

Support Group Meetings

Mt Gravatt

Mt Gravatt District Community Centre
1693 Logan Road
Almost opposite the Tri-Care Nursing Home
Fortnightly on Fridays at 7:30pm

Bundaberg

Neighbourhood Centre
111 Targo Street at 10:30am
Meetings held on the 2nd Wednesday of each month
Contact: Peter 4155 1015

Cairns

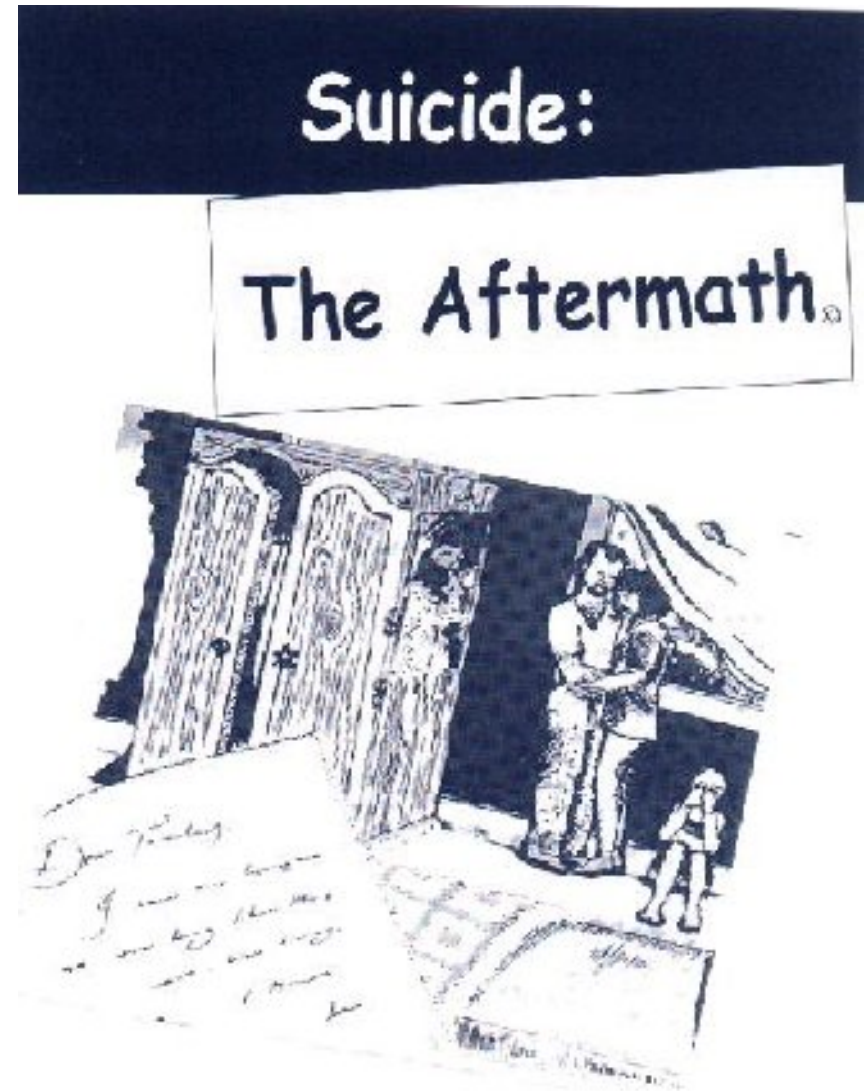
Red Cross House
247 Lake Street at 7:30pm
Meetings to be held on the 2nd Friday of each month.
Contact: Fran 4045 2955

Hervey Bay

Coffee & Chat mornings held each month
Contact: Olwen 0414 311 468

TELEPHONE HELP LINE 24/7

1300 767 022



Survivors of Suicide Bereavement
Support Association Inc
PO Box 334
SPRINGWOOD QLD 4127
Telephone 24/7: 1300 767 022
ABN 15 084 233 358

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Recommended Reading

- Olwen Schubert 1999
The Nature of Words: Guidelines for Communicating with the Bereaved by Suicide
SOSBSA Publishers
ISBN No 0 9586313 1 x
- Victoria Alexander
In the Wake of Suicide: Stories of the People Left Behind
Jossey-Bass Publishers
ISBN 0787940526
- Trudy Carlson
The Suicide of My Son: The Story of Childhood Depression
Benline Publishers
ISBN 0964244313
- Sheila Clark
After Suicide — Help for the Bereaved
Hill Content Publishing,
Melbourne
- Virginia Ironside
'You'll Get Over It' — The Rage of Bereavement,
Hamish Hamilton,
London
- E. Betsy Ross and Joseph Richman
Life After Suicide: A Ray of Hope for Those Left Behind
Insight Books
SBN 0306456303.
- Self Healing Tools* 2000
SOSBSA Publishers
- Facilitating a Bereaved Employee: Guidelines for Employers* 2000
SOSBSA Publishers
ISBN No 0958 6313 6 0
- First Aid for Emotional Hurt*
a pamphlet edited by
Bruce Dimmock and the
SOSBSA Management
Committee, 1999
- Alison Wertheimer
A Special Scar: The Experiences of People Bereaved by Suicide,
Routledge Publishing,
London/Melbourne

