



Healing After a Suicide Loss

This journey that you are on is not meant to be traveled alone. We at the Helpline Center are here to support you, today and always.

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There is hope.



Introduction

This guide was created to demonstrate that *there is help and there is hope* as you experience the complex grief of losing someone you love to suicide.

The path towards healing resembles a wilderness that is meant to be explored with intention, care, and empathy for yourself and others. Our wish is that this is a useful tool for you as you face the difficult questions, realities, and emotions that go along with moving forward as a survivor of suicide loss.

Although there is no solution for the pain you are experiencing, may you be open to the idea that healing is possible, hope is present, and resources are available. This journey that you are on is not meant to be traveled alone. *We at the Helpline Center are here to support you today, and always.*

Words that matter

The language that we use is important as we work towards dismantling the stigma that surrounds mental health, mental illness, and death by suicide. Throughout this guide, you'll find us referencing "survivors of suicide loss." Survivors of suicide loss, "survivors" for short, is used to describe someone who has lost a loved one to suicide.

As we work towards accurately describing a death by suicide, we have strayed away from using the judgmental phrase of "committed suicide." The reason for this is that the word "committed" is oftentimes associated with negativity of committing a crime or committing a sin. Instead, we are replacing that with "died by suicide."

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How to Get Through Hard Days

On days that are hard, focus on what is most important, you. The long list of things that need to get done or people to contact can wait. You have to take care of yourself and prioritize your health and wellbeing. Some days are about surviving and that is ok.



Breathe

If you are finding yourself anxious, overwhelmed, or scared it can be helpful to focus on your breath. Take a moment to sit still, close your eyes, and breathe. Try to breathe slowly. If it's difficult to get your mind to relax, try counting to six as you breathe in and out.

Eat

You may not feel like it but it is important to eat, even if it is in small amounts, even if it's not a full rounded diet. Without food the effects on your body will have consequences in all areas of your life including your mental health.

Hydrate

Just as food is needed so is fluid. If you aren't thirsty still take small sips of water throughout the day. Something is better than nothing.

Call someone

We are social creatures and if we do not engage with others for an extended period of time we struggle. Even a five-minute phone call can do you good. You don't have to share how you are feeling if you don't want to.

Move your body

Getting your body moving can reduce anxiety and stress, as well as help you sleep better at night.

Sleep

Sleep is a basic need that is often overlooked in times of stress. If you are tired, sleep. If you aren't tired, still try and sleep.

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Suicide Grief is Different

When a loved one dies by suicide there are often differences to someone who has died by other means.

Unexpected Death

Most suicides come unexpectedly to loved ones and cause a variety of emotions and thoughts. Often there is a period of shock after the sudden death and the normal that was felt before seems like it can never be found again. Your body can go through periods of having high energy or where you can't get yourself out of bed for the day. Also, if you were the one who found your loved one that can cause a great deal of post-traumatic stress that can bring flashbacks or nightmares, making you feel hypervigilant or on edge.





Asking “Why?”

Why did my loved one do this? Why didn't they come to me? Why didn't I see the signs? Why did they not get help? Most of these questions are unanswerable but that doesn't mean you won't find yourself asking them. It is normal to want answers and to try and make some sense of the heartache you feel.

Anger

Anger is often prevalent after a suicide. Anger at the person who took their life. Anger at family members or friends for not helping before it was too late. Anger at yourself for not doing enough or recognizing the signs. Or anger toward God or a High Power for not intervening. Anger is a normal human reaction that most survivors feel at some point in their grief journey.

Why won't people talk to me?

It is also common for family or friends of a survivor to not know how to engage in conversation about the loved one that died. It can cause people to feel anxious, worried, or confused and so they may avoid a survivor all together.

Sometimes the person you thought would be there for you is not and sometimes someone you least expected can become a great support to you. Just because people do not want to talk about how your loved one died does not mean you cannot. Many survivors find it helpful to acknowledge how their loved one died.

The guilt loop

Guilt is another predominate emotion that many survivors feel. This could be for things that were said or not said. For thinking you should have done more or acted differently. For feeling relief after the death. It can also come when you find yourself feeling happy or when you find yourself not thinking about your loved one. Because you can feel guilty for feeling happy many people feel like they are stuck in this loop of guilt that they can't get out of it.

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Helping Yourself Through Your Suicide Grief

The reactions you have to grief will ebb and flow like waves on the ocean, at times those waves will be quick and shallow other times long and deep.



Grief is the reaction we have to loss. Common reactions include:

Physical

Grief can cause someone to have many different physical reactions such as changes in sleep, concentration, appetite, energy levels, stamina, etc.

Emotional

Grief can bring about many different emotions such as sadness, fear, guilt, anger, even feelings of being numb. These emotions will vary with different intensities.

