

Comforting Friends

Published by Friends for Survival, Inc.

A NATIONAL OUTREACH & SUPPORT ORGANIZATION
FOR THOSE AFFECTED BY A SUICIDE DEATH

2021

JULY



DEFENDING A MEMORY

by Randall Stepp

I'm a suicide loss survivor
broken and slow to mend.
All that remains is a memory
which I'm left here to defend.

People are so judgmental
always so quick to decide.
My son was so much more
than the way in which he died.

When someone hears of a suicide
they picture a poor tortured soul.
not a kind and gentle kid
in a situation gone out of control.

A dreadful chain of events
placed his back to the wall.
One terrible choice later
I have forever lost it all.

I just want people to know
the boy that was my best friend.
He was not just another statistic
that met with a tragic end.

All I have left is his story
which I will continue to tell.
In the hopes others will listen
and come to know him as well.

Source: *Losing a Son to Suicide: A Poetic Journey Through Grief.*
Dedicated to the memory of my son and best friend,
Brandon Tyler Stepp.

July: We have exciting news - we are starting an in-person support meeting in Grass Valley. Three passionate peer support volunteers are ready to greet you on the third Thursday of each month at Hospice of the Foothills.

This is your opportunity to exercise Suicide Loss Survivor Bill of Rights #3 (listed on page 2). Whatever feelings or emotions you are experiencing, our meetings are a safe and non-judgmental place to express those feelings and emotions, talk about your grief and support one another.

Our team is committed to providing services that help reinforce The Suicide Loss Survivors' Bill of Rights. Your suggestions, notes and support are always welcome and inspire us to continue to offer a variety of services that comfort, encourage and educate.



Gratefully,
Marilyn Koenig
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

GROUP MEETINGS

Go to our website, click on **Upcoming > Meetings**. Find your virtual meeting date and time, click on **“Register.”** On this same page, you can also check for updates regarding in-person meetings.

VIRTUAL MEETINGS:

Second Monday

July 12 @ 3pm PST

Third Tuesday

July 20 @ 7pm PST

Fourth Wednesday

July 28 @ 7pm PST

Grieving Moms Groups (2)

#1 July 1 @ 6:30pm PST

#2 July 22 @ 3pm PST

Grieving Spouse & Partner

July 13 @ 6pm PST / 9 EST

Legacy Survivors (Private Utah Chapter)

Wednesday, July 14 @ 6pm MST

Modesto (Private Chapter)

Monday, July 19 @ 7pm PST

IN-PERSON MEETINGS:

Grass Valley

Thursday, July 15 @ 6pm PST

Hospice of the Foothills

11270 Rough & Ready Highway

Grass Valley, CA 95945

WEBINARS:

Available to watch anytime:

FriendsForSurvival.org > Upcoming > Webinars

Are you interested in starting a grief support program in your area?

Get our free publication, *“Pathways to Purpose and Hope: A Guide for Creating A Sustainable Grief Support Organization for Families and Friends After A Suicide Death.”* Order by calling 916-392-0664, or on our website under **“Shop.”**

suicide loss survivors’ bill of rights

by JoAnn C. Mecca

1. I HAVE THE RIGHT TO BE FREE OF GUILT.
2. I HAVE THE RIGHT NOT TO FEEL RESPONSIBLE FOR THE SUICIDE DEATH.
3. I HAVE THE RIGHT TO EXPRESS MY FEELINGS AND EMOTIONS, EVEN IF THEY DO NOT SEEM ACCEPTABLE, AS LONG AS THEY DO NOT INTERFERE WITH THE RIGHTS OF OTHERS.
4. I HAVE THE RIGHT TO HAVE MY QUESTIONS ANSWERED HONESTLY BY AUTHORITIES AND FAMILY MEMBERS.
5. I HAVE THE RIGHT NOT TO BE DECEIVED BECAUSE OTHERS FEEL THEY CAN SPARE ME FURTHER GRIEF.
6. I HAVE THE RIGHT TO MAINTAIN A SENSE OF HOPEFULNESS.
7. I HAVE THE RIGHT TO PEACE AND DIGNITY.
8. I HAVE THE RIGHT TO POSITIVE FEELINGS ABOUT THE ONE I LOST THROUGH SUICIDE REGARDLESS OF THE EVENTS PRIOR TO OR AT THE TIME OF THE UNTIMELY DEATH.
9. I HAVE THE RIGHT TO RETAIN MY INDIVIDUALITY AND NOT BE JUDGED BECAUSE OF THE SUICIDE DEATH.
10. I HAVE THE RIGHT TO SEEK COUNSELING AND A SUPPORT GROUP TO ENABLE ME TO HONESTLY EXPLORE MY FEELINGS TO FURTHER THE ACCEPTANCE PROCESS.
11. I HAVE THE RIGHT TO REACH ACCEPTANCE.
12. I HAVE THE RIGHT TO A NEW BEGINNING.
13. I HAVE THE RIGHT TO BE.

