

Losing Loved Ones

It's hard enough to lose a loved one, but there is perhaps nothing more painful than to lose a loved one to suicide. A survivor of suicide is any person grieving a suicide death of their loved one. It is estimated that for every suicide, there are at least 6 survivors. Some believe this to be a very conservative estimate. The grief reactions to losing someone to suicide are similar to the emotions of any death; however, there are some additional components. The stigma of suicide is still very prominent and survivors may feel judged or shamed by others. Most survivors will feel a great deal of stress, pain, anxiety and even symptoms of depression, however, with time these feelings will lessen and become less intense

If you are a survivor of suicide, you may experience some of the following emotions:

- **Shock and Disbelief:** Disbelief and emotional numbness might set in. You may think that your loved one's suicide couldn't possibly be real. It may be hard to comprehend what has happened and you may cope by staying in a fog of shock. Some may feel completely numb, while others refuse to believe that a suicide occurred and fall into a stage of denial.
- **Guilt and Self-Blame:** You might think about what you should have said or done to help your loved one. You might repeat "what if" scenarios in your mind, blaming yourself for your loved one's death. You might also think of "if only" scenarios, such as: If I had only been there sooner to stop him, or he would still be alive if I would've been there for him. Some survivors direct blame towards the medical facilities, institutions or professionals that have been involved in their loved one's treatment. This blame or anger can be misdirected, as unfortunately even with treatment, some are in such critical stage that suicide is the only possible solution that they can see.
- **Despair:** As happens with all grief, you may be overcome by sadness or feelings of helplessness. You may even consider suicide yourself. If you are having any thoughts of harming yourself, please seek professional treatment immediately.
- **Anger:** Feelings of anger are oftentimes common due to unresolved emotions. You may become angry when you consider the life ahead of you without your loved one. You may feel angry since your loved one chose to take his or her life. You may be dealing with the images of finding your loved one, or moving on with a void in your family. Anger can be directed at both yourself and the person who took their life. You may feel that you missed important clues that could have prevented the suicide. Or, you might also think your loved one picked death over living a life with you.
- **Sadness:** Feelings of sadness are another common emotion when grieving a suicide. You may be sad over the lost potential. You may consider all the lost hopes and dreams...all the could-have-beens.
- **Shame:** You may feel a sense of shame due to the way your loved one passed. You may think that people will judge you or more importantly, judge your loved one. You may feel the need to defend the honor of your loved one, even in death. Some people find it easier to lie about the way their loved one died. For example, saying that it was an accident vs. a suicide.
- **Rejection and Abandonment:** You might feel rejected by the idea that your relationship wasn't enough to keep your loved one from dying by suicide. You feel that they picked death over a life with you. This may bring about feelings of rejection or abandonment.
- **Relief:** If your loved one had a long history of mental health treatment, substance abuse issues or legal problems, a sense of relief may occur after a suicide. You may feel that you can finally know that the pain and suffering is over for your loved one and that they, too, will feel free from the roller-coaster of events. Sometimes feeling relief will cycle back into feeling guilty, as it might feel so wrong and selfish to feel relieved.
- **Nightmares and Flashbacks:** Following a suicide, you may have nightmares and flashbacks for weeks, months or even years. This may be intermittent and not necessarily daily. This is common most often when a survivor had the painful experience of finding their loved one or witnessing their death. Over time, you may learn of things that trigger these flashbacks and may be able to manage your exposure to possible triggers of flashbacks and nightmares.
- **Loss of Interest in normal activities and social withdrawal:** Oftentimes, life takes on a new meaning for survivors. You may not be up to seeing friends and feel a lack of interest in your normal interests or hobbies that you once enjoyed. With time, most survivors are able to find sources of joy and meaning in their lives. Sometimes taking up a new hobby may provide enough distraction to get you through some rough days.
- **Why Question:** Probably one of the most usual and persistent reactions is the need to know why the suicide occurred. Even in situations when a loved one has long term mental health needs, it's still just as shocking when they take their life. It is impossible to prepare for the news of a suicide. You may find yourself thinking about your loved one's last moments and what you could have done to prevent their decision to take their precious life. Survivors struggle with the Why question, sometimes for years, until they can find a way to let go of the need to figure out why. Survivors who reach a level of understanding can feel a sense of new normal and peace.

Finding support after a suicide:

- **Support groups:** Survivors of Suicide are groups for family and friends that have **lost** a loved one through suicide. These groups are led by peers and at times have a clinician associated with the group for extra support. Consider trying the group. You can just attend and listen-you don't have to talk, and for many it helps to feel surrounded by others that understand the depth of grief you feel. Once you feel more comfortable, you can share and be more vocal in the group. Here are a few websites that can help you locate the support group nearest to you:
 - www.survivorsofsuicide.com
 - <https://afsp.org>
 - www.allianceofhope.org
 - <http://www.suicidology.org>
- **Counseling:** Talking to a counselor with a specialty in grief counseling can assist you in working through some of the intense emotions you may be feeling. Some people prefer to work on their grief individually rather than in a support group environment. Counseling is a very intimate platform and may be a good fit for those who find it difficult to talk in a group setting.
- **Faith-based groups and community support:** If you are spiritual or religious, you may find support in your community or with the leader of your church or temple. Oftentimes, religious leaders have ample experience with loss and can provide recommendations for prayer or meditation.

If you are struggling with prolonged, complicated grief, you should see a medical doctor or mental health professional.

Resources:

After Suicide Loss: Coping with Your Grief, Bob Baugher, Ph.D., and Jack Jordan, Ph.D., 2002.

Rocky Roads: The Journeys of Families Through Suicide Grief, Michelle Linn-Gust, Ph.D, Chellehead Works, 2010.

Silent Grief: Living in the Wake of Suicide, Christopher Lukes and Henry Seiden, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2007.

Understanding Your Suicide Grief: Ten Essential Touchstones of Finding Hope and Healing Your Heart, Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D, Companion PR, 2009.