

# HOPE4U AND HEALING

We hope this guide has reached you at a time when it can be most helpful. This is a practical guide to help you through: the first few moments then the first few hours then the first few days then the first few years.

This guide—focuses on the practical matters that survivors need to deal with after a suicide. We hope it will help you through this difficult time.



**A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR PEOPLE WHO HAVE LOST SOMEONE  
TO SUICIDE** By Diane Russell Hope4u foundation

# THE PURPOSE OF LIFE IS A LIFE OF PURPOSE.

Robert Byrne  
*American Celebrity*

## ***When someone close to you dies by suicide you will survive.***

Yes, the grief is overwhelming. It is hard to believe now, but one hour at a time, one day at a time, you will get through it. And then, as time goes on, the pain will lessen.

**What helps in the short-term.** Emotional reactions to a suicide are intense and overwhelming? Knowing what to expect will help you cope and begin healing.

You may feel as if your brain is numb. You may forget things. You are not to blame for the choice made by another person. You are not to blame for the suicide of someone close to you.

It is not unusual to feel overwhelmed by sorrow, physically illness and angry. You may feel ashamed or guilty. Sometimes, you think about suicide yourself. These reactions and other strong feelings are normal. People react in different ways when they are mourning such a loss. You feel there is no time for grief.

If you are having thoughts of harming yourself, talk to someone (for example, a friend, family member, religious or spiritual leader, or counsellor) about how to cope with your feelings and keep yourself safe. let others help you Your sense of confusion is likely so great at first that it can be hard to cope—so let other people help you. Look to your friends, family, place of worship, community, and others for support.

They can deal with callers and help make funeral and other arrangements. They can assist you in remembering what you need to know and do and in making some decisions.

**Telling others what to say.** One challenge you will face is telling others about the suicide. Although it may be difficult to speak openly about suicide, it is important to tell family and friends the truth. This allows them to help each other cope with their grief and helps you work through yours.

In some situations, you might choose to say something as brief as, “She died by suicide, and I just can’t talk about it yet” or “He lived with a deep depression and died by suicide.” Creating a brief statement that you repeat can be helpful so that you aren’t trying to think of what to say each time you need to tell someone.

You do not have to disclose details to people who are not close to the family. In addition to telling family and close friends, you will need to notify people with whom the deceased had regular contact. Because telling people can be difficult, you may want to ask someone to help you make these phone calls.

The list of people to inform might include school personnel, an employer and work colleagues, doctors, religious or spiritual organizations and the owner of the property where the deceased was living.

**When telling children and teens.** Tell the truth You need to tell children and teens that the death was a suicide. While they may not need to know all the details, especially if they are very young, they do need to know that the person killed himself or herself. It may be hard to say this—but it's the truth and it's better that they hear it from you.

Young people can sense when they are being lied to. And concealing the truth only fuels an atmosphere of mistrust, fear and loneliness. If you do not tell them the truth, eventually they will find out through someone else. That will be far more painful for them.

Children will ask "Why?" This is a difficult question to answer because the only person who knew why, was the person who died. Make the explanation fit the age of the child. For example, a younger child can be told, "He didn't want to live anymore. He felt sad and hopeless and forgot that he could get help." Keep your answers simple and short. Children and teens will tell you what they want to know, and you need answer only what they ask about.

**Show your grief.** It is okay for young people to see your anger, helplessness, and confusion. Observing your reactions helps them understand that their own feelings are normal and okay. Check in with them to make sure they do not take on responsibility for your feelings. They need to know it is not their job to make things better for the family. Reassure them that you and others are still able to take care of them. Listen and reassure Children and teens may be confused when they are told the death was a suicide. They may ask a lot of questions to make sense of the news: "Didn't he love us?" or "Why was she so sad?" Answer the questions that you can. Tell them that you do not have all the answers but that you are always there to listen. Encourage them to talk about their feelings. You may find there are times when young people benefit from talking to someone else, such as a family friend or a therapist.

**When someone close to you dies by suicide.** Young people will need plenty of reassurance that the suicide was not their fault, that they are still loved, and that other people they care about will not die too.

