

## Losing Someone to Suicide

Death by suicide not only affects the person who died, but also those who cared about the person. Suicide Bereavement is the deep sadness and grieving that is often experienced after the loss of a loved one to suicide. While grief is a normal response to losing someone important to you, when someone dies by suicide you may experience many complex feelings, thoughts and behaviors. Many of these relate to the person no longer physically being in your life. Some may relate to the fact that the death was by suicide. These feelings can be particularly intense, overwhelming and confusing.

For every suicide there are often many family members, friends and colleagues who are affected. While individuals work through their personal grief differently, some experiences of suicide bereavement are similar due to the stigma often associated with suicide. Suicide loss can affect your physical and mental health and sometimes includes dealing with thoughts of suicide. It is important that as individuals and communities we respond to people affected by suicide with compassion and continue to support them through their mourning process.

### What makes suicide different

Losing a friend or loved one is never easy. However, when you lose someone to suicide, it can feel different from other types of loss. Several circumstances can make death by suicide different, making the healing process more challenging.

- **Stigma and Isolation:** Talking about suicide can be difficult for those who have experienced the loss. Different cultures view suicide in different ways, and sometimes discussing it can be hard. This can also be made more challenging when the act of suicide conflicts with religious views. Suicide can be isolating as communities of friends each struggle differently to make sense of the loss they all have experienced. Finding the right people in your support network who are able to help you experience your loss is important. Sometimes, this may mean seeking professional help in order to help you cope with your loss. In those situations, you can [visit the Counseling Center](#), or [find a therapist in the community](#).
- **Mixed Emotions:** When a death is by suicide, you may both mourn the person's passing while also hold intense feelings about the circumstances of their death. Feelings such as anger, abandonment, and guilt commonly occur after a suicide as well as positive feelings about the deceased. Sorting through all of these diverse feelings can make the healing process more difficult.
- **Needing to Understand Why:** Understanding the circumstances of a death by suicide can sometimes lead you to asking "Why?" You may second guess your relationship, wish that you had noticed signs earlier, or wonder how you could have acted differently. This need to understand "why" may be hard on you, as the circumstances surrounding the loved one's death could be unclear or not easily known. Some questions may never be answered, while you may find other answers that make sense. Sometimes you will find answers to your questions, while other times, you must learn to accept the fact that there are some things no one can know.
- **Risk for Survivors:** People who have recently experienced a loss by suicide are at increased risk for having suicidal thoughts themselves. After experiencing the loss of a loved one, it's not uncommon to wish you were dead or to feel like the pain is unbearable. Remember that having suicidal thoughts does not mean that you will act on them. These feelings and thoughts will

likely decrease over time, but if you find them too intense, or if you're considering putting your thoughts into action, seek support from a mental health professional. **24/7 mental health emergency support services are always available.** JMU students can visit the Counseling Center during operating hours. After-hours call [540-568-6552](tel:540-568-6552), press "1". Additionally, 24/7 support is available through the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (1-800-273-8255) and the Crisis Text Line through texting "HOME" to 741741. Emergency support is also available at Sentara RMH Medical Hospital ([540-689-1414](tel:540-689-1414)), 2010 Health Campus Drive, Harrisonburg. Students in need of emergency services when located *out of town or state* should contact their local emergency services, call 911, or go to the nearest emergency room.

### Effects of suicide bereavement

Some common experiences of grief following suicide loss may include:

- Shock, numbness and denial.
- Searching for an explanation, asking "Why?"
- Guilt, responsibility for not preventing the suicide, and sometimes relief.
- Anger and blame.
- Stigma and shame, that you or other people will think negatively of the grieving family and friends.
- Loneliness, social isolation and disconnection.
- Difficulty trusting others, feeling abandoned and rejected - family relationships are often affected.
- Depressive symptoms and heightened suicide risk.
- Coming to accept that the loss will be a permanent part of your life

### Coping with grief

If you are dealing with the suicide of a friend or loved one, it is important to find support to make sense of what has happened, deal with the grief and learn how to live with your loss.

Although the pain of suicide loss cannot be eased quickly, there are things that can help:

- Take time out for enjoyable activities - allow yourself time out from the pain you're experiencing. It's ok to give yourself time out from the pain you are experiencing by doing something you enjoy, even if you don't feel like doing it at the time.
- Stay connected to your loved ones and accept support from people around you. This will reduce your sense of isolation and feelings of loneliness associated with grief.
- Find ways to honor the life of the person who has died (e.g. assemble a memory box, photo album, keep a journal, share memories and talk about their life.)
- Allow people to help you; don't be embarrassed to accept their help. Sharing with other people can reduce the sense of isolation and aloneness that comes with grief.
- Stay healthy – eat healthy meals, exercise regularly, get a good night's sleep, avoid drugs and keep alcohol to a minimum.
- Prioritize daily tasks, do only what is essential.
- Be kind to yourself. Avoid making major decisions until you can think more clearly.
- Join a suicide survivors support group - sharing your experience with others who have been through similar experiences will help you realize you are not alone and that you can survive.

## Helping someone who lost a loved one to suicide

If you know someone bereaved by suicide, you can help by:

- Listening
- Accepting their rage, guilt, depression, self-centeredness and blame-placing without judging them
- Letting them cry
- Not asking "why" or if there was anything that could have been done
- Encouraging them to talk about the death with any children - they need help too
- Mentioning the loved one by name
- Including them in your normal activities
- Realizing that working through grief can take years and that the hurt is never forgotten
- Urging them to wait before making any major changes such as moving, giving away possessions or quitting a job
- Understanding they can't just 'get over it' but grow their lives around it
- Suggesting they join a suicide survivors support group
- If and when appropriate, asking them if they are thinking about suicide.
- Getting them professional help if they need it
- Consider joining a support group to share with others who have had similar experiences. This will help you realize that you are not alone in your experience and that you will survive.
- Take opportunities to join in public ceremonies where you can be private, yet part of a larger group. Use rituals and customs that are meaningful to you.
- Talk with a counselor/psychologist to focus on your unique situation, to find support and comfort, and to find other ways to manage and cope.

### Additional Resources

[American Foundation for Suicide Prevention- "I've Lost Someone"](#)

[American Association of Suicidality – Resources for Suicide Loss Survivors](#)