

Suicide and Grief



BUILDING A JUST SOCIETY

understanding suicide and grief

Grief is a universal experience. It is a human response to a loss of someone significant. It can be a very difficult experience.

Suicide bereavement

Grief in response to a suicide can be particularly intense and difficult. It can raise many questions for family and friends. Some of the experiences of bereavement might include:

- a sense of unreality, numbness, nightmares and intrusive thoughts
- feelings of guilt and failure that it was not prevented
- feelings of guilt at perceived failed responsibilities
- a sense of blame
- an unrelenting need to ask why, to try and make sense of and understand why it happened
- feelings of shame, rejection and abandonment
- anger towards the person who has suicided
- anger towards those perceived to have contributed to the suicide
- personal diminishment, that is, experiencing the suicide as a reflection of the quality of the whole relationship with the person
- a sense of shame and stigma, that other people will think negatively of the bereaved family and friends. Sometimes this can result in feeling alone and withdrawing from others

What do I tell others?

Some people find it difficult to tell others about the cause of death and choose not

to do so. Initially this may be easier. However, it may result in experiencing a sense of unease and distance in relationships with others. This may lead to a lack of support and a sense of isolation. Being as open and honest as possible is recommended.

Some things which may help

It is important not to expect too much of yourself in the early stages. You may not have the energy or motivation to live your life in the same way as before. Remind yourself that you are reacting to a devastating blow.

Some people find it helpful to realise and acknowledge that their lives will never be the same again. It has been described this way by one: "You will never be the same again, you will never get over it, but you will have a life again, you will wake up in the morning and feel good. You will start to make plans for the future. At some point, life will feel normal again; not the old normal, the new normal."

Many people who are bereaved through suicide have feelings of guilt and regret. They may feel they should have seen the suicide coming. 'If only ...' or 'I wish ...' are common thoughts. Parents may feel there was something wrong with their parenting. Brothers, sisters and partners may feel responsible particularly when there has been family stress or conflict.

It is important for bereaved people to remember that *they acted with the information they had at the time*. With

Support After Suicide

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A program of
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hindsight it is often easy to see signs of the person's distress and to criticise what was or was not done.

Some may feel there were many things they would have liked to have said to the person but were unable to because of the suddenness of the death. They may yearn to tell them they were loved, or to settle misunderstandings. It is common to feel sadness about the unfinished, un-lived life, but it may help to recognise the person's contributions and influences during their life and to remember the time spent together.

For some people there may be an experience of relief, particularly if there has been a period of difficulty leading up to the death.

Don't be afraid to ask for assistance. Some people will not be able to handle your grief, so find those who can. Seek out an understanding friend, family member or support group. Some bereaved people suggest it is best to do this sooner rather than later as it can make a real difference to you and your family and friends.

In a family, it is important to communicate with one another while at the same time having respect for each other's way of handling the experience.

How can I support someone?

Those in the community sometimes feel unable to provide adequate support to those bereaved by suicide. They may struggle to know what to say or do. They may feel awkward or stay away leaving the bereaved feeling angry and isolated.

Any grief can be difficult to respond to and discuss and the stigma still attached to suicide makes this even harder.

What we have learned from bereaved people is that they need compassion, recognition and validation of their experience. In summary:

- non judgemental support
- an opportunity to tell the story, sometimes over and over again
- a safe and supportive environment
- to be listened to and heard
- to express their grief in their own way.

Support

Telephone counselling

Lifeline www.lifeline.org.au
13 11 14

Suicide Callback Service

www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au
1300 659 467

The Suicide Call Back Service provides crisis counselling to people at risk of suicide, carers of someone who is suicidal and those bereaved by suicide across Australia.

Hope For Life suicideprevention.salvos.org.au
1300 467 354

For those who have lost a loved one to suicide.

Kids Help Line www.kidshelp.com.au
T. 1800 55 1800
(5 to 25 years)

Mensline <http://www.menslineaus.org.au/>
1300 78 99 78

MensLine Australia is a 24/7 telephone support, information and referral service, helping men to deal with relationship problems in a practical and effective way.

Griefline (VIC) www.griefline.org.au
T. 03 9935 7400 (12.00pm-3.00am)

Suiceline (VIC) www.suiceline.org.au
T 1300 651 251

Suggested reading

- *After Suicide: Help for the Bereaved*, Sheila Clark, 1998.
- *Why do people die by suicide*. Thomas Joiner, Harvard University Press, 2007.
- *Darkness Visible*. William Styron, Vintage Books, London, 1990.
- *If only: personal stories of loss through suicide*. Belinda Woolley & Pauline Meemeduma (eds.) University of Western Australia Press, 2006.
- *Healing After the Suicide of a Loved One*, Simolin and Quinan, 1993.
- *After Suicide: a ray of hope for those left behind*, Eleanora Ross, 2001.
- *No Time to Say Goodbye: Surviving the suicide of a loved one*, Carla Fine, 2000.
- *Dying to be Free: A Healing Guide for Families After a Suicide*. Bev Cobain and Jean Larch, Hazelden, 2006.
- *Rocky Roads: The Journeys of Families through Suicide Grief*. Michelle Linn-Gust, Chellehead Works, 2010).