Emphasize that there are always other solutions to problems—so that they do not see suicide as a way of coping with their problems. Seek help young people need a lot of support and comfort when a loved one dies. You may find it too difficult to support your children or reassure them when you are in the early stages of grieving. If this is the case, call on someone you trust or seek the help of a professional therapist or a bereavement support group.

**Working through the grief.** Grief is more complicated when a death is sudden. There is no chance to say goodbye. Strong emotions arise as a result of the suicide: extreme sadness, anger, shame and guilt are normal responses to a sudden death. But you are not to blame. The search to find out why someone decided to end his or her life is a painful yet important part of working through the grief—even when there are no answers.

**The stigma of suicide.** You are not only grieving a loss, you are dealing with the emotions around suicide as well. Grieving a suicide can be more difficult and more complicated than grieving other deaths.

There is the question of why this happened, the suddenness of the death, the means of death, and the presence of police and coroners. Although you may feel that there was something you could have done to prevent the suicide, you wouldn't feel this way if the person died from cancer, heart disease or other causes. Many people—based on cultural, religious and societal beliefs—hold negative attitudes about death by suicide. They view suicide as a moral issue rather than as the health issue that it is. Knowing that some people feel this way, and listening to their judgmental comments, can add another element of distress on top of what you're already feeling.

It may also make you want to keep the cause of death a secret This rate is higher for youth, older adults, people with mental health problems (especially depression and bipolar disorder), Aboriginal people and inmates in correctional facilities. About 90 per cent of people who die by suicide have a mental health problem. By talking about suicide, you are breaking the silence around this often-unspoken topic.

**Working through the grief.** Some aspects of grief are predictable. But grief

does not involve stages or phases that one passes through in a linear fashion. Rather, grief is like a roller coaster ride: it tends to ebb and flow daily, and you may feel many emotions at the same time. The hardest time can be after the most immediate or critical issues have been attended to, when there are fewer distractions, and others have returned to their daily lives. It is important for you and those who care about you to recognize that you need ongoing support.

**Numbness and shock.** Individuals usually feel numb and in shock when they first find out about the suicide, and for several weeks after or even longer. This feeling is like sitting on the side of a play about your life, but not really taking part in life itself. Nothing seems real.

The feeling of shock has a purpose - it cushions you from the pain of what has happened. Over time, the numbness fades and you will proceed with your grieving. The grief process is different for each person.

***The following are some of the ways people react to the suicide of a family member or friend.***

**Changes in behaviours.** You may find yourself acting in ways that are different from how you behaved before. This could include changes in your habits as well as changes in your relationships with others, such as:

Disturbances in your sleeping patterns

Crying - sometimes uncontrollably and for a long time

Visiting places or carrying treasured objects associated with the person who has died

Restless overactivity

Withdrawing socially (for example, by avoiding friends and phone calls)

Lack of interest in the world

Overuse of alcohol and other drugs or overdoing activities to numb the pain

Eating more or less than you usually do

Generally doing things out of character

Discovering that your usual coping mechanisms are not working for you now.

• **Emotional responses.** Some of the emotional reactions you may experience as you grieve include:

- Anger
- Sadness

- Guilt
- Anxiety
- Shock
- Denial
- Helplessness
- Hopelessness
- Apathy
- Despair
- Numbness
- Relief (sometimes, if the person was ill for a long time)
- Yearning or pining for the person
- Frustration
- Irritability
- Loneliness or isolation
- Feeling overwhelmed.
- Being forgetful
- Being unable to think straight
- Lacking the ability to make decisions
- Looking for signs that the person is there.

**Physical responses** You may find that your body works differently or that you experience physical symptoms that are not normal for you. This could include:

- Being clumsy and unco-ordinated
- Lacking energy or feeling extremely tired
- Being hyper-alert and unable to rest
- Muscle weakness
- Difficulty breathing
- Tightness in the chest or chest pain
- Dry mouth or problems swallowing
- Feeling emptiness in the stomach
- Nausea or digestive upsets
- Irregular heartbeat
- Sensitivity to noise
- Startling easily
- Changes in appetite
- Frequent colds and other illnesses.

