

When Someone Close to You Commits Suicide

Overview

How to cope with the loss of a loved one to suicide.

- Understanding grief
- What to tell others
- Creating closure
- Resources

Surviving the suicide of a loved one is a terribly painful event. You may experience a lot of emotions all at once. You may feel shocked, confused, and even angry. A common emotion that survivors of suicide have is guilt. People tend to think of what they might have done differently to help prevent the suicide. These are all normal thoughts and emotions, and although it will take time, with the right support you can continue on successfully with your life.

Understanding grief

There is no one way of grieving the loss of a loved one through suicide. Grief is a process of healing that takes different courses for different people. It is important to know that even though you may be far along in the healing process, there may be times when it comes up again, such as around a particular holiday, a birthday, or even a season. That is, grief may never be entirely finished, but it can become more and more manageable in your daily life. Try not to set time limits on your grief, or compare your feelings to anyone else's. Here are some things you need to know about the stages of grief.

Denial

This is very often the first stage in the grieving process. Denial works to protect us from feeling overwhelmed by intense emotions like shock, anger, or anguish. Thoughts like "This can't be happening" or "There must be some kind of mistake" are common first reactions to the loss of a loved one. Denial serves the purpose of helping come to terms, initially, with grief. If it stays on too long, however, it can work against the healing process.

Anger

One aspect of grief is anger. You may find yourself blaming others or organizations for not being able to prevent your loved one's death. It is also common to blame your loved one for taking his or her life and leaving you without him or her. The anger is perfectly normal, although it can be disruptive if your level of anger is very high. Here are some ways to manage your anger:

- *Tell yourself that anger is normal following a terrible loss.* Try and keep that in mind, especially if you find yourself blaming yourself for the anger. It is OK to be angry about your loss, and talking about it with friends and family can often help you calm down.

- *Exercise as a way to help calm yourself.* Taking a walk or a bike ride can help calm your racing thoughts or the physical side effects of anger (muscle tension, headaches, etc.).
- *Be careful not to direct anger at others.* As much as you may want to verbally or physically attack someone, expressing your anger in this way will not help you. Talking about it will help.
- *Express your feelings through journal writing, painting, music, or poetry.* Not everyone feels like talking all the time, so activities like writing in a journal or painting a picture may help get your feelings out in a positive way. Expressing your feelings in different ways can also help you better understand what is happening to you.

Bargaining and guilt

It is common in this stage of the grieving process to want to “cut a deal with God” in exchange for rolling back time and preventing your loved one’s suicide. It is only human to want things back the way they were. For example, you may say that you’ll start praying every day or go to church or stop being mean if only you can have your loved one back. Bargaining also involves becoming obsessed with lots of “what ifs”: “What if I had taken her straight home?” “What if I’d gone downstairs and checked on him that night?” “What if I had told her I loved her more?”

Being deep in grief makes it hard to think clearly, and you may really believe that you could have stopped your loved one’s suicide. If you find yourself bargaining or thinking about all the “what ifs,” just remember that this is all part of a normal grieving process. And remember that you did not cause your loved one to commit suicide. Again, talk with others about your feelings. You may also consider turning the guilt you feel into positive action by volunteering your time or money to an important cause. Sometimes taking action to support others helps relieve guilt.

Depression

As the daily reality of your loss begins to sink in, you may find yourself battling some depression. It can be hard to see how you can go on without your loved one. You may begin to experience some signs of depression, such as

- a noticeable change in appetite
- difficulty sleeping or sleeping too much
- wanting to be alone most of the time
- having a hard time concentrating
- feeling tired and without energy
- bodily aches and pains

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- feeling that you can't go on
- weight loss or gain
- frequent crying
- agitation
- loss of pleasure

If these symptoms persist, it is important to get to your health care provider or contact your employee assistance program (EAP), if available. Your EAP can help you find professional counseling and/or support groups in your area. If you need help contacting your EAP, ask your manager or human resources (HR) representative.

Acceptance

This is the final stage of the grief process, when you realize that your life is continuing on. Most people at this stage feel an increase in energy and are better able to think about and act on future goals. The loss is still there, but it does not dominate your life.

It is important to seek support from others during all the stages of grief.

