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# Grief After Suicide

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## A Different Grief

Survivors of suicide – family and friends of a person who died by suicide – feel the emotions that death always brings. Adding to your suffering is the shock of a sudden, often unexpected death. As well, you may feel isolated and judged by society, friends and colleagues.

Some people compare the emotional stress to being trapped on an endless roller-coaster. You may feel:

- Guilt, anger, blame, shame, confusion, relief, despair, betrayal, abandonment
- Disconnected from your loved one because he or she chose to die
- Consumed by a need to find the meaning and reasons for the suicide
- An exaggerated sense of responsibility for the death
- The suicide was malicious, or a way for the deceased to get back at you.

## What Survivors Should Know

First, know that you are not alone. Approximately 1 out of 4 people know someone who died by suicide. It can also help to know that:

- Suicide was the decision of the person who died
- It is estimated that the majority of suicides are the result of untreated depression or other mental illness.

## Survivor Coping Strategies

No two people ever experience grief in the same way, or with the same intensity, but there are strategies that can help you cope with your loss.

- Acknowledge that the death is a suicide
- Recognize your feelings and loss
- Talk openly with your family so that everyone's grief is acknowledged and can be expressed
- Reach out to your friends and guide them if they don't know what to say or do
- Find support groups where you can share your stories, memories, and methods of coping!

## Telling Others – What to Say

One challenge you will face is telling others about the suicide. Although it may be difficult to speak openly about suicide, it is important to tell family and friends the truth. This allows them to help each other cope with their grief and also helps you work through yours.

You might choose to say something as brief as, *“She died by suicide and I just can’t talk about it yet,”* or, *“He lived with a deep depression and died by suicide.”* Creating a brief statement that you can repeat can be helpful so that you aren’t trying to think of what to say each time you need to tell someone. You do not need to disclose details to people who aren’t close to the family.

In addition to telling family and close friends, you will need to notify people with whom the deceased had regular contact. Because telling people may be difficult, you may want to ask someone to help you with these calls. The list of people to inform might include school personnel, an employer and work colleagues, doctors, religious or spiritual organizations, and the owner of the property where the deceased was living.

## Telling Children and Teens

Tell the truth. You need to tell children and teens that the death was a suicide. It may be hard to say this – but it’s the truth and it is better that they hear it from you. However, they may not need to know all the details.

Concealing the truth only fuels an atmosphere of mistrust, fear, and loneliness. If you do not tell the truth, eventually they will find out through someone else. That will be far more painful for them.

Children may ask, *“Why?”* This is a difficult question to answer because the only person who knew why was the person who died. Make the explanation fit the age of the child. For example, a younger child can be told, *“He didn’t want to live anymore. He felt sad and hopeless and forgot that he could get help.”*

Keep your answers simple and short. Children and teens will tell you what they want to know, and you need answer only what they ask you.<sup>ii</sup>

## Show Your Grief

It's okay for young people to see your anger, helplessness and confusion. Observing your reactions helps them understand that their own feelings are normal. Check in with them to make sure they do not take on responsibility for your feelings. They need to know it is not their job to make things better for the family. Reassure them that you are still able to take care of them.

## Listen and Reassure

Children and teens may be confused when they are told the death was a suicide. They may ask a lot of questions to make sense of the news: *"Didn't he love us?"* or, *"Why was she so sad?"*

Answer the questions that you can. Tell them that you do not have all the answers but that you are always there to listen. Encourage them to talk about their feelings.

Young people will need plenty of reassurance that the suicide was not their fault, that they are still loved, and that other people they care about will not die too. Emphasize that there are always other solutions to problems – so that they don't see suicide as a way of coping with their problems.

## Seek Help

Children and teens need a lot of support and comfort when a loved one dies. You may find it too difficult to support your children or reassure them when you are in the early stages of grieving.

You may find there are times when young people benefit from talking to someone else, such as a family friend, a counselor, or a support group.<sup>iii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Canadian Mental Health Association. (2005). *Grief After Suicide*. Canada: National Office.

<sup>ii iii</sup> Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. (2011). *Hope and Healing after Suicide: A practical guide for people who have lost someone to suicide in Ontario*. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication.



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