

GRIEF AFTER SUICIDE

SOURCE: CANADIAN MENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION (CMHA)

The death of someone close to us is one of life's most stressful events. When the death is from suicide, family and friends must cope with sadness at the loss plus all their feelings of confusion and sometimes, even anger. It takes time to heal and each of us responds differently. Help may be needed to help cope with the changes in our lives. But in the end, coping effectively with bereavement is vital to our mental health.

If someone close to you has just committed suicide, we hope this information will help you understand that you are not alone in your struggle and that help is available. If you have a grieving friend or relative, this information may help both of you understand and cope with this difficult time.

How common is suicide?

Approximately one out of four people knows someone who has committed suicide. The deceased leaves behind a network of family and close friends who must cope with the same inner turmoil that you are probably trying to understand and cope with now.

Am I to blame? Could I have helped?

No, you are not to blame. After a suicide, family members and friends often go over the pre-death circumstances and events, blaming themselves for things they think they should or should not have done. "If only I had persuaded him to get help!" or "If only I hadn't told her I wanted a separation ... " Even though suicide is an individual decision, it is a very natural and common reaction for

survivors to feel guilt or responsibility. People who are left behind should seek out bereavement counseling or support groups to help relieve this feeling of responsibility.

What are the stages of grieving?

There are many different stages of grieving. The three stages outlined below are ones that most people we experience. However, people do not usually flow from the first stage through to the last in a logical order. Some people may jump back and forth between stages, and the length of time it takes to go through the different stages may vary.

STAGE I: Numbness or shock

Initially, people function almost mechanically. You may also feel anger, confusion, or even relief depending on the circumstances. These feelings are normal. Many people at this stage will keep an emotional distance from others to protect themselves and to avoid discussing the death.

STAGE II: Disorganization

It is normal to feel lonely, depressed, and tearful at this point. You may have problems sleeping or eating. Some people may feel sorry for themselves and even hallucinate. You may agonize over things you think you could have done for the deceased. At this stage, you may need to reach out to someone and discuss your feelings.

STAGE III: Re-organization





You will begin to feel more comfortable and may find that there are moments in your day when you do not think about your loss. Your feelings will not be as intense, and you will be able to focus on daily tasks. At this point, most people need encouragement to re-enter life's mainstream.

But remember, there is hope and help. You may never get over the death itself, but you will overcome the grief

Is anger or relief a natural reaction?

- While all kinds of loss are painful, the issues are different when dealing with a death by suicide. The length of time it takes to work through the stages of grief also varies depending on the circumstances.
- Feelings of anger, confusion, and relief are natural. Do not deny them. If the deceased person had been depressed and/or had previously attempted suicide, there is nothing wrong in feeling relieved that the burden is gone or that you are angry because you have another burden to carry.
- If you do not work through these feelings, you will prevent yourself from moving forward in the bereavement process. Not moving forward is dangerous; it can cause mental and physical illness and can tear families and friendships apart. It can stop people from coming to terms with the suicide. You must face your feelings before you can work them out.

How does suicide affect the family?

It is important to realize that not all members of the family will grieve in the same way or go through the same stages at the same time. Every family member needs room and understanding to go through the bereavement process in his/her own way.

Be honest with children about the cause of death. Otherwise, they will go through the grieving process again when they learn the truth. Be careful not to ignore or forget the grief experienced by children. They need help dealing with it but should not be 'protected' from it.

How will friends react?

- Generally, friends are well meaning. They want to give support and help but they may not know how. They may be afraid that they will overwhelm you or think that you want to be alone.
- Guide them. Tell your friends you want and need to talk about your loss. By opening, you will help yourself and help your friends help you. People who talk out their feelings are usually the people who recover most quickly from a loss by suicide.
- If your friends seem uncomfortable talking about the death, or even being with you, it may be a reaction to your discomfort. If you are uncomfortable talking about the circumstances, don't. Your friends will already know. Let others simply respond to the death of your loved one.





