

Suicide Loss Survivor Guide



Northampton County Suicide Prevention Task Force
An initiative of Northampton County Executive Lamont G. McClure
Aftercare Resource
2801 Emrick Boulevard
Bethlehem, PA 18020
610-829-4500

Northampton County Information & Referral and Emergency Services
610-829-4800
610-252-9060 (24 hours)

To the Newly Bereaved After Suicide

By LaRita Archibald

Grieving is a unique, lonely extremely painful process with each individual working through their own space at their own pace, but it is comforting to know what helped others who have experienced the anguish in the aftermath of a loved one's suicide.

1. **Talk! Talk! Talk!** Speak of your pain, your loss and the cause of it as long and as often as you need to speak of it.

2. **Be with your grief.** Don't suppress, avoid or postpone grief's expression. Let yourself feel it! Cry! Tears are cathartic and cleansing. Friends/extended family feel helpless faced with the magnitude of the loss and grief. They try to soothe, may even plead with bereaved not to cry. Don't suppress your grief to spare others distress. If you are reluctant to express your pain in others' presence, provide uninterrupted time each day to reflect upon the life shared, your loss and sorrow ... a time to mourn. Plan this private time during the day, allowing yourself some pleasant distraction during the pre-bedtime hours. In this manner, you manage your grief and allow healing without the discomfort of thinking your grief expressions impose upon others.

3. **Let your friends give what they offer** ... to be with you, to share a meal, to run errands, to listen to your heartbreak. When you feel the times of being alone are unbearable, call upon them. Friends extend "Let me know how I can help?" Most are sincere. By calling on friends when we need support we allow them the gift of sharing our loss. On the other hand, if we continually refuse help, we may send the message that no help is needed and future offers would be an intrusion. Sensitive people will understand both your need for support and for time alone.

4. **We seldom feel like accepting invitations**, often for a long time, but consider being with close friends/family at small dinner parties, movies, concerts, sports events, etc. So what if you lose your composure! These social events provide the mind momentary respite from what has happened and are a useful focus when sleep is elusive or tormenting memories overwhelm us.

5. **There is nothing funny about suicide or the death of someone we love.**

6. **Re-establish routine in your life as soon as possible.** People thrive on orderliness in their lives and a loved one's death disturbs this orderliness in the most devastating manner possible. Re-establishing routine is a major, necessary step in reaffirming life's continuance and future well-being. For those who are confronted constantly by the family member's absence re-establishing routine means redistribution of household chores and living arrangements. Adjusting to a loved one's death means many heartbreaking, but necessary changes from life as it once was.

7. **Acute grieving depletes energy**, leaving little concern for good grooming. For a time it may take great effort and determination to shower, shave, arrange one's hair, makeup and dress each morning but caring for one's physical appearance is a critical step toward restoring well-being, balance and orderliness to one's life.

8. **Provide the best opportunity for restful sleep** by avoiding stimulants throughout the evening. Exercise is nature's anti-depressant. Exercise enhances sleep opportunity but should be done in the late afternoon. Caffeinated food, including chocolate and most carbonated drinks are sleep robbers. **Alcohol is a depressant** that magnifies an already depressed state of mind and does not contribute to restful, uninterrupted sleep. Alcohol masks feelings, lowers inhibition and deprives one of control. Alcohol consumption should be avoided during acute grief.

9. **Take the best possible care of yourself** ... of your emotional being, your mental, spiritual and physical being. Eat properly! Don't allow yourself to get too hungry or to go without meals. Try not to overeat. Often we experience a gnawing, empty feeling that we mistake as hunger and seek to fill that void with food that may be hard to digest or upsetting. Become informed of both the dynamics of grief and of suicide in order that your grief is not unnecessarily complicated by myths, fears and biases. Pace yourself. This process is aptly called "grief work" and it is truly the most exhausting task your emotions, mind or your physical body will ever be called upon to do. You may experience some physical symptoms, for grief often manifests itself physically. Do not dismiss these symptoms ... see your physician as soon as possible.

10. **Grief and the workplace.** For many bereaved it is an economic necessity to return to work soon after the funeral. Others return to work soon as a means of keeping mentally occupied and find solace in their work. Some postpone returning to their job fearing the additional stress created by work. Work can be helpful in restoring routine in one's life. Most employers are compassionate and sympathetic. Some have firsthand knowledge of loss and grief and extend encouragement and understanding. Others have a very unrealistic view of how long it takes to "get over" a family member's death and may not be tolerant of mistakes, distraction or quick trips to the bathroom to dry tears. It can be helpful to discuss your limits and concerns with your employer, perhaps arriving at a compromise whereby you work a few hours a day when you first return to the workplace. It is also helpful when an employer engages a counselor to speak of suicide bereavement with fellow employees placing them at greater ease in offering you support.

