



AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF SUICIDOLOGY

Helping Survivors of Suicide: What Can You Do?

2014

The loss of a loved one by suicide is often shocking, painful and unexpected. The grief that ensues can be intense, complex and long term. Grief and bereavement are an extremely individual and unique process.

There is no given duration to being bereaved by suicide. Survivors of suicide are not looking for their lives to return to their prior state because things can never go back to how they were. Survivors aim to adjust to life without their loved one.

Common emotions experienced with grief are:

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|------------|------------|-------------|-----------|
| Shock | Denial | Pain | Numbness |
| Anger | Shame | Despair | Disbelief |
| Depression | Stress | Sadness | Guilt |
| Rejection | Loneliness | Abandonment | Anxiety |

The single most important and helpful thing you can do as a friend is listen. Actively listen, without judgment, criticism, or prejudice, to what the survivor is telling you. Because of the stigma surrounding suicide, survivors are often hesitant to openly share their story and express their feelings. In order to help, you must overcome any preconceptions you have had about suicide and the suicide victim. This is best accomplished by educating yourself about suicide. While you may feel uncomfortable discussing suicide and its aftermath, survivor loved ones are in great pain and in need of your compassion.

Ask the survivor if and how you can help. They may not be ready to share and may want to grieve privately before accepting help.

Let them talk at their own pace; they will share with you when (and what) they are ready to.

Be patient. Repetition is part of healing, and as such you may hear the same story multiple times. Repetition is part of the healing process and survivors need to tell their story as many times as it is necessary.

Used the loved one's name instead of 'he' or 'she'. This humanizes the decedent; the use of the decedent's name will be comforting.

You may not know what to say, and that's okay. Your presence and unconditional listening is what a survivor is looking for.

You cannot lead someone through their grief. The journey is personal and unique to the individual. Do not tell them how they should act, what they should feel, or that they should feel better "by now".

Avoid statements like "I know how you feel"; unless you are a survivor, you can only empathize with how they feel.

Survivors of suicide support groups are helpful to survivors to express their feelings, tell their story, and share with others who have experienced a similar event. These groups are good resources for the healing process and many survivors find them helpful. Please consult our website (www.suicidology.org) for a listing of support groups in or near your community.

The American Association of Suicidology (AAS) offers a variety of resources and programs to survivors in an attempt to lessen pain as they travel their special path of grief. These include:

- Survivors of Suicide Kit: an information kit consisting of fact sheets, a bibliography, and sample literature.
- *Survivors of Suicide: Coping with the Suicide of a Loved One* booklet and *A Handbook for Survivors of Suicide*.
- *Surviving Suicide*, a quarterly newsletter for survivors and survivor support groups.
- "Healing After Suicide", an annual conference held every April, for and about survivors.
- Suicide Prevention and Survivors of Suicide Resource Catalog: a listing of books, pamphlets, etc. which can be ordered from AAS. Includes resources for children and those who care for them.
- Directory of Survivors of Suicide Support Groups – available at www.suicidology.org

Additional Resources

Survivors of Suicide www.survivorsofsuicide.com

Suicide Awareness: Voices of Education (SAVE) www.save.org

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) www.afsp.org

Beyond Surviving: Suggestions for Survivors

Iris M. Bolton

1. Know you can survive; you may not think so, but you can.
2. Struggle with “why” it happened until you no longer need to know “why” or until YOU are satisfied with partial answers.
3. Know you may feel overwhelmed by the intensity of your feelings but that all your feelings are normal.
4. Anger, guilt, confusion, forgetfulness are common responses. You are not crazy, you are in mourning.
5. Be aware you may feel appropriate anger at the person, at the world, at God, at yourself. It’s okay to express it.
6. You may feel guilty for what you think you did or did not do. Guilt can turn into regret, through forgiveness.
7. Having suicidal thoughts is common. It does not mean that you will act on those thoughts.
8. Remember to take one moment or one day at a time.
9. Find a good listener with whom to share. Call someone if you need to talk.
10. Don’t be afraid to cry. Tears are healing.
11. Give yourself time to heal.
12. Remember, the choice was not yours. No one is the sole influence on another’s life.
13. Expect setbacks. If emotions return like a tidal wave, you may only be experiencing a remnant of grief, an unfinished piece.
14. Try to put off major decisions.
15. Give yourself permission to get professional help.
16. Be aware of the pain in your family and friends.
17. Be patient with yourself and others who may not understand.
18. Set your own limits and learn to say no.
19. Steer clear of people who want to tell you what or how to feel.
20. Know that there are support groups that can be helpful, such as Compassionate Friends or Survivors of Suicide groups. If not, ask a professional to start one.
21. Call on your personal faith to help you through.
22. It is common to experience physical reaction to your grief, e.g. headaches, loss of appetite, inability to sleep.
23. The willingness to laugh with other and at yourself is healing.
24. Wear out your questions, anger, guilt, or other feelings until you can let them go. Letting go doesn’t mean forgetting.
25. Know that you will never be the same again, but you can survive and even go beyond just surviving.

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