Social

Grief can affect how we engage with others and how others engage with us. You may find a change in your desire to be around other people, the amount you want to engage with them, or your thoughts and feelings around what those relationships mean to you.

On Grief

Grief can affect almost all areas of your life. These reactions are normal though they will vary from person to person. The reactions you have will ebb and flow like waves on the ocean, at times those waves will be quick and shallow other times long and deep. These waves will change throughout your life and you will learn how to care for yourself through them. As your grief reaction is deeply personal so will be the ways you learn to hold your grief and show kindness to yourself through it. Your grief journey is your own, though you may have companions along the way, it is ultimately about finding what you need.

Since grief can have strong effects on your life there are times when getting extra support is needed. If your health is deteriorating, such as significant weight gains or losses, reach out to your primary care physician. If you are having thoughts of suicide reach out to the suicide and crisis helpline by calling 988.. If you continue to have a loss of joy, or general feelings of apathy, reach out to a counselor or [call/text/chat 988 to speak with a counselor.](https://www.helplinecenter.org/loss)

Exploring the Truths About Suicide Grief

Grief, especially suicide grief, is not linear. For so long, we have been told that grief happens in five stages, which implies that there is an ending to it—which there is not.

Grief and mourning are not the same

Grief: Mixture of internal thoughts and feelings people have when someone they love dies; the internal meaning given to the experience of loss.

Mourning: Outward expression of grief. A few examples would be talking about the loved one you lost, crying, expressing your thoughts through performing or visual art, or celebrating important dates.

Grief comes naturally; mourning requires a conscious effort. Acknowledging the loss of someone you love, both to yourself and to others around you, allows you to process your grief and honor the loss.





Grief and mourning do not occur in orderly, predictable stages

Grief, especially suicide grief, is not linear. For so long, we have been told that grief happens in five stages, which implies that there is an ending to it— which there is not. Your first interaction with suicide grief will likely feel overwhelming, knocking your world off its axis. With time, you will slowly start feeling like you are adjusting to the new world you are living in, but with difficulty.

Yet, at times, out of nowhere, waves of emotions (such as regret, anger, loss, loneliness, guilt, etc) may overcome you and bring you back to the place you were in initially. That is normal. It may surprise you and scare you; it is critical to remember that with support and intentional care for yourself, it will become easier to recover from those grief bursts each time.

The “whys” of a suicide death may never be determined

There are so many factors, biological, environmental, personal, and psychological, that can increase one’s risk of suicide. That means that deciphering “why” an individual may take their own life becomes complex, and oftentimes is impossible. Although “the last straw” may appear to be the only reason for a suicide, typically there are many additional, unseen layers that play a role.

Guilt is not a required part of the grieving process

Many survivors following their loved ones death by suicide faces the question: “Do you feel guilty?” This question can feel as if people are implying that survivors should feel guilty, when the truth is that friends, family, and caregivers may have tried very hard to encourage their loved one to receive help and treatment to avoid suicide.

Suicide does not discriminate

It is not limited to any one demographic background.

You do not have to struggle with mental health to die by suicide

Many times, folks blame deaths by suicide on mental health conditions, yet not every death by suicide is a result of a diagnosed mental illness.

Suicide grief should be experienced, not avoided

Closely following the death, many survivors are encouraged to “get back to normal.” We are taught to move on from death because many people are uncomfortable with grief and mourning. However, healing at your own pace, on no particular schedule is valid.

Minimizing our grief leads to further, deeper isolation in the journey. Acknowledging and accepting the loss are the only things that will truly let you weave your suicide loss into the fabric of your life. In order to heal in grief, you must be open to feeling your grief.

Birthdays, holidays, anniversaries, and other special days should be observed

Honoring and acknowledging special days can bring you peace, whether you do it individually or in the company of supportive friends. The anticipation of upcoming important dates can come with anxiousness or fear, that is normal. It is common for there to be more stress over what you imagine yourself feeling, yet when the actual date comes it provides you a sense of relief.





You will never get over this, but you will not always feel as you do now

Many of us are taught to search for a closure that does not exist. A survivor will never be able to “get over” or “move on” from the death of a loved one by suicide. The truth is, survivors will continually feel grief over their loss.

That being said, there will come a time when the grief will no longer consume your life in the way it did initially; grief will be present in a healthy way that demonstrates the deep love you shared for and with the person who died. Grief gets harder before it gets better, and over time some of the anger will diminish as the happy times begin to surface. Your grief was not meant to be overcome, it was meant to be experienced.