11. **Suicidal thoughts are scary.** When someone we love dies, we are overwhelmed by the pain of loss and fear of the future without them. We may believe we cannot endure the intensity of the pain. For a time, we may not wish to. When the cause of death is suicide the surviving family members have been shown the worst possible example of how one can end pain and problems and the survivor may view ending their life as a way to stop hurting. It is normal to want to escape the pain of loss and grief. It is not abnormal to think of ending one's own life to escape it. But there is considerable difference between having suicidal thoughts and acting upon them. If you are obsessed with thoughts of killing yourself, begin to seriously consider ways of ending your life or believe you don't deserve to live due to some circumstance surrounding the loved one's death, see a mental health professional without delay. It would be a grave injustice to compound the loss and magnify the grief of others by this manner of resolving your own.

12. **What's normal! What's not!** Grief as we are taught to understand it is intensely distorted when suicide is the cause of death. You may question whether your feelings are normal. Most likely they are and you are experiencing normal emotional reactions to an abnormal occurrence ... suicide. Grief after suicide is often very effectively addressed within the safe environment of a suicide survivor support group. Never hesitate to seek professional counseling.

In the Days Ahead....

Unfortunately, even though you are going through the worst experience of your life there are things that must be done. Please use family and friends whenever possible to lighten the load placed upon you.

The first thoughts that will enter your head are WHY? WHAT DID I MISS? I SHOULD HAVE BEEN ABLE TO STOP THIS. Don't do this to yourself. You need to get through the next few days on autopilot. You should work through these statements with a counselor NOT by yourself.

Contact a funeral home. They will guide you arranging your loved one's final journey.

Contact your clergy. Find strength in your faith.

If the suicide took place in your home, stay somewhere else at least for a day or two. You may need to have someone come in and clean. Contact your homeowner's insurance. They will assist you in getting a company to clean if needed.

You are going to be hit with tidal waves of emotions. Let them happen. You will feel anger, resentment, regret, incredibly sad, depressed, and look to place blame. You may want to yell, cry and laugh. These are all okay. You're entitled to them all. Lean on each family member. Each one of you will be dealing with loss differently. There is no right or wrong way to grieve, and no time line.

Don't rush in to any big decisions. The emotional roller coaster you are feeling will affect your decision making. Just take a breath, remove yourself from the decision, and come back to it later after you had some time to process your grief. This may take a week, months or years. Take everything hour by hour. Be kind to yourself.

Remember to eat, drink, shower, walk around and talk about your loved one. It may seem basic but the weight of your emotions will keep you down. Life keeps moving even if we do not.

Go to your doctor. You may need professional guidance. Don't be afraid to talk to your healthcare professional. They may be able to help you with methods to cope with your grief, especially the day of the funeral. Grief counseling is available. Talking with someone can help you work through your grief.

Finally, look for support groups. YOU ARE NOT ALONE. There are survivor groups out there that know your pain. They felt what you are feeling. They can share their coping skills, they can be your light in a very dark tunnel. You will have triggers that bring you back to that day of loss. For every heart wrenching moment, you need to also feel the warmth of joyful moments your loved one brought to your life. Never forget how precious those memories are.

Questions and Answers

1. Who can I reach out to if I have questions?

The Coroner's Office is available to assist your family with questions that you may have. The office can be reached at 610-258-1806.

2. Why does the Coroner's office need my loved ones electronic device(s)?

The Coroner's Office uses digital forensics for further testing. This is for no other reason other than to gather more information. Their office can keep the device(s) for an extended period of time depending on the circumstances. No files will be deleted from the device(s) during that time. The Coroner's Office will contact you when the device is ready to be returned.

3. If a suicide happens in the home and clean up is needed, who should I contact?

Contact your homeowner's insurance company. They can provide you with companies that assist with cleaning up after a tragic event. Ask the cleaning company questions about cost. Some companies take advantage of your grief and increase the cost. Your homeowner's insurance should ensure they do not.

4. How many death certificates do I need?

The number needed will depend on the type of assets and accounts your loved one has. Certain types of accounts require the standard death certificate be presented. Other types of accounts only require the short form, which does not list the cause of death and is available at the Registrar of Wills office. There is a lower fee for copies of the short form.