- *Ask for help from family and friends.* Stay in touch with friends and relatives and ask them to help you with whatever you need. When suffering a loss, you may find it difficult to do simple tasks. You may need someone to have dinner with or to help you clean the house. This kind of concrete help can see you through the worst of the initial shock.
- *Talk with people you love about your anguish.* Talking to friends, family, or a professional counselor can help you deal with your feelings. Sharing your pain may make you feel less alone with your loss. Expressing your feelings is critical at this time. Give yourself time and permission to grieve. Grief can't be rushed or ignored.
- *Seek support from your employee assistance program, if available.*
- *Take care of yourself.* Although you may not feel like it, make sure you continue to eat regular meals, even if it's less than you normally eat, and try to keep to a regular sleep routine. As difficult as it may be, you need to go on living your life. Trying to get back to even a partial routine can help you feel more like yourself.
- *Respect your beliefs.* Spiritual beliefs can be a great comfort following a loss. Religious and cultural customs may provide much needed stability, comfort, and peace.

- *If, as time goes on, you continue to have trouble dealing with the loss of your loved one, consider talking with a counselor or therapist.* Ignoring your own depression will only make things harder. Now is the time you may want to consider attending a support group in your area and contact your EAP for further direction and assistance.

What to tell others

Breaking the news of suicide can be one of the hardest things you will ever do. Friends and family of the suicide victim will need to be reassured that it wasn't their fault and they couldn't have prevented it. Survivors of suicide (the loved ones left behind) often feel an added sense of guilt or fear of being judged by others about why the suicide occurred. Make sure they are in a safe place with others around for support before you tell them. It's best to be gentle, but direct. Let them know people who commit suicide are often suffering from a chemical imbalance as a result of depression or another psychiatric illness.

It is especially difficult to tell children about suicide. Although they may not fully understand death or suicide, children do feel loss and grief, and they need help with their feelings. According to SAVE (Suicide Awareness Voices in Education), common feelings include

- hurt over being abandoned; they may feel the person who died really didn't love them
- thinking the death is their fault
- being afraid they will die, too
- worry that someone else they love will die or worry about who will take care of them
- guilt because they wished or thought of the person's death
- sadness
- embarrassment
- confusion
- anger with the person who died, at God, at everyone
- loneliness
- denial -- pretending nothing happened
- numbness
- wishing it would all go away

It is important to reassure children that all of their feelings are OK.

- *Talk truthfully about the loss.* While your initial reaction may be to hide the truth about your loved one's death, it is best to tell children the truth. Otherwise, they may hear it from someone else, which might be worse for them. Keeping the truth from children also sends the message that it's not OK to talk about sadness and pain. Tell them as much as you know, using simple and direct words. You might say, "He was in a great deal of pain and didn't know where to get help." Tailor your words to the child's maturity level and help younger kids put words to their emotions like "angry" and "sad."
- *Talk about your own feelings.* It's OK to cry and acknowledge your own sadness. This helps your child come to terms with his own feelings.
- *Show your love.* Sometimes children think they will lose you, too. Giving children pictures of you or other objects will help them get through the tough moments.
- *Be patient.* It's natural for children to ask the same questions over and over. It's their way of trying to come to terms with their confusion about death.
- *Explain death in a way that fits with your beliefs.* If you have spiritual beliefs, talking with your child about them may help them better understand the death of a loved one.

Creating closure

Coming to a place of acceptance (the final stage of grieving) often goes hand in hand with getting a sense of closure on the actual death. Talking with others who knew the person well or even having some kind of a gathering to talk about the person can be quite healing. In addition, getting support from spiritual leaders can assist in creating closure. Laughing and enjoying life again doesn't mean you've forgotten your loved one. In fact, going on with your life is a wonderful way of honoring your loved one's memory.

Resources

- *The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention* provides research, education, and information on support groups in all 50 states. Information and help is available on their Web site at www.afsp.org or by calling 888-333-AFSP (2377).
- *The American Association of Suicidology* provides information on current research, prevention, ways to help a suicidal person, and surviving suicide. A list of crisis centers is also available. Visit their Web site at www.suicidology.org or call 202-237-2280.
- *Suicide Awareness Voices of Education (SAVE)* provides information and resources on surviving suicide and depression. Visit their Web site at www.save.org or call 888-511-SAVE.

- *Local crisis center or suicide prevention center.* Crisis centers and suicide prevention centers often have listings of local support groups. Check your local yellow pages for local listings.

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