As a friend, what SHOULD I do?

- 🧠 **Be a good listener** - Your loved one may need to talk about what has happened, their feelings about it, or just to reminisce about their lives together.
- 🧠 **Provide reassurance** - It is very common for a person to feel guilt and that they could have done more. Acknowledge these feelings. Let them know that they did what they could. It will help him/her to come to terms with the fact that he/she is not to blame.
- 🧠 **Be available** - This is especially true immediately after the death and during holidays and other special events when the loss is most keenly felt. Treat your friend as you would treat anyone who has lost a family member.
- 🧠 **Be patient** - If a loved one refuses to accept your invitations to dinner, etc., be patient and keep asking. In time they will be ready. And never blame anyone. Suicide is a decision made by one person, and judgments should not be made about the family.
- 🧠 **Help out with errands and other tasks** - Depending on the situation, a grieving person may feel too overwhelmed with emotion to do even simple tasks; they may be having to deal with funeral arrangements or may be having to pick up the slack for a spouse who is no longer around to help them. Don't wait to be asked for help.
- 🧠 **Keep in touch** - Write letters, send sympathy cards or flowers, or call your loved one periodically.
- 🧠 **Encourage your friend to consider outside help from a counseling agency or support group in the community.** In a Suicide Bereavement Group or similar

self-help group, your friend will be able to discuss his/her mixture of feelings with other people who have suffered a similar loss.

As a friend, what SHOULDN'T I do?

- 🧠 Do not avoid them - Don't worry if you don't know the right thing to do or say. Your presence or simplest of gestures is all that is required to help.
- 🧠 Do not say, "It was for the best" -Realizing this doesn't diminish the pain and sense of loss.
- 🧠 Do not say, "I know how you feel" unless you really do - These are just hollow words unless you have been in the same situation and can offer suggestions about what helped you to heal.
- 🧠 Do not hide your feelings - Don't hide your own grief or avoid the subject because you don't want to upset them. Instead, grieve together, hold each other, and cry, or talk about the times you both spent with the loved. If you don't mention the person at all, it may in fact feel to the grieving as if you don't even care or understand how they are feeling. Open the communication lines.
- 🧠 Do not advise them to let go of clothing or personal effects before they're ready - Each person grieves in their own time. Out-of-sight, out-of-mind does not apply to someone you've loved deeply.
- 🧠 Do not try to accelerate the process of bereavement -- It can take a long time for a person to work through the grief, to deal with the confusion, and to come to terms with his/her feelings.





The following suggestions are directed towards survivors and are provided by Iris Bolton, author of *My Son ... My Son ... A Guide to Healing after Death, Loss, and Suicide*.

- 🧠 Remember to take one moment or day at a time.
- 🧠 Know that you will never be the same again, but you can survive and go beyond just surviving. You may not think so, but you can.
- 🧠 Struggle with 'why' it happened until you no longer need to know 'why' or until you are satisfied with partial answers.
- 🧠 Having suicidal thoughts, yourself is common. It does not mean you will act on these thoughts.
- 🧠 Don't be afraid to cry. Tears are healing.
- 🧠 Remember, the choice was not yours. No one is the sole influence in another's life.

- 🧠 Expect setbacks. Don't panic if emotions return like a tidal wave. You may only be experiencing a remnant of grief
- 🧠 Try to put off major decisions.
- 🧠 Give yourself permission to get professional help.
- 🧠 Be aware of the pain of your family and friends.
- 🧠 Be patient with yourself and others.
- 🧠 Set your own limits and learn to say no.
- 🧠 Know that there are support groups that can be helpful. If none are available, ask a professional to help start one.
- 🧠 Call on your personal faith to help you through.
- 🧠 It is common to experience physical reactions to your grief (headaches, loss of appetite, inability to sleep).
- 🧠 The willingness to laugh with others and at yourself is healing.

"The single largest barrier is ignorance."