5. I'm feeling overwhelmed and hopeless. Who can I call for help?

Northampton County offers a variety of services including linkage to community resources. If you or someone you know is in need of support, contact **Northampton County Information and Referral** at **610-829-4800**. Someone is available to assist you Monday through Friday from 8:00 am to 5:00 pm. If it is urgent and you need to speak to someone after hours, contact **Northampton County Crisis** at **610-252-9060**. A crisis worker is available 24 hours a day. Remember you are not alone. Don't be afraid to ask for help.

Do I Need Grief Counseling?

As we go through grief, it is sometimes easy to miss the signs telling us we need to seek out help. Whether you are considering getting help for yourself or a friend that seems to be struggling after the death of a loved one, consider these points to see how many you can relate to.

- **Inability to Stop Crying** – This is certainly one of the most apparent traits that friends can see, understanding you're still overcome with sadness.
- **Significant Weight Loss** – Weight loss could mean the person is not eating and getting proper nutrition and their body is burning off stored calories. This is dangerous because it could lead to other health issues.
- **Inability to Concentrate** – Moving on means being able to compartmentalize your moments of grief. You'll always feel sad about your loss and miss your loved one, but you are still alive, and you need to be able to choose when to think about them.
- **Change in Sleeping Patterns** – You're eventually going to be able to sleep, even if it's after crying yourself to sleep. But if you find yourself sleeping during the day and staying awake all night, that's a sign your mind is struggling to handle this on its own.
- **You're Having Suicidal Thoughts or Thoughts of Hurting Yourself** – Without question, this is the most important point, as some people reason they can't go on living without their loved one. Rational thought, though, would help them understand that their loved one would never wish them to do that, and they'd want them to continue living.
- **Uncontrollable Rage** – After the initial moments of losing a loved one, we should be able to lessen our anger toward the loss as time goes by. Uncontrollable rage will just open up opportunities for more trouble, so counseling is definitely needed.
- **Others Have Mentioned You Need Grief Counseling** – If other people have already brought this subject up, then they're seeing some signals that a professional therapist might be necessary to help you move on.

Important Phone Numbers

Northampton County Coroner's Office
610-258-1806

Northampton County Information & Referral
610-829-4800

Northampton County Emergency Services
(24 hours)
610-252-9060

Northampton County Mental Health
610-829-4840

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
1-800-273-8255
1-888-628-9454 (Spanish)
Or text 741741

Resources

Support Groups

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (3 locations)

First Presbyterian Church of Allentown
3231 West Tilghman Street
Allentown, PA 18101

Group meets monthly on the third Thursday of the month from 7:00pm-8:30pm

Contact: Mary Youtz or Gerry Ifkovits afsplv2@gmail.com

Lehigh Valley Hospital- Muhlenberg
2545 Schoenersville Road
Bethlehem, PA 18018

Group meets monthly on the first Tuesday of the month from 7:00pm to 8:00pm

Contact: Marie Bartos marie.bartos11@gmail.com or Cheryl Patino
Cheryl.afsp@gmail.com

Change on 3rd
117 N 3rd Street
Easton, PA 18042

*Group meets twice a month on the second and fourth Monday of the month from
6:30pm-8:00pm.*

Contact: Kerry Monroe monroejim@hotmail.com

Hotlines

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-8255 or text 741741

Spanish Speaking Hotline: 1-888-628-9454

Veterans Affairs Crisis Hotline: 1-800-273-8255, press option 1

Websites

www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (LV Chapter)

www.afsp.org/chapter/afsp-greater-lehigh-valley-pennsylvania

www.veteranscrisisline.net

www.northamptoncounty.org

www.nami-lv.org

Grief Counseling

Please consult your insurance provider to locate a grief counselor near you. The number can be found on the back of your insurance card. If you do not have insurance, please contact Northampton County Information and Referral Services at 610-829-4800 for further assistance.

Resources for Bereaved Children

After a Suicide Death: An Activity Book bit.ly/grievekids

Red Chocolate Elephants: For Children Bereaved by Suicide

bit.ly/redelephants

After a Parent's Suicide: Helping Children Heal

<https://amzn.to/2GA3u8c>

A Child In Grief (New York Life Foundation) bit.ly/achildingrief

Dougy Center- Grief Resources bit.ly/dougygrief

When a Brother or Sister Dies (Compassionate Friends)

bit.ly/siblingdies

When Families Grieve (Sesame Street) bit.ly/familiesgrief

When Families Grieve (downloads) bit.ly/kidsgriefresources

Mission Statement

The mission of the Northampton County Suicide Prevention Taskforce is to develop and implement strategies to reduce the risk of suicide and stigma of mental illness in Northampton County through the collaborative efforts of community agencies and service providers.



NORTHAMPTON COUNTY SUICIDE PREVENTION TASK FORCE
AFTERCARE SUBCOMMITTEE
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