

Suicide Grief

(Adapted in part from Victoria Hospice)



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Suicide Grief

Your grief after a suicide may feel quite different than the grief you have felt after other kinds of losses. Often the death of someone from suicide has a much more intense and long lasting impact. When someone you know dies by suicide you may struggle with complex social, emotional and cultural issues that can make your grief overwhelming and isolating. You may 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 **at that moment in time**. Suicide is seen as the only release from a life 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- **Often the person who chooses suicide has withdrawn from friends and family.** Sometimes once a decision about suicide has been made the person seems preoccupied, remote or even really happy.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 composed the note doesn't necessarily reflect her frame of mind when she 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 chose suicide, he 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 (cont).

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 she did not value her life and your relationship as you did. You may feel angry that she just gave up or that she didn't consider how devastating this loss would be for the people who cared about her. You may feel angry at God. You may feel angry at yourself.
- **You may feel tremendous guilt and blame.** You may feel that something you did or didn't do contributed to the despair that he felt when he chose suicide. If your relationship with the person who died was conflicted you may accuse yourself of being the cause of his 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 him for reasons of your own health or well-being.
- **You may feel ashamed or judged by others.** Many people think that people who die by 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 he had been suffering for some time and it seemed as though nothing would ever improve, you may understand his desperation and his decision.

YOUR THOUGHTS:

- **You may experience confusion and forgetfulness.** These are common responses in fresh grief. You are not crazy; you are in mourning.
- **You may want to 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 she could have chosen this traumatic final way to solve her 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 a 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 may find 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 by 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 his 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 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 may question how you can 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 (See Resources, listed at the end of this handout).

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 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 will listen and 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. In Nanaimo, a Suicide Bereavement Support Group meets monthly through Nanaimo Community Hospice Society. You may also search the Internet for relevant discussions groups. Refer to the Resource Page for more information regarding support groups and the internet.
- **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.
- **Accept your feelings.** Find helpful ways to express them. Tears can be healing. Know you can survive. You may not think so right now, but you can. Remember to take one moment, one day, one step at a time. Expect setbacks. Your grief may come over you like a tidal wave and come in upsurges of grief. This is normal.
- **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. Be patient with yourself and give yourself time.
- **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 or your counsellor – someone 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 feel you made.** Even if you cannot undo the mistakes that you feel you have 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.

Resources

Books:

Beyond Grief by Carol Staudacher

This book has something for everyone who is grieving or wants to know about grief. There are general chapters that address the emotional, physical, social, thought and spiritual struggles that bereaved people commonly experience. There is also an excellent chapter on suicide grief.

Living When a Young Friend Commits Suicide by Earl Grollman

This is a book written for teens that are grieving after a suicide death. It is written in point form and very easy to read. It addresses most, if not all, of the questions that teens will have about suicide.

After Suicide Loss: coping with your grief by Bob Baugher

A small easy to read well written book.

Healing After The Suicide of a Loved One by Ann Smolin and John Guinan

This book invites you to begin your healing journey. It has case studies and good information and advice.

The Empty Chair by Beryl Glover

Another well written and helpful book.

Surviving Suicide <http://survivingsuicide.com>

Site hosted by a suicide bereaved mom. Has a lot of easy to access information organized by topic. Also provides links to many other websites for suicide grievers.

Suicide Bereavement Group: (250) 591-8811

The first Wednesday of each month, from 6:00 to 8:00 p.m. Meetings are held at Nanaimo Community Hospice. **Participants must be registered Hospice clients and have met once with a Hospice counsellor.**

If you are feeling suicidal please call:

The Vancouver Island Crisis Line (250) 753-2495

Mental Health and Addictions Walk-in Counselling Clinic

No appointment necessary.

Monday-Friday 10:00 a.m. – 7:00 p.m.

Brooks Landing Mall

203-2000 Island Highway, N. Nanaimo.

(phone) **250 739-5710**