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Explaining Suicide to Children

Excerpt from: The National Child Traumatic Stress Network and New York Life

The death of a loved one is the most difficult life event that many children ever experience. A death due to suicide can be especially hard to face. Parents and caregivers may feel overwhelmed as they try to decide what to tell their children about a suicide death while struggling with their own grief over how the person died. We have found the following tips to be useful to caregivers in preparing to tell their children about a suicide death and helping children to grieve in healthy ways.



Children know what they're not supposed to know.

It is easy to understand why caregivers struggle with the very difficult decision about whether, how, and when to tell their children about a suicide death. But children almost always know when adults are not sharing important information about a death. Although caregivers may believe they are protecting their children by hiding the fact that a loved one died by suicide, this can actually lead to more problems down the road. For example, children can become even more upset, worried, or angry if they are left to guess or imagine how the person died.

Children may also begin to wonder whether their caregivers can be trusted with other issues or information. This lack of trust can make it harder for children to talk to their caregivers at a time when they most need and want open and honest communication. By giving children truthful, age-appropriate information about a suicide death, caregivers can help their children to grieve in normal and healthy ways.

Explaining “why”

When explaining a suicide death to children, it is helpful to use clear, simple language, while also thinking about their developmental stage (what they can understand) and their own individual grief reactions. There are many different reasons why a person may die by suicide, and it is often hard (and sometimes impossible) to know exactly why it happened. This uncertainty can make understanding and explaining the death much more difficult. You can begin the conversation by pointing out (if appropriate) that some people die by suicide because they suffer from a serious mental health problem:

“Some people have serious mental health problems, like severe depression, that make it very hard for them to think clearly and make good decisions.”

You can also describe how mental illness can lead people to feel trapped, helpless, or hopeless:

"Because ___ felt hopeless and wasn't thinking clearly, ___ wasn't able to think of other more helpful choices or better ways of coping besides suicide."

It is helpful to let children know that most of the time, people with serious mental health problems can get the help they need, through counseling or medication, so they don't feel the need to end their lives.

It can also be comforting to let children know that you can't "catch" a mental illness like depression the same way you catch a cold or the flu:

"When someone in the family has a serious mental health problem and is not thinking clearly, it does not mean that other family members will have the same problem. Even though ___ died by suicide, it does not mean that other family members will too."

Explaining "how"

After giving basic information and facts about how the person died, it is helpful to let your child ask questions and let them guide the conversation so they don't feel overwhelmed. Children are often able to handle only small pieces of information at a time and ask only for information that they are ready to hear. They may want to have the same conversation with you at a later time and may ask you similar questions (often many times), as they try to make sense of the death or hear new information.

This "revisiting" may happen naturally as kids grow and better understand what it means to die by suicide. It is helpful to let your child know that you are open to hearing any other questions they may have, whenever they may have them:

"I am here to answer any questions you have about how _____ died. I may not always have all of the answers, but I will always do my best to be honest and share with you what I do know."

Remember that the behaviors you show toward your child





can be just as powerful as the specific words you use. For example, making good eye contact, holding their hand, hugging, and even just being there to listen can go a long way towards helping your child feel understood, comforted, and protected.

Addressing “unspoken” thoughts and feelings

It can be helpful to let children know that it is common for people to have many different feelings after a suicide death and that it is okay to express them:

“It’s okay to have strong feelings about how _____ died. It’s normal to feel confused, angry, very sad, or even embarrassed after someone dies by suicide.”

Some children may believe they are to blame for the death, even though they may not share these thoughts or feelings openly. Some children may also believe that if the person had loved them enough, they would not have died by suicide. If you think that your child is feeling guilty or somehow responsible for the death, it can help to tell them directly that it is not their fault. You can also reassure your child by letting them know how much the person loved and cared for them.

Your role as their caregiver

Remember that your job as a caregiver is not to completely take away your child’s pain (grief is a naturally painful experience). Instead, your role is to help your child to share whatever thoughts or feelings they may have and to feel understood and safe in doing so:

“No matter what you’re feeling, it often helps to talk about it. I want you to know I’m here to listen whenever you need me.”

You may not have all the answers about what caused your loved one to die by suicide, and that’s okay. Know that it is also okay for you to express your emotions in front of your child. Allowing your child to see you feeling sad or even crying sends the message that it is normal to be sad and that crying is natural when you miss someone you love:

“Sometimes I may get upset when we talk about _____. But it is normal to feel sad and cry when someone you care about dies. The more we share our feelings with others, like how much we miss the person, the better we’ll feel as time goes on.”

On the other hand, if you find yourself unable to carry out your daily work or family responsibilities because of your own grief, you may need extra support. Caregivers are often so worried about caring for their children after a suicide death that they forget to care for themselves

Remember that the care you may need (including support from family, friends, and/or a therapist) is just as important as caring for your child. Getting the help you need will also make it easier for you to be there for your child and can be an important opportunity for you to model good self-care—including asking for help if you need it.

