of the knife into the flesh is felt again and again.

~~C.S. Lewis~~

Death is nothing at all. I have only slipped away into the next room. I am I, and you are you. Whatever we were to each other, that we still are. Call me by my old familiar name, speak to me in the easy way which you always used. Put no difference in your tone, wear no forced air of solemnity or sorrow. Laugh as we always laughed at the little jokes we enjoyed together. Play, smile, think of me, pray for me. Let my name be ever the household word that it always was, let it be spoken without effect, without the trace of a shadow on it. Life means all that it ever meant. It is the same as it ever was; there is unbroken continuity. Why should I be out of mind because I am out of sight? I am waiting for you, for an interval, somewhere very near, just round the corner. All is well.

~~~Scott Holland, in a sermon delivered in 1910