hopefulness

by a Friends for Survival Member

Suicide Loss Survivor's Bill of Rights #6 says: "I have the right to maintain a sense of hopefulness." There is hope, even though you may not feel it right this minute. Sometimes trying to stay positive is just simply exhausting. But that is okay, do what you can. One heartbeat at a time.

So how do we maintain a sense of hopefulness? For me, it means making hope part of my everyday life. Hope goes beyond a single optimistic thought of better days; instead, it makes me take proactive action that helps improve my situation. I avoid focusing on what is not working in my life. I work on reframing negative thoughts and having trust in myself and my ability to get through difficult situations. I try not to focus on things that I cannot control. What you can't control is simply out of your hands. I choose to make the most of what I can control and then move forward one small step at a time from there.



Seek Support

BILL OF RIGHTS # 10: SHARING OUR GRIEF WITH OTHERS IS A POWERFUL RELEASE. SOMETIMES THOSE CLOSEST TO US DO NOT WANT TO TALK ABOUT IT, SO WE NEED TO REACH OUT: SEEK COUNSELING, SEEK A SUPPORT GROUP.

WHEN YOU JOIN A SUPPORT GROUP, YOU MAY BE NERVOUS ABOUT SHARING PERSONAL ISSUES WITH PEOPLE YOU DON'T KNOW. AT FIRST, YOU MAY BENEFIT FROM SIMPLY LISTENING. OVER TIME, HOWEVER, CONTRIBUTING YOUR OWN IDEAS AND EXPERIENCES WILL HELP WITH YOUR HEALING AND ADD COLOR INTO YOUR WORLD.

Thoughts on the Suicide Loss Survivors' Bill of Rights

by J David Pincus and Richard J. Knapp

When Marilyn Koenig invited us to select one or two of the "rights" in JoAnn Mecca's "Survivors' Bill of Rights" for brief comment, we decided to make our picks independently, then draft our thoughts and exchange them for comment and edits, much as we did in writing our joint memoir, *Sons of Suicide: A Memoir of Friendship*.

As we read each other's drafts, we realized that both "rights" directly refute the pervasive stigma attached to suicide that often generates adverse misperceptions of suicide victims and survivors alike.

We hope our reflections enhance understanding of survivors' need for clarity and truth, and reassure – even embolden – survivors of suicide loss. The goal: to lessen the stigma that colors much of society's impressions of suicide and those affected by it.

David Pincus comments on Bill of Rights #4: I have the right to have my questions answered honestly by authorities and family members.

I had barely turned 13 when my mother's life ended by suicide. I never felt more empty inside than on that terrible day. But by the next morning, I was overtaken by an obsessive need to know, "Why?" Why would the person who was supposed to love me and my sister the most choose death over life?

More than anything, I needed to understand why she did it. The boxcar of sensitive, uncomfortable questions rumbling through my brain felt like a runaway train. But where to go for answers to impossible questions? All the adults in my life wanted to protect me, so their inclination was to avoid, deflect or minimize my queries. Except one: my Uncle Ben, "Unc" to me. In the days before the funeral, I stuck to him like glue, peppering him with question after question, and he never flinched or hedged; he gave it to me straight and unvarnished, treating me not as a lost boy incapable of handling the raw truth but as a young man able to accept and adapt to unstable circumstances and make sensitive judgments for myself. And when he didn't know the answer, he didn't speculate. The influence of Unc's blatant honesty on me during those uncertain, upsetting days can never be overstated.