**Grieving takes time. How long people grieve varies.**

Occasionally you can get stuck as they work through their grief. If this

happens, a therapist can help. You need people in your life who can support you. Clinical depression is different from normal grief in that it is more intense and prolonged. If you are concerned about depression, please contact your doctor.

**Young people and grief.** When children grieve Children do not show their feelings in the same way adults do. You may see their emotions expressed in their behaviour and play. And they may talk about their feelings with other children rather than with adults. Sometimes children look as though they have not been affected by the death. They may cry for a while and then return to play and within moments be laughing—this is because their words and behaviour do not always reflect how they feel inside. Adults often misinterpret this behaviour as a lack of capacity to grieve; however, what adults are observing is the child mourning in manageable chunks. It is common for children, as they grow, to grieve the loss of a loved family member at a later time. They may develop new feelings and new responses to the death, even years after the suicide.

They often ask different questions as they try to understand what happened from a more mature point of view. And they may experience grief again as they pass through various developmental events, such as graduations, proms, getting their first job, getting married and the birth of their first child. Children need to deal with their grief. Be available to talk with them about the death or have them talk to someone else they and you trust.

#### **Children who are four and under:**

- often think in concrete terms
- may associate death with sleep
- may not see death as final
- engage in “magical thinking”; for example, children do not have a sense of permanence: they believe the deceased person can return or that they can visit the deceased.

**Five to eight years.** Children at this age are learning to see death as final for all living things, including themselves. They may:

- ask many questions. Working through the grief
- be curious about what happens to the body
- engage in magical thinking - this could show up as thought processes indicating the child thinks he or she caused the death or fears that death is contagious.

**Nine to 12 years.** Children in the preteen years of nine to 12:

- realise that death can happen to anyone, whether they are young or old
- may continue to believe they are invincible
- understand that memories keep the person alive.

**Teens grieve.** Teens experiencing the suicide of a family member or friend may be confronting death for the first time. The teen years are marked by many firsts which is why, at times, teens seem to have dramatic reactions to life events. As with all firsts, teens don't have prior experience to draw on and are unsure about what to do with their grief. They grieve differently than adults and, because their brains are still developing, problem solving may not be a well-developed skill.

Teen mourning rituals tend to be more collaborative and less private than adults. They may exhibit more anger and feel guilty about not knowing about the risk of suicide or doing something to prevent it. Like adults, they will ask why and try to comprehend how someone can end his or her life. At the same time, they may be acutely aware of their own self-destructive patterns.

Peer groups and other groups they may belong to (such as clubs, teams, and cultural and religious groups) can be helpful to teens. Expressing themselves through technology is common with teens and can also be useful in the grieving process (for example, writing an online journal or blog as a way to remember and celebrate the person). Signs of teens' grief: As with adults and younger children, the ways in which adolescents express their grief will vary from teen to teen.

#### **Some common signs of teen grief include:**

- appearing confused, depressed, angry or guilty
- experiencing physical complaints, such as having difficulty eating or sleeping
- masking their hurt and pain to fit in with their peers
- changes in school work patterns, either by burying themselves in school work and doing well or by not being able to concentrate and doing poorly
- feeling different or that they no longer fit in with their peer group
- relying on friends or changing to other groups who they feel understand them more
- becoming more responsible and taking on the roles and responsibilities of the deceased (especially if the deceased was their parent), or being more

- helpful to their parents or the surviving parent
- becoming overly concerned with the safety of family members and friends
- feeling like they have lost their family because the dynamics have shifted.

### **Working through the grief with young people.**

For young people, the seriousness of the loss takes them beyond the innocence of childhood. Their world is shattered. Their once-predictable life has become uncertain and frightening. Yet grieving children and teens are amazingly resilient and, with support from loved ones, can grieve and begin healing. Children and teens need this support, regardless of how they seem to be coping. Demonstrations of love and ongoing support are the greatest gifts you can give a grieving child or teen. If you are also grieving, make sure that you have your own supports, while also supporting your children. There are many ways you can help children and teens cope with the death and their ensuing grief.

