



Caring, Support, Awareness, Education
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The dictionary describes the word 'grief' as: misery, sorrow, pain, unhappiness, angst and woe.

When a person suffers from 'grief' its effects on that person depend not only on the particular relationship (family member / partner or friend) to the one who has suicided, but also their relationship to other survivors and their network of contacts.

Grief is a suffering of the heart, mind and soul body. It is an excruciating mental and physical agony. This thing called 'grief' may manifest itself in the breakdown of a person's immune system; it may subject the bereaved to migraine-like headaches; it may eventuate as longer-term fatigue; it may be a significant contributing factor in the development of clinical depression; it may be driven by some unknown, energetic force that propels the sufferer to 'overload' on work.

Often, until all legal processes are complete, the grieving process may be inhibited as a protection of self because inner reserves may be needed to counter other unforeseen stressors or demands. At other times, the whole mental and physical self is in limbo — numb — and all the necessary procedures are accomplished through robotic remote control.

It is important to be aware that each family member will grieve differently and their emotional upheavals will, in most cases, not be in sync with yours.

The Grief Journey

The full impact of this suicide tragedy occurs at different times — there is no sequential occurrence — but when you first begin to realize that this much loved person is never coming back, the grief can literally be overwhelming. It is not only that you feel everything is much worse; the fact is that you believe it to be the very real truth. In the beginning although the grief was raw and agonizing, the mind tends to protect itself by placing you in shock, in numbness, but as your mind first begins to grasp the enormity that your life is changed forever, the flood of anguish and emptiness engulfs your whole being.

Crying continually, sleeplessness, difficulty in eating, confusion, lack of concentration, memory loss, lethargy, tiredness, melancholy, utter helplessness and accompanying physical symptoms such as extreme headaches, heart ache, immune breakdown, panic attacks, susceptibility to various viruses are all 'normal' occurrences within the grieving process.

Relatives and friends may try to alleviate your distress by offering words of comfort and producing reading material — it is because they feel hopeless in the face of your pain and are willing to try any means to see you well again. For you it is senseless, as nothing can ease this inescapable and indescribable pain.

Then there is the question of guilt — the awful G-word. Relatives and friends may tell you that you did the very best you could for the suicide victim, that it was ultimately his/her choice, that you shouldn't feel guilty. Just as the feelings of love you had and have for the person who suicided, you cannot help if you feel guilty about that person's actions. To feel guilt is normal, but it is important to understand where this comes from and in time be able to move on from these feelings.

You will most likely need to ask 'why?' — usually there is no ready answer, even if the person who has suicided has left a note. The note is most often ambiguous — it may be, in fact, a sort of Will or set of instructions, it may be as simple as I'm sorry, I love you. In some ways the reliving of the experience and the continual questioning helps in the coping mechanisms.

The key to 'good grief' is to allow yourself to mourn in a way that suits you, to access help — either medical, counselling and/or through a support group for the bereaved by suicide — so that you have the necessary support systems to help you cope and work through your grief. You will have 'bad' days and 'good' days and some of the bad days may be quite devastating, for it's usually caused by an unknown factor, something completely unexpected and will probably come at a time when you think you're coping and it will knock you over, but not down — your own resilience may surprise you!

The key in working through 'good grief' is acceptance or acknowledgment. This usually starts in dribs and drabs. At first it may be the very necessary procedures such as helping to organize the funeral, finalizing all the person's accounts with banks, insurers, etc. Depending on where the person lived, it may be in sorting and collecting belongings from his/her place of residence. If the person was cremated, it will be the decision of where his/her ashes are to be placed or scattered. It may be in the changing of your Will. It may be the first Christmas that you don't include his/her name. Inextricably, acknowledgments that your life has changed irrevocably will slowly and surely gain your acceptance. Once you have accepted this loss, this death, this suicide, the grief journey becomes a path to recovery— Not to your old life, but in the learning of a new one and one in which you will know happiness again.

Many of the above occurrences may span months or years — it will always be in your time not someone else's 'right time'. Relatives and friends may want you to 'move on' — make haste slowly. For in taking your time, there will be fewer regrets later on.

Because each person's grief journey is unique, in all probability you will walk some of that road alone and in doing so, will feel loneliness, emptiness and a real sense of abandonment. It is a way in which you re-center yourself, this 'new' and changed you, and your sense of place in learning to live anew. Just be aware that this is 'normal' and a very natural progression towards self-healing.

Other People's Reactions

As a western society we do not deal with death easily and particularly with the issue of suicide. We are still reluctant to say suicide as even to this day, that word strikes fear in people and a person's suicide still remains a stigma — so the deceased's family may give other reasons for the person's death. It may seem an easier option rather than telling the truth, but the very action of maintaining a secret, causes yet another stressor and will complicate the grieving process — and there is always the possibility that the secret may reveal itself at a future date delivering more pain and potentially shame.

Remember it is quite acceptable to just state that the person has suicided/took his/her life and that you don't want to enter into further discussions about it at this time.

You may find that you will become selective in the people you choose to share the suicide details and with how you're truly feeling.

Suicide Bereavement Support Groups

These groups provide a safe place to share your pain and to tell your story. The environment is one of trust and you will find that by sharing with others who have been bereaved by suicide that you are not alone in struggling with your experience. You will find by listening to other's stories that they too have felt despair and that their beliefs have been shattered.

The bereaved by suicide offer a unique gift, for it is only by experiencing the suicide of a much loved person that they are able to really empathize with your sorrow — for they too, have suffered such devastating turmoil and have run the gauntlet of emotional and physical pain.

They also validate your own feelings and may even help you to alleviate some of the stressors you are facing.

Final Thoughts on Suicide Bereavement

We all have a healthy respect for mortality, whether we believe in an after life or not, as we all realize that every life on our planet is finite. Yet knowing this, we seek out loving relationships with our spouses, children, relatives and friends — so in a sense we grapple with loss throughout our lives.

Each time we have the courage to love, we court the fear of loss — for if we had not loved, the loss would be far less. We expand and enhance and enrich our lives by loving and sharing with the significant people in our lives, so the impact of their suicide leaves us helpless in the wake of uncontrollable circumstances. For as Proust stated: 'We are made up of countless tiny selves. And when a loved person dies, it takes a long time for all those selves to be informed of the event' and, so as each one of those selves discover that loss, it again impacts on us.

Your journey through grief and acceptance will be frustratingly slow and painful, yet remember that you will eventually integrate the loss into your life and it will become part of who you are now.

Remember too, to reach out for help when you need it and to utilize whatever assistance is available for this will be of great benefit in your healing process.

Your legacy will be bittersweet memories — bitter as this important person is no longer with you to share all that life has to offer — sweet as the lovely and loving memories will forever be in your heart.

And above all — be gentle with yourself.

Authors Note

Where the grief journey involves trauma or where the sufferer feels that the grieving process has completely stalled we advise that they reach out for professional help.

The grief process can affect a persons' sense of what is real.

The grief process will vary depending on Cultural differences.

QLD Helplines

Standby Brisbane 07 3250 1856
Standby Response Service 0438 150 180
(24 hour mobile crisis response to suicide bereavement)
Sunshine and Cooloola Coasts 0407 766 961

National Helplines

LifeLine: 13 11 14 (24 hour)
Mensline: 1300 789 978 (24 hour)
Suicide Callback Line: 1300 659 467 (24 hour)
National Hope Line: 1300 467 354 (24 hour bereavement support)
Beyond Blue: 1300 22 4636
Kids Help Line: 1800 55 1800 (24 hour)
SANE Helpline: 1800 18 SANE (M-F 9am-5pm)

Photo by Pia Koskelainen