

Coping With the Loss of a Loved One Through Suicide

Each year, more than 29,000 people in the United States die by suicide. It is this country's 11th leading cause of death. It is estimated that for every suicide, at least six other people's family members, friends, and co-workers are intimately affected, and left to survive the terrible loss.

These survivors are often left stunned and troubled by the powerful reactions they experience:

- Shock is often the immediate reaction to suicide, along with a physical and emotional numbness. These are the ways of temporarily screening out the pain so that it can be experienced in smaller, more manageable steps.
- Depression may appear as disturbed sleep, fatigue, inability to concentrate, change in appetite, and the feeling that nothing can make life worth living.
- Anger may be part of the grief response, whether directed towards the deceased, another family member, a therapist, or oneself.
- Relief may be a part of the reaction when the suicide followed a long decline into self-destructive behavior and mental anguish.
- Guilt often surfaces as the feeling, "If only I had done...", "If only I had said or not said ..."
- Why? Many survivors struggle long and hard with this question.

What becomes of these intense, relentless feelings? They usually diminish as months and years pass, although some residual feelings may remain unresolved. Recognizing how best to accommodate and cope with these feelings can help you advance the healing process:

- Maintaining contact with other people is especially important during the stress-filled months after a loved one's suicide. Friends and relatives may feel uncomfortable and unable to offer consolation. Take the initiative to talk about the suicide and ask for their help; it will also help them.
- When you feel ready, share with your family and friends your feelings of loss and pain. Understand that each family member may be grieving in his or her own way.
- Children experience many of the feelings of adult grief. Remind them that they are still loved by sharing your thoughts and feelings with them and asking them to share theirs with you.
- Anniversaries, birthdays and holidays may be stressful reminders of the suicide. Plan these days to meet your own emotional needs and your family.

- You may need to feel guilty for a while before you can accept that you are not to blame and that you are only human, with human limitations.
- It is worth trying to understand the feelings of the deceased, but no one gains when the struggle to understand the suicide becomes the only activity that seems worth while.
- It is important not only to be able to go on with your life, but eventually to enjoy life again, without feeling that enjoyment is disloyal to the deceased.
- The survivors of any death need comfort, support, and trusted listeners with whom they can discuss their grief. The stigma of suicide and the shame, guilt, and blame that people feel can isolate suicide survivors in their grief. Many survivors find their relief in support groups, where they can voice their feelings and learn from the experience of others.
- Individual counseling with a mental health professional or clergy member is another option to help survivors through their grief process.