### **Here are some suggestions. Talking about the death with young people.**

- Be “present” and focused and listen to what they are saying— and what they are not saying.
- Do not force young people to talk about the death. Wait until they are ready. Create a loving and safe environment where young people can ask questions. Answer questions. If young people do not get their questions answered, they fill in the blanks and use their imaginations to come up with scenarios that are often worse.
- Respond only to what the young person is asking about. Do not provide more information than asked for.
- Encourage children and teens to express their thoughts, feelings and fears. Help them to identify these feelings.
- Make sure young people know it is okay to feel happy as well as sad. Feeling happy (or feeling better) does not mean that they are not sad about the death or that they have forgotten the person.
- Keeping up routines
- Provide consistency and routines for children and teens.
- Engage young people in activities that can take their minds off what has happened or can help them celebrate the person’s life. This could include drawing, moulding clay, writing, playing with toys, making a memory picture book or a memory box with favourite mementos, framing a picture of the person, planting a tree or garden in the person’s honour, lighting a memorial candle, or visiting the cemetery.

What helps healing. It will get better Healing does not mean forgetting. It means that the sadness and other feelings do not get in the way of your life as much as they did in the beginning. You will heal and the pain will lessen.

Keep on talking some families and individuals seek out information about suicide and grieving; others choose not to do so. Many may say they talked their way through their grief. As you heal, talk about your memories of the person who died by suicide. Find a safe person, who will let you talk and are comfortable hearing about your pain. The people you choose to talk to may or may not have experienced the suicide with you. When you are open about the suicide, you give others permission to talk about it too.

Keeping the suicide, a secret adds to the feeling of shame. A lot more people than you realize have been touched by suicide. At times you may need to be distracted from your grieving. That is okay. Do not feel guilty about losing yourself in something else for a while. Hold on to your memories often you, both adults and young people, have found comfort in holding on to items that remind them of the person, such as furniture, clothing, jewellery or favourite objects.

You might like to put together an album with photos of the deceased. You can also build a collection of memories by asking other people to tell you their stories of the deceased and recording them in a notebook. Do what works for you. Sometimes friends and family want to help but they do not know what to do. They may feel uncomfortable talking about suicide because of the stigma attached to it. They may be worried that you or others will cry when they bring up the subject. They might act strangely and not mention the suicide at all. Do not let this get in the way of your talking about it when you need to. Tell people it is okay to mention the suicide and let them know they can help you by simply listening. Most people really do care.

It is okay to say “No” when invited to do something you do not feel ready to do. Some individuals feel even more pain and emptiness several months after the death. The tasks of planning the funeral and dealing with financial and legal matters have been completed. Friends and family have offered their sympathy and then needed to get back to their lives. Be prepared for this and reach out for help when you need it.

Difficult days There will be many times throughout the years when coping with the loss becomes more difficult, such as the anniversary of the death,

birthdays and holidays. These occasions can intensify your grief—and you may feel more on edge in the days or weeks leading up to them. It will help you to plan ahead and talk to other family members about how they want to spend the day. This gives everyone a chance to support each other and talk about their grief. Often the anxiety about the date is more intense leading up to the day than on the actual day. Developing rituals to mark important days can be helpful.

Many times you identify what is considered to be a triggering event, such as a relationship breakup, as the “cause” of the suicide when, in most cases, the person had been in extreme emotional or physical pain for a long time. As you work through your grief, you will gradually learn to live with questions that cannot be answered.

**support groups** You may find it helpful to talk to other survivors of suicide. The healing power of a shared experience is strong and talking to others who have lost someone to suicide can help you work through your own grief. Sharing your experience can help break your sense of isolation and give you a sense that you are not alone in your journey.

There are many bereavement groups available, through numerous organisations. You may find it most helpful to join a group that is specific to your loss (for example, a spouse, a child, a sibling) and that is with other survivors of suicide. You may also find it useful to seek support among people and groups who share the same spiritual, religious or cultural world view as you and who can better relate to your experience of death and suicide. Aboriginal people, for example, may find comfort in talking to an elder or talking circle.