Months later, as my search for answers heated up, I somehow found the nerve to march into the psychiatric

hospital where my mother had been a patient for several months before her suicide and demand that her doctors meet with me. After being rebuffed, I took up residence in the lobby most of the day, refusing to abandon my personal sit-in. Finally, one of her psychiatrists – an authority figure with a grandfatherly demeanor – appeared, and sat down beside me. He was adept at appearing to address my questions while saying nothing that helped me understand my mother's psyche, I later realized (though given the outcome in her case, were there any acceptable answers?). I left somewhat mollified by what may've felt like a minor triumph of sorts at the time, however hollow it actually was.

Today, 60 years later, I have a spotty awareness of the forces compelling my mother's obsession to die prematurely, yet I can't say I really know why. Not the way I want to.

Yes, I have "the right to have my questions answered *honestly* by authorities and family members," as JoAnn Mecca affirms in her "Survivors' Bill of Rights." Unfortunately, as with all such rights, some people honor them genuinely, others don't or won't or can't. Which is why every right needs supporters willing to fight on, no matter what.

Rick Knapp comments on Bill of Rights #5: I have the right not to be deceived because others feel they can spare me further grief.

My father never referred to my mother's death as "suicide." It must have been an accident, he said. The note she left addressed to him wasn't signed, he told us, and she always at least initialed her notes so it must not have been complete.

Was my father protecting my siblings and me? I was the middle child, 14 at the time and rather immature. Did he really believe it? Or was he protecting himself from acknowledging the cause of her death?

In the weeks after Mom's suicide, neighbors, friends and teachers largely avoided the subject. Some offered condolences, a few brought food to the house. What could they say? It's hard enough to know what to say to someone who loses a loved one to natural causes or an accident, but suicide...?

And, to complicate matters, what do you say to a child, barely into his teens?

The answer, of course, is to be open and honest; to answer questions candidly in an age-appropriate way. Children are more savvy than many give them credit for. Deception is not acceptable; it avoids the truth, erodes trust and leaves a void that will be filled by the darkest of thoughts festering inside with no pressure valve. And silence is its own form of deception.

For me, family members' and friends' avoidance of the subject only added to the sense that the subject of suicide – that the cause of my mother's premature death – was taboo, something I should hide, be embarrassed by and ashamed of. It implied that there was something terribly wrong with Mom – and by extension with me. The stigma of suicide envelops even the survivors of suicide loss.

People's reluctance to talk with me about Mom may have been well-intentioned. Perhaps they were side-stepping their own discomfort, or attempting to avoid deepening the grief they knew we were suffering. But the effect was the opposite. It kept me in the dark, kept me from knowing my mother better.

Since writing *Sons of Suicide* with David, I've met many other survivors of suicide loss. Some would prefer not to talk about the suicide. I respect that. But some have a deep desire to do so. After our book was published, my wife and I invited a couple for dinner. Although we knew the husband, we had not met his spouse. Her son had died by suicide only a year or so before. While we were putting the finishing touches on dinner, she asked about our book, and I posed a few questions about her son and the profound loss she experienced. After a minute or two, I stopped myself. "I'm sorry," I said. "We don't have to talk about this."

"No," she insisted. "I want to talk about 'Evan'." She needed to share their story, express her sorrow, remember the good times and the goodness of the person she lost to suicide. To acknowledge the pain that prompted him to take his life.

And to say Evan's name out loud.

J. David Pincus and Richard J. Knapp each lost his mother to suicide when they were in their early teens, nearly 60 years ago. They met a few years later and formed a close, life-long bond when they realized they shared a common tragedy, a story recounted in their book, Sons of Suicide: A Memoir of Friendship.

Support

RESOURCES

Friends for Survival
www.friendsforsurvival.org

Phone: (916) 392-0664

Toll Free: (800) 646-7322

If you are in crisis and need immediate help, call the 24-hour National Crisis Line:

1-800-273-TALK (8255)

Alliance of Hope

Survivor services including a 24/7 on-line community forum
www.allianceofhope.org

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP)

Extensive lists of available meeting support www.afsp.org/find-support

American Association of Suicidology (AAS)
www.suicidology.org

Suicide Awareness Voices of Education
www.save.org

Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS)

For service members, veterans, and their families: www.taps.org

The Compassionate Friends
For bereaved parents of a deceased child: www.compassionatefriends.org

The Nat'l Center for Grieving Children & Families
The Dougy Center
www.dougy.org/grief-resources

SACRAMENTO COUNTY

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Friends for Survival, Inc.
P.O. Box 214463
Sacramento, CA 95821-4463

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