

Surviving a Suicide Loss

Where Do I Start?

Know that you are not alone. If you have lost someone to suicide, the first thing you should know is that you are not alone. Each year over 45,000 (2017, CDC) people in the United States die by suicide—the devastated family and friends they leave behind are known as “survivors.” In fact, research shows that during the course of our lifetime 85% of us will lose someone we care about to suicide. That means that there are millions of survivors who, like you, are trying to cope with this heartbreaking loss. Survivors often experience a wide range of grief reactions, including some or all of the following:

- **Shock** is a common immediate reaction. You may feel numb or disoriented, and may have trouble concentrating.
- **Symptoms of depression**, including disturbed sleep, loss of appetite, intense sadness, and lack of energy.
- **Anger** towards the deceased, another family member, a therapist, or yourself.
- **Relief**, particularly if the suicide followed a long and difficult mental illness.
- **Guilt**, including thinking, “If only I had....”

These feelings usually diminish over time, as you develop your ability to cope and begin to heal.

What Do I Do Now?

It’s important to remember that you can survive the pain. There may be times when you don’t think it’s possible, but it is. Here is some guidance from fellow survivors:

- Some survivors struggle with what to tell other people. Although you should make whatever decision feels right to you, most survivors have found it best to simply acknowledge that their loved one died by suicide.
- You may find that it helps to reach out to family and friends. Because some people may not know what to say, you may need to take the initiative to talk about the suicide, share your feelings, and ask for their help.
- Even though it may seem difficult, maintaining contact with other people is especially important during the stress-filled months after a loved one’s suicide.
- Keep in mind that each person grieves in his or her own way. For example, some people visit the cemetery weekly; others find it too painful to go at all. Each person also grieves at his or her own pace; there is no set rhythm or timeline for healing.
- Anniversaries, birthdays and holidays may be especially difficult, so you might want to think about whether to continue old traditions or create some new ones.
- You may experience unexpected waves of sadness; these are a normal part of the grieving process.
- Some survivors find comfort in community, religious, or spiritual activities, including talking to a trusted member of the clergy.
- Many survivors use the arts to help them heal, by keeping a journal, or writing poetry or music.
- Try to take care of your own well-being; consider visiting your doctor for a check-up.
- Be kind to yourself. When you feel ready, begin to go on with your life. Eventually starting to enjoy life again is not a betrayal of your loved one, but rather a sign that you’ve begun to heal.

Here are some additional suggestions:

1. Know you can survive. You may not think so, but you can.
2. Struggle with “why” it happened until you no longer need to know “why” or until you are satisfied with partial answers.
3. Know you may feel overwhelmed by the intensity of your feelings, but all your feelings are normal.
4. Anger, guilt, confusion, forgetfulness are common responses. You are not crazy—you are in mourning.
5. Be aware you may feel appropriate anger at the person, at the world, at God, at yourself. It’s okay to express it.
6. You may feel guilty for what you think you did or did not do. Guilt can turn into regret through forgiveness.
7. Having suicidal thoughts is common. It does not mean that you will act on those thoughts.
8. Remember to take one moment or one day at a time.
9. Find a good listener with whom to share. Call someone if you need to talk.
10. Don’t be afraid to cry. Tears are healing.
11. Give yourself time to heal.
12. Remember, the choice was not yours. No one is the sole influence in another’s life.
13. Expect setbacks. If emotions return like a tidal wave, you may only be experiencing a remnant of grief, an unfinished piece.
14. Try to put off major decisions.
15. Give yourself permission to get professional help.
16. Be aware of the pain of your family and friends.
17. Be patient with yourself and with others who may not understand.
18. Set your own limits and learn to say no.
19. Steer clear of people who want to tell you what or how to feel.
20. Know that there are support groups that can be helpful. If you can’t find one, ask a professional to help start one.
21. Call on your personal faith to help you through.
22. It is common to experience physical reactions to your grief, such as headaches, loss of appetite, inability to sleep.
23. The willingness to laugh with others and at yourself is healing.
24. Wear out all your questions, anger, guilt or other feelings until you can let them go. Letting go doesn’t mean forgetting.
25. Know that you will never be the same again, but you can survive and even go beyond just surviving.

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