

# Grief After Suicide

We live in a grief-avoidant culture that tends to ignore, suppress, minimize or over-expedite (rush) the process of grief. This can be exacerbated in the case of grief after suicide.

For various social and historical reasons, suicide itself carries with it a level of stigma that can make the grieving process somewhat unique for the families, friends, colleagues, and loved ones of the person who died by suicide. Research on grief after suicide is clear that the *course of grief* after a suicide is, generally, non-pathological – meaning that it is not out of the range of what is considered “normal” or “customary.” However, the feelings and experiences of those grieving after a loved one’s suicide – and why they experience these feelings – may be distinguished from the grief experiences of others who are bereaved as a result of other circumstances (disease, accident, natural causes, homicide, old age, etc.)

Both research on suicide bereavement and narratives from those who have been suicidally bereaved reveal that grief after suicide may include feelings of:

**Abandonment** – as if the person who died did not love them, or did not love them enough to refrain from suicide.

**Anger** – at the person who died, at others, at the world, at the situation in general, at themselves.

**Regret** – about things that were (or were not) said or done before the suicide.

**Shock and disbelief** – that the person actually caused their own death intentionally.

**Guilt** – around about feeling that they should have been able to prevent the suicide.

**Shame** – about the cause of death and about how others might perceive the deceased, or what they might think or say about them or their families or friends.

**Confusion** – about why things happened the way they did and about what the future may hold.

**Anxiety** – about how to adjust to life without the person.

**Isolation** – because oftentimes others – even close family, friends or colleagues - do not know what to say or how to reach out to those who are bereaved as a result of a loved one’s suicide.

**Relief** – especially if the deceased individual had struggled with long-term mental health problems or was extremely distressed for a substantial period of time; or if the individual who died had made repeated suicide attempts in the past. Often, then, there can be feelings of guilt that follow (or coincide with) feelings of relief.

In many cases it may take time for those who are bereaved as a result of the suicide of a loved one to make meaning of the loved one’s death. Having patience around this process can be challenging. Additionally, those who are suicidally bereaved may need to ask the question “Why?” over and over. Such questioning is not out of the ordinary. It is important to remember that grieving takes time and that the process is not linear or straight-forward; it may, in fact, contain twists and turns.

**Continued to next page**

# Grief After Suicide

Things that may be helpful for those who are grieving after a loved one's suicide:

- **Remember that grief is a process that takes time.** Our culture does not often honor this, nor does it encourage the process that may be necessary for those who are suicidally bereaved. Patience can be a great gift to give to yourself as you grieve.
- **Allow yourself to experience all feelings** and share them with those who are willing to listen.
- **Seek support and ask for it when you need it.** Sometimes a grief support group (possibly one specifically geared to survivors of suicide) can assist with this. Oftentimes those who are grieving (or who have experienced the death of someone they love to suicide) can provide a level of comfort and support that others may not be able to do.
- **Remember that you can have boundaries with others.** Others may ask you questions about the death and/or about how you are managing. If you would rather not discuss things at that time, however, you have the right to say “I appreciate your interest, but I’d rather not discuss that just now. If I feel the need to talk about that in the future, though, I will consider touching base with you.”
- **Do your best to suspend self-judgment.** Oftentimes those who are suicidally bereaved feel ultimately responsible for the suicide, or that they should have seen the “warning signs,” and/or that they should have been able to prevent it. Exploring these feelings may be helpful; however letting go of self-judgment also is important to the healing process.
- **Realize that holidays, birthdays, special occasions, and the anniversary of the death of the person might all be “triggers” for more acute grief responses.** Take extra care to have personal and/or professional support available at these times.
- **Reach out for professional help if necessary,** especially if you experience thoughts of suicide yourself. These thoughts sometimes surface, but it does not mean that you will act on them. If you feel as if you may, ask for help or dial 911 for immediate assistance.
- **Engage in rituals of remembrance,** if they feel helpful for you. In our culture, often the funeral is the only form of ritual we have to remember a loved one. Sometimes after a suicide, others may feel as though remembering or talking about the deceased person might make you upset or ruin your day; consequently, an unspoken “code of silence” can result. If it’s helpful for you, find rituals that may help to process your grief. This can mean lighting a candle, looking at pictures, visiting the cemetery, writing a letter to the deceased or doing community service in honor of the deceased person. Repeat these rituals as many times as you need to if they bring you comfort.
- **When you feel ready, you may wish to get involved in community efforts** to prevent suicide or educate about suicide and the experience of those who are bereaved by the suicide of a loved one. Only you can decide if/when this might be something you choose to do.