How to know if your child needs additional help

If you notice one or more of the following behaviors, your child may need an assessment by a trained professional who can help decide whether they would benefit from grief support or more specialized grief therapy.

- Wishing to be back with the person who died (“*I keep hoping I might die so I can see ____ again*”); although common among bereaved children, these fantasies can lead to true suicidal thoughts or behaviors.
- Having very frequent thoughts about death and dying, including the way in which the loved one died (“*I can’t stop worrying that I’ll probably die the same way as ____ died*”)
- Talking about or even just mentioning a wish to die, or a wish to hurt oneself or others

Other high-risk or “red flag” behaviors may include:

- Trouble keeping up with daily tasks (e.g., missing school and/or unable to finish assignments)
- Continuing to show signs of extreme sadness (including frequent crying, low energy, staying away from friends or family, appetite and sleep changes) for more than 6





months since the death happened, risky or dangerous behavior (drug or alcohol use, reckless driving, stealing, etc.)

- Appearing numb or “in another world” when the topic of the death comes up.

Resources

Suicide risk may be more common in children after experiencing the death of a loved one by suicide. If your child expresses any thoughts of suicide, be sure to reach out and let a counselor or therapist know.

In the case of an emergency, or if you are concerned about a family member who may be at risk for suicide, you can call, text or chat 988.

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, & New York Life. (2019). Talking to Your Child About a Suicide Death: A GUIDE FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network. Retrieved January 9, 2023, from <https://www.nctsn.org/resources/talking-to-your-child-about-a-suicide-death-a-guide-for-parents-and-caregivers>



Helpline Center Support Services

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Call • Text • Chat 988

Reaching out for support and help is now accessible through a new 3-digit phone number, 988. It's a direct connection to compassionate and professional support for anyone who might be struggling with emotional distress, experiencing suicidal thoughts, or those with concern about a family member or friend with a mental health or substance use issue.

Surviving After Suicide Monthly Support Group

Dates: Third Thursday of each month

Location: 3817 S Elmwood Ave | Sioux Falls, SD 57105

Virtual Group: Visit www.helplinecenter.org/loss for upcoming dates.

Our monthly support group provides survivors with a powerful community that comes together to share, reflect on, and experience that complex grief that accompanies losing a loved one to death by suicide. It's a safe, confidential space that looks to provide hope to survivors no matter where they are at in their journey. There is no fee or registration required. Must be 18 years old to attend. If you have questions, you can email griefsupport@helplinecenter.org.

Surviving After Suicide Class

Being a survivor of suicide loss is complex and can feel lonely; one can be left with unanswered questions and conflicting

emotions. The Surviving After Suicide Class is a ten week education and support based class for adults that is designed to support survivors as they express and seek to understand the powerful grief they experience.

Each class focuses on a unique aspect of survivor grief and is followed by a support session allowing members to share their stories. The supportive mourning process is guided by a book and a journal written by Dr. Alan D. Wolfelt that includes practical strategies for coping and healing.

“To integrate your grief into your life, you must experience enough safety to feel your feelings.”

—DR. ALAN D WOLFELT

In this class, you will experience a safe and confidential setting that will allow you to be open and honest about your own thoughts and feelings. There is no fee for the class or materials. Must be 18 years old to attend. Registration is required. Classes are held beginning in January, April, and September. Email the Helpline Center for more information at griefsupport@helplinecenter.org

Caring Cards

Caring cards are made by survivors who understand the pain of losing a loved one to suicide. The cards are sent to survivors near the anniversary of their loved one’s death. If you are interested in receiving a caring card or helping make them, please email griefsupport@helplinecenter.org

Library

The Helpline Center has multiple books on grief and loss available to check out. For a list of the books, please visit www.helplinecenter.org/loss or email griefsupport@helplinecenter.org to discuss which books would be best to support you in your journey.

Loss Survivor Website

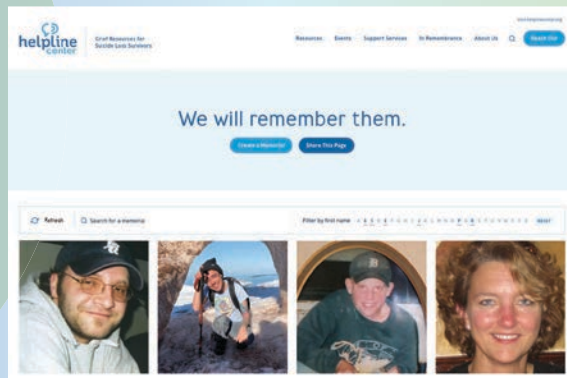
Please visit www.helplinecenter.org/loss for more support and resources.

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Create a digital memorial of your loved one on our website: helplinecenter.org/loss



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