

# Support after a suicide

## Reflection

*Another day for you to wonder, another day for you to mourn  
It wasn't my intention to go before the coming dawn  
My pain was deep within my heart and troubled head  
It wasn't my intention to go without words said.*

*My frame of mind seemed normal, or so I heard them say  
It wasn't my intention not to see another day  
I did not mean to make you suffer or cause you so much pain  
It wasn't my intention to never see you again.*

*Despair and confusion left my aching mind unsure  
It wasn't my intention to suddenly close life's door  
If only I could give you reasons and brush the tears away  
It wasn't my intention to leave and not stay.*

*I did not mean for you to grieve, now left alone to cry  
It wasn't my intention to leave you, forever asking why  
As the burdens of life's worries slowly ebb from my heart  
It wasn't my intention to tear your soul apart.*

## Y. Docherty

**Death by suicide is the most personal act any person can make, involving a wide circle of people - the survivors. This booklet is intended to help survivors along the path following a bereavement by suicide - to help you understand what is happening to you.**

You have found yourself experiencing emotions that are unfamiliar, unexpected and frightening - almost beyond your control.

Bereavement by suicide is very different from any other bereavement, giving rise to all the emotions following any loss, alongside many other emotions.

Since the death is self-chosen and self-inflicted, there are the unanswered and unanswerable questions of *why?* and, sometimes, *how?* and also *if only?* and *what if?*

In the following pages we hope to outline the emotions you may experience, but it is important to remember that:

- the process is unique to you
- the emotions experienced are a natural part of the journey you will make
- you are the only person who knows how you feel

## **Feelings**

Initially, there are feelings of shock and disbelief which last longer than with other bereavements. This leaves survivors feeling numb and empty of emotion, often finding difficulty in accepting the reality of the death - "This can't be happening to me."

There may be a feeling of disorientation, the real world is going on all around. but the survivor is not part of it. The survivor is just an onlooker -- separate and alone.

Many survivors experience suicidal thoughts - of wanting to join the deceased and escape from the present confusion and nightmares.

## **Symptoms**

The shock of any sudden death gives rise to real physical and emotional symptoms. These may include:

- tightness in the chest
- hollow feelings in the stomach
- breathlessness
- lack of concentration
- exhaustion
- lethargy
- physical pain

These feelings act as a 'cushion', to enable the survivor to cope with this terrible situation in which they find themselves.

## **Guilt**

Guilt is often an overriding emotion, survivors feeling in some way responsible for the death and that the death was somehow preventable. The "if onlys" and "what ifs" come to mind over and over again:

- "Could we have prevented this?"
- "Did we actually contribute towards it?"
- "We should have seen the signs"
- "We are to blame!"

**But if help was not sought, or signs not shown, how could survivors have known?**

As well as self-blame, there is often a tendency to blame others, frequently within the close family, leading to a breakdown in communications. Members of the medical profession, the police, God and the church, friends, work, social circumstances – these are all targets for blame. Blaming is often a way of dealing with grief, giving only temporary relief and causing damage to relationships within family and friends – just at a time when support is needed.

## **Searching**

Looking for a reason for the decision is inevitable. Trying to understand can occupy the mind for long periods. However, the answer will never be known, since the only informant is no longer with us.

## **Anger**

Anger is a normal part of grieving - especially so following a suicide. The anger needs to be acknowledged and expressed: it is realistic and must not be suppressed out of a sense of loyalty to the deceased. It is important to realise that the deceased *can* be loved, but the action they have taken can cause anger. The anger may be directed to others leading to blame.

Anger is sometimes unacknowledged because of its connection with the feelings of guilt. These swings of emotions - from anger to guilt, to blame, to anger - may give rise to feelings of a loss of control - "going mad" and being different, and noticeably so.

## **Rejection**

An overwhelming emotion, since the loved one has chosen to go can be rejection, that those left behind were not worth living for, and perhaps not even given the opportunity to be of help. Feelings of unworthiness may lead to feelings of being unloved, and hence unlovable. This sense of rejection, if not questioned, may lead to insecurity and a sense of failure.

Following bereavement by suicide, the survivor may be left feeling vulnerable, wondering what will happen next, distrusting everything and everybody. This may lead to a loss of self-esteem and confidence, a fear of being let down, and sensitivity to *any* rejection, however small.

## **Relief**

It may be difficult to admit to relief, but when depression, despair and unsuccessful suicide attempts have been experienced by family and friends. There may be relief following the final successful attempt, coupled, of course, with sadness. The deceased is no longer in despair and the constant threat of suicide is over.

## **Shame**

A stigma attached to suicide is still present in our society, and may give rise to a feeling of being judged and found wanting. Also, the loved one may be judged as cowardly or selfish. Society in general has difficulty in dealing with suicide, and will take many and varied efforts to avoid it. This leads to isolation - survivors feel they are alone with no opportunity to speak of the loved one.