Grieving is a normal, healthy response to a significant loss in your life. Seeking help from a therapist can provide guidance and offer some understanding of your difficult journey. A professional can also dispel some of the myths associated with grieving and help you assess the need for medication.

Grieving takes energy, so forgive yourself when you simply can't do the things you think you “should” do. In the beginning, your grief journey may use up all the energy you need just to get through the day, especially if you have to care for others or deal with some of the practical matters discussed earlier. The more you take care of yourself, the better equipped you will be to get through each day. Each person is unique. What works for one person may

not be helpful to another person. And there may be days when you find that doing the same thing that was helpful yesterday may not be as helpful today.

Here are some suggestions that may help you:

Make time for you. Use your alone time to think, plan, meditate, pray, journal, remember and mourn. Surround yourself with safe people and safe places to support you on this difficult journey. Accept help. Do not be afraid to tell people what you need. Often, people may not know what to say or how to help. For example, you could suggest tasks (such as mowing the grass, shopping for groceries or going for a walk with you) to friends and family who want to help. You could create a venue, such as a blog, where you could tell people how they can help.

One day... As time passes, you will find the courage and resources to keep going and have the energy to be more purposeful about taking care of yourself. Here are some suggestions:

- Manage your health. Eat a balanced diet and get physical exercise. Drink plenty of water and avoid or limit your use of alcohol, caffeine and tobacco.
- Keep a journal. Record your thoughts, feelings, hopes and dreams. Writing them down may help make them more real. Using technology (such as e-mail and Facebook) is one way to keep in touch with people.
- Talk things out. Confide in a trusted friend, family member, colleague, religious or spiritual leader, or professional therapist.
- Practise relaxation techniques such as deep breathing and visualization.
- Use music, art or other creative therapies to explore and work through your feelings. Read about suicide, grief and the ways in which people have used their spirituality to cope in times of tragedy.
- Take a break from your grief. See a movie, visit a museum or art gallery, pursue a hobby or go for a walk with a friend.
- Re-establish a routine in your life. Survivors often find the structure and distraction of returning to work or getting a new routine helpful.
- Give back to your community. Many survivors have found a sense of peace and fulfillment in shared compassion and in using their experiences to help others.
- Take small steps. Recognize each step forward and reward yourself in some way. Whatever you do, make sure it feels right to you.

# *A tribute to my sons*

*How did I cope this the second time? Losing one son was painful and now Oh, how I long to hug my sons, hear them say: "I love you." There is such a feeling of emptiness within. I have moments of emotional pain where tears will fall without any self-control. I am only grieving, please don't let me grieve alone. Stay with me; listen to me as I tell you, my pain. This is the time to surround myself with pictures of my son.*

*I look at his belongings and the scent of his body in his clothing before it fades and the items I have kept. I look at each picture and remember the time that relates to the photo. I know you never meant to hurt me, or your brothers. I just never knew you were hurting so much. Jason you were the joker the warrior and protector of us all and yet we did not protect you. You will always be the 31 year old son the most beautiful loving soul.*

*Aaron, I will always remember you as the considerate, thoughtful, full of life young man and so much energy at work. I will not grieve sadness. I will only allow positive grieving for you. I will support you, love you and respect your choice. I realize I have no influence over what happens to any one of my adult children when they leave the house. I wake up remembering what I am grateful and thankful for, and each time, it is the fact I had 27 years with you. I carried you for nine months and you were born to me. I had the pleasure of being your mother. Thank you for this. I am grateful for all the times you made me proud to be your mum. I will remember you most for your thoughtfulness and the memories you have given me. The times we laughed and the times we cried. When I'm sad, don't leave me alone, don't walk away. I am only grieving. It's okay when you don't know what to say I can never explain the loss of two sons to suicide.*



**RIP JASON** 17/2/1984 ~10/11/2015



**RIP AARON** 21/10/1993 ~ 22/2/2021





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