

Grief after Suicide

Coming to terms with the death of a loved one is one of life's most challenging journeys. When the death is from suicide, family members and friends can experience an even more complex kind of grief. While trying to cope with the pain of their sudden loss, they are overwhelmed by feelings of blame, anger and incomprehension. Adding to their burden is the stigma that still surrounds suicide.

Survivors of suicide and their friends can help each other and themselves by gaining an understanding of grief after suicide. For survivors, it helps to know that the intensity of their feelings is normal. Friends can learn how to support the bereaved.

A Different Grief

Survivors of suicide - the family and friends of a person who completes suicide - feel the emotions that death always brings. Adding to their suffering is the shock of a sudden, often unexpected death. As well, they may feel isolated and judged by society, friends and colleagues.

Some people compare the emotional stress to being trapped on an endless roller-coaster. Survivors may feel:

- guilt, anger, blame, shame, confusion, relief, despair, betrayal, abandonment
- disconnected from their loved one because he or she chose to die
- consumed by a need to find the meaning and reasons for the suicide
- an exaggerated sense of responsibility for the death
- the suicide was malicious, or a way for the deceased to get back at them.

Stigma Affects Mourning

Suicide is a difficult topic for many people. Cultural and religious taboos can lead to judgmental or condemning attitudes. Some people prefer to avoid even discussing suicide and their lack of knowledge about it makes them fearful. Attitudes like these can isolate and further stress survivors.

Stigma leads survivors to feel abandoned by their social network. They describe:

- Being avoided by friends or acquaintances
- Feeling judged
- People behaving as if the death had not occurred

Some survivors perceive stigma that is not really there. They may anticipate difficult questions and disapproval, and withdraw in order to protect themselves.

Whether it is real or perceived, stigma can affect a survivor's journey to acceptance.

What Survivors Should Know

First, know that you are not alone. Approximately 1 out of 4 people know someone who died by suicide. It can also help to know that:

- Suicide was the decision of the person who died
- It is estimated that the majority of suicides are the result of untreated depression or other mental illness

Survivors Are at Risk

Survivors of suicide are at high risk of completing suicide themselves. The experience suddenly makes the idea of suicide very real, and it is not uncommon for survivors to experience suicidal thoughts. Another factor is that suicide-related illnesses like depression run in families.

Because of this increased risk for suicide, survivors should not be isolated, but rather supported and encouraged to talk about all their feelings - even the most difficult ones.

Survivor Coping Strategies

No two people ever experience grief in the same way, or with the same intensity, but there are strategies that can help you cope with your loss.

- Acknowledge that the death is a suicide
- Recognize your feelings and loss
- Talk openly with your family so that everyone's grief is acknowledged and can be expressed
- Reach out to your friends and guide them if they don't know what to say or do
- Find support groups where you can share your stories, memories and methods of coping
- Be aware that anniversaries (e.g. birthdays) can be especially difficult and consider whether to continue old traditions or begin new ones
- Develop rituals to honour your loved one's life

How Can I Help My Friend?

Showing a willingness to listen is probably the most important thing you can do for a friend who is a survivor of suicide. It may be distressing at first, but you're not expected to provide answers. Instead, you can be a comforting, safe place for someone who desperately needs to talk.

What you can do:

- Listen with non-judgmental compassion
- Understand that your friend will need time to deal with their loss
- Avoid clichés
- Talk about the person who has died
- Offer practical assistance such as shopping, cooking, driving
- Find and offer information on resources, support groups, etc.
- Be aware of difficult times, like anniversaries and holidays

Where To Go For More Information

For further information, contact a community organization like the Canadian Mental Health Association to find out about support and resources in your community.

*Information from the Canadian Mental Health Association website -
<http://www.cmha.ca>*