

Healing after suicide

Many people who die by suicide leave loved ones behind who suffer from a range of painful emotions.

When it happens to someone you know

Losing a loved one to suicide can be overwhelmingly painful for family members and friends. Unlike a death that occurs naturally from old age or illness, a death by suicide is usually sudden, unexpected, and sometimes violent. The shock and trauma for survivors is further complicated by the social stigma of suicide, possible police investigations, media coverage, lack of privacy, and judgment of others in the community.

How many people it impacts each year

Research shows that at least six people are directly affected by the death, including immediate family members, relatives, neighbors, friends, and co-workers. Given that more than 43,000 people take their lives each year, approximately a quarter million survivors are left behind, traumatized by the loss.¹

Many people who die by suicide suffered from clinical depression or other mental health disorder. The survivors may also be at risk for depression and anxiety.

Common responses

The emotional pain of survivors can be complicated, intense, and prolonged. People may feel a sense of guilt and responsibility and blame themselves for not seeing the warning signs. They may feel a profound sense of betrayal, rejection, and abandonment. Other common responses are:

- Feeling a need to make sense of the death and understand why the person made the decision to die. Even if the person left a note or a message, there are often unanswered questions that can persist for years.

- Replaying the events that took place before the person's death and constantly second-guessing different outcomes.
- Experiencing symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder such as flashbacks and anxiety, particularly if they witnessed the suicide or discovered the body.
- Shame and anger due to the stigma of suicide and mental illness, and possible negative community responses.

Some individuals experience intense grief that does not heal with time.

The bereaved person may feel empty, preoccupied with the death and unable to resume the activities of daily life. This type of grief, known as complicated grief, can affect from 10 – 20% of the survivors of suicide loss. If left untreated, complicated grief often persists, resulting in significant impairment and poor health outcomes.

How you can help

Sometimes people struggle with what to say or how to help a family who has lost a loved one by suicide. Helping the survivors means being a good listener and avoiding any criticism or judgments. Try to:

- Be present and listen attentively without feeling the need to provide answers.
- Avoid speculating on the reasons for the suicide or the person's state of mind.
- Be sensitive about what you say. Avoid clichés such as "I know how you feel" or "time will heal all wounds."

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- Be compassionate and understanding, and remember that grieving takes time.
- Take the initiative to be helpful. Bring a meal, mow the lawn, or pick up groceries for the family.
- Be aware of support groups and offer to find one if the family is interested.

The grief of suicide survivors is unique and complicated by the circumstances of the death. You can help by being present as a caring friend and sounding board. Let the family know you're ready to listen if and when they want to share their thoughts and emotions.

Help is available. For additional information, visit MagellanHealth.com/MYMH

1. 2014 data, released December 2015, CDC Web Based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS)
Sources: American Association of Suicidology; American Foundation for Suicide Prevention; Harvard Health Publications

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