

Suicide and Grief at a Glance

- Grief in response to suicide can be particularly intense and complicated
- Some people find it difficult to be open about the cause of death, but being open and honest as much as possible may help you feel less isolated.
- Feelings of guilt, shame, and blame are very common.
- It is important not to expect too much of yourself in the early stages.
- In a family, the pain can make it more difficult to communicate with one another. Conflicts can arise.
- It is important to communicate while at the same time respecting each family member's different way of handling the loss.
- There is no wrong or right way to grieve. There is no specific timeline.
- Don't be afraid to ask for help; it can make a real difference to you, your family, and your friends.

Some of the experiences of bereavement following suicide might include:

- A sense of unreality, numbness, nightmares, and intrusive thoughts
- Feelings of guilt and failure that the death was not prevented
- Feelings of guilt at perceived failure of responsibilities
- A sense of blame
- An unrelenting need to ask why, to try and make sense of and understand why it happened
- Feelings of rejection and abandonment
- Anger toward the person who took their life
- Personal diminishment, that is, experiencing the suicide as a reflection of the quality of the relationship with the person
- A sense of shame and stigma, believing that others will think negatively about you and your family (Sometimes this can result in feeling alone and wanting to withdraw 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 your 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 that 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 realize and acknowledge that their lives will never be the same again, but that they will adapt to a new normal where they will once again feel good and make plans for the future.

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 hindsight, it is often easy to see signs of the persons distress and to criticize 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 recognize the person’s contributions and influences during their life and to remember the time spent together.

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.

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

In a family, it is important to communicate with one another while at the same time respecting 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, but the stigma attached to suicide makes it especially difficult.

What we have learned from bereaved people is that they need compassion, recognition, and validation of their experience. In summary: non-judgmental support, an opportunity to tell the story, a safe and supportive environment, willingness to remain open and listen.

Taking Care of Yourself While Grieving

Nutrition, sleep, and exercise

- Eat a balanced, nutritious diet and avoid junk food.
- Drink plenty of fluids to avoid dehydration.
- Avoid alcohol or drugs—they can cause more problems and will not help you to deal with the pain.
- Exercise regularly if possible—it can help with energy, establishing a routine, improving mood states, and regaining a sense of control.
- Get plenty of sleep. Try relaxation techniques like listening to soothing music or doing deep breathing exercises if you have difficulty sleeping.
- Try going to bed and waking up at the same time each day.
- Watch for significant weight loss or gain. See your physician for assistance if you see changes or find yourself having trouble eating or sleeping.
- Realize that physical reactions are typically not permanent and tend to ease as the grieving process continues.

Emotional and psychological care

- Give yourself permission, time, and space to grieve.
- Acknowledge and express feelings in healthy ways.
- Allow yourself to cry, but also know that it is OK not to cry.
- Don't avoid feelings or pretend that death doesn't hurt.
- Allow others to reach out to you and share verbal and nonverbal forms of caring for you. You do not have to grieve alone. Talking to others and sharing your grief experiences with supportive people in your life can be comforting.
- Don't escape into loneliness, but also know that wanting to be alone at times is ok.
- Honor that all people grieve differently and that there isn't one right way to grieve.
- Ask for help when you need it.
- Know when to seek professional help from a counselor, social worker, or psychologist. Seeking counseling services does not mean you are weak, crazy, or inadequate.
- Allow yourself to let go of guilt and "if only..."
- Grief consumes a lot of energy. Cut yourself some slack and take it easy if you need to.
- Keep a journal—"off-load" and sort out thoughts and feelings by writing them down.
- Grief can make it hard to remember things. Keep a to-do list.
- Take time to make decisions. Put off major decisions if possible.
- Set small goals for yourself.
- Create a routine and take things one step at a time.
- Feel free to ask "why?" when searching for answers to death.

- Find a support group—sharing with others who can relate with where you are coming from can offer comfort and hope.
- Tell others what you would like or need from them: help, emotional support, time together, a friendly ear.
- Serve others. Sometimes helping another person in need can ease the pain and hurt you feel.
- Allow yourself to take periodic breaks from grieving.
- Find a hobby: reading, art, poetry, gardening, walks, etc.
- Avoid judging yourself with others on how you are doing with your grief process as compared to another person. Everyone grieves in a different way and on a different timetable.
- Laugh and have fun. It is ok to laugh, play, and have fun. Doing so does not mean you are avoiding or not honoring someone's death.
- Read books, articles, or poetry written by others who have experienced loss.
- Create a memory book of photos and writings that help you honor the impact this person had on your life.
- Realize that you can't prevent or skip the grief process. You also can't cure or fix grief. Typically, the only way out of grief is working through the grief.

Religious and spiritual care

- Know that it is common to question your spiritual belief system after someone dies. Spiritual people may decide they want nothing to do with spirituality. Sometimes those who have nothing to do with religion or spirituality suddenly have a great desire to seek out these things and discover a spiritual path that works for them.
- Death can bring up spiritual questions for many people. Sometimes it helps to share spiritual questions and concerns with someone who will understand, support, and accept you, regardless of your spiritual belief system.
- If it is comforting, seek help from your spiritual source of strength.
- If you need a break from things of a spiritual nature, take a break.
- If it helps, draw on spiritual strength of others or spiritual resources. Many individuals often find comfort through scripture study, religious articles, church attendance, or clergy.