



SURVIVORS OF SUICIDE

Every suicide has unique and painful effects that ripple among family members, friends, peers, co-workers and community. Life is difficult for those who struggle following the suicide of someone close. All the usual complications of adjusting to loss are compounded by questions, confusion, rejections, anger and despair. Therefore, normal grief reactions are intensified.

Death by suicide is usually sudden and unexpected. There is no time to prepare for the death, no anticipation to reduce the emotional blow. The suddenness leaves the survivor no time to work on unfinished relationship issues or to reach a sense of closure. Reactions of shock, disbelief and denial are normal.

We do not expect a person to die of his or her own choosing. Some survivors refuse to believe a suicide occurred. They insist the death was an accident, despite all evidence to the contrary. Denial in this instance serves as a buffer to the acceptance of reality at a manageable rate.

By its very nature suicide is violent. Many suicide survivors are haunted by vivid memories of the death scene or the conflicts that occurred prior to the death. Rejection of self and others is always implicit and may even be stated in accusatory suicide notes. Anger at the victim for deliberately leaving is common. There is a good chance that survivors will also be angry with themselves. They may feel directly responsible for the death: "I should have done something." "I should have seen the warning signs and prevented this from happening." These are universal statements, especially from parents and spouses.

Survivors often search for something or someone to blame. A person or an institution can become the scapegoat. Blaming others often leads to dissension within a family as members select the one who they believe was the most at fault in order to pass on the burden of blame.

The relentless pursuit of "why?" is typical of all suicide survivors. This represents the hope of finding a reason for the death. The search for the answer can unleash a mental dialogue of more questions, doubt and guilt. This may go on for years following the death.

It is not unusual for families in which a suicide has occurred to undergo multiple pressures prior to the death, particularly when there have been threats of suicide and a history of depression. The turmoil that many families have experienced adds to the stress the family feels when a suicide occurs. If the suicide victim's emotional state made him or her difficult to be with, the family usually experiences a sense of relief. Then, feelings of guilt return for feeling that way.

In every suicide there is a component of rejection. The survivor feels that the person who has completed suicide has both rejected and abandoned them. Survivors can feel shame that someone preferred death to living with them.

If you or members of your family have felt or experienced any of the mentioned reactions, you may take some small comfort in the knowledge that you are experiencing the wide range of normal reactions as survivors of completed suicide. Although your pain is intense, there are some healthy things you can do to help yourself.

HOW TO HELP YOURSELF

Grief is difficult, but it is necessary. By turning the grief process into a growing experience, you can find meaning in a senseless tragedy.

One of the best ways to start the healing process is to share your grief with those who will support you. Share your fears and talk about your feelings. Express your anger, your guilt, and your fears. Your friends may feel awkward around you for a while because they don't know what to say. You may want to withdrawal. But instead, you must make a special effort to reach out to others for support. Tell them when you want to talk about the deceased. Don't be afraid to use the word "suicide." It is important that everyone accepts what has happened.

Learn all you can about the causes of suicide. It will help you understand what happened. You may find only partial answers to the "Why?" question. You may have to come to a conclusion that you will never know why.

Allow yourself to hurt. The shock to your system, physically and emotionally, is enormous. Be patient and loving with yourself.

Expect setbacks. Just when you feel better, all the intense emotions can return. If you think you aren't coping well, give yourself permission to get professional help.

Follow your own instincts about what to do, when and how. You will get so much advice from people that you may feel confused. Go slow and you will know what is right for you.

You may be tempted to "protect" young children by concealing a suicide. Don't. They will hear about it somewhere else and feel worse than if you had told them. You need not give every detail but do be factual. You may find that talking to your children helps you with your grief.

Know that you can and will survive. Your life is worth living. You have people who need you and you need them. You will have a future.