## **Depression**

Depression is almost inevitable following a bereavement by suicide. The constant swings of emotion – questioning, physical pain and lack of sleep – will have an effect. It may be necessary to consult a doctor.

## **Effects on the family**

Communication may be difficult because of family members' fear of hurting one another by speaking of the suicide, or perhaps there may be blame within the family.

Each member will be affected in a different way, since each bore a different relationship to the deceased.

The differences need to be *discussed*, *accepted* and *respected*, as each member will grieve in their own way and in their own time.

## **Be kind to yourself**

**It is so important to understand that all the feelings mentioned are normal and to be expected, in varying degrees and at different times.**

**No one can give a pattern for grief – it is different for all of us.**

**Let the emotions be felt and do not attempt to fight them.**

**Allow yourself to be sad, angry, guilty – do not let anyone else tell you how you should, or ought to feel.**

**You have experienced a traumatic and terrible shock.**

**Give yourself time to heal.**

**Events will trigger emotions unexpectedly, but allow for this and do not be ashamed.**

**You will never ‘get over it’, but, in time, will learn to live with it.**

**Life will never be the same again, never back to ‘normal’, but you can create a new normal.**

## **Survival Guide**

The survivor of a suicide bereavement faces a stark choice:

*"..It is up to you ... to decide whether to be permanently hurt by the last act of a free individual or not ...This option is YOURS." (Lake. 1984)*

- Know you can survive. You may not think so, but you can.
- Struggle with 'why' it happened until you no longer need to know 'why' or until you are satisfied with partial answers.
- Know you may feel overwhelmed by the intensity of your feelings, but all these feelings are normal.
- You may feel rejected and abandoned - share these feelings.
- Anger, guilt, confusion, denial and forgetfulness are common responses. You are *not* going crazy: you are in mourning. Be aware you may feel anger at the person, at the world, at friends, at God, at yourself; it's all right to express it.
- You may feel guilty for what you think you did or did not do. Remember the choice was not yours – *one cannot be responsible for another's actions.*
- Find a good listener: be open and honest about your feelings.
- Do not remain silent about what has happened, about how you feel.
- You may feel suicidal. This is normal; it does not mean you will act on those thoughts.

- Do not be afraid to cry. Tears are healing.
- Keeping an emotional diary is useful as well as healing. Record your thoughts, feelings and behaviour. Writing a letter to the deceased expressing your thoughts and feelings can also be part of the healing process.
- Give yourself time to heal.
- Expect setbacks. If emotions return like a tidal wave, you may be experiencing ‘unfinished business’.
- Try to put off making major decisions.
- Seek professional help if needed. Be aware of the pain of your family and friends.
- Be patient with yourself and with others who may not understand.
- Set your own limits and learn to say no.
- Call on your personal faith to help you through.
- It is common to experience *physical symptoms* to your grief: headaches, sleeplessness, loss of appetite etc,
- Ask the questions. Work through the guilt, anger, bitterness and other feelings until you can let them go. *Letting go does not mean forgetting.*
- Know that you will never be the same again, but you *can* survive and go beyond just surviving.
- Recognise that you are not alone – many others share this type of loss. If there is a group in your area where other survivors of suicide bereavement meet, then go along and meet them. You have nothing to lose and perhaps there is much to be gained. Those who are left behind after a suicide can be helped by talking to those who have experienced the same thing.

### **From survivors**

*“I don’t like what I have got – I hate what I have. I would not have chosen it – but it is all I have.”*

*“I have needed to talk”*

*“I need time – but it has to be my time. I need to grieve but in my way and in my time”*

*“I will always look back – but I am gradually learning to look forward.”*

*I don't know why.  
I'll never know why.  
I don't have to know why.  
I don't like it.  
I don't have to like it.  
What I do have to do is to make a choice about my living.  
The choice is mine.  
I can go on living, valuing every moment in a way I never did before or I can be  
destroyed by it and, in turn, destroy others.  
I thought I was immortal. That my family and children were also.  
That tragedy only happened to others.  
But I know now that life is tenuous and valuable, so I am choosing to go on  
living, making the most of the time I have, valuing my family and friends in a  
way never possible before.*

**Iris Bolton**

## **Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide**

The Flamsteed Centre  
Albert Street  
Ilkeston  
Derbyshire, DE7 5GU  
**Tel:** 0115 944 1117

**email:** [sobs.admin@care4free.net](mailto:sobs.admin@care4free.net)

**Website:** [www.uk-sobs.org.uk](http://www.uk-sobs.org.uk)

**National Helpline:** - 9am to 9pm every day - 0844 561 6855

**Press Officer:** contact Angela at [angelasamata@mac.com](mailto:angelasamata@mac.com)

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