Available Services

Queensland

Survivors of Suicide Bereavement
Support Association Inc
(SOSBSA)
PO Box 334
Springwood Qld 4127
Telephone: 1300 767 022

The Compassionate Friends Qld
Inc
PO Box 218
Springwood Qld 4127
Telephone: (07) 3254 2657

South Australia

Bereaved Through Suicide Sup-
port Group
PO Box 151
Kent Town SA 5071
Telephone: (08) 8332 8240

New South Wales

Suicide Prevention Australia
PO Box K998
Haymarket NSW 2000
Telephone: (02) 9211 1788

Bereaved by Suicide Support
Group
Salvation Army
PO Box 687
Chatswood NSW 2057

Western Australia

Survivors of Suicide Support
Group
The Samaritans
60 Bagot Road
Subiaco WA 6008
Telephone: (09) 9381 5555

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Introduction

As a mother who lost her only son, Christian Paul Schubert, at the tender age of 21 to suicide, I know only too well the emotional heartache and the very real physical pain of losing a much loved member of my family.

In 1991 there was very little information that families bereaved by suicide could access. At that time I had no idea of any services available to us. Even now there seems to be little at hand that may help family through this traumatic event.

So as Secretary of Survivors of Suicide Bereavement Support Association Inc I hope that this informative booklet may help others who are bereaved by suicide.



Olwen Schubert

Secretary

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 empathise with your sorrow — for they too, have suffered such devastating turmoil and have run the gauntlet of emotional and physical pain.

They also vindicate 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 realise that every living creature 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 utilise 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.

Reporting a Suicide

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-centre 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.

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 police will need to be contacted so that they may investigate what occurred. They will probably need to question family and friends. The person who found the suicide victim will most likely be asked to make a statement regarding the discovery of the suicide and the events that preceded it. If the suicide victim left a note, tape or video recording, the police will take possession of same as evidence.

Unfortunately, once a person has suicided, that person comes under the jurisdiction of the law and the police follow the very necessary and relevant legal procedures. As a close family member or friend, it will be a distressing and emotional occasion and you may find yourself feeling completely hopeless and frustrated during these procedures.

The scene of the suicide will need to be visited by the police and they will explain the relevant and legal and usual procedures that are necessary. If the person who found the suicide victim has not already contacted the ambulance service, the police will do so.

Once the police have investigated the suicide, the ambulance will take the suicide victim to the morgue (within the Brisbane metropolitan and regional areas, it will be the John Tonge Centre), in other areas it may be the hospital morgue. The police will require someone to formally identify the body. It is advisable that you have a support/advocate person: one who can absorb information that may be overwhelming for you; who will help you deal with police; the Coroner's Court or the media; who will accompany you to the morgue as this is a traumatic and emotional experience. It may be helpful if your support person ask either the police or morgue assistant to alleviate this stressful process by describing what to expect in a gentle and sensitive manner.

The police, if deemed necessary, may be in contact with you again to gather further information.

The Coroner

In Queensland, deaths may be subject to a Coroner's Inquiry and, as a legal requirement, include 'unnatural deaths' such as violent or unusual causes, accidents, suicides and homicides, deaths in prisons.

The police, acting on behalf of the Coroner, having conducted the investigation of the suicide will report their findings to the Coroner.

A post-mortem examination may be performed to determine the exact cause of death. The results of this examination will be reported to the Coroner. An inquest is not automatically held as the Coroner may be satisfied with reports from the police and medical examiner.

You are entitled to a copy of the post-mortem results and the Coroner's report and upon your request, you may obtain same from the Coroner's Office. It is helpful to have a compassionate person with you when you first read the report, if it is too harrowing, leave it until you feel that you can cope. It may take some time to obtain this information and, if the Coroner decides to hold an inquest into the suicide, be prepared for a lengthy period of time to elapse, as the duties of the Coroner are very demanding.

Brisbane Coroner's Office

Central Courts Building
179 North Quay
BRISBANE Q 4000
Phone: (07) 3247 4606
Fax: (07) 3247 9292

Coronial Support Unit

John Tonge Centre
39 Kessels Road
COOPERS PLAINS Q 4108
Phone: (07) 3274 9197
Fax: (07) 3274 9108

Outside Brisbane —

Local Magistrates Court:

Phone numbers are listed in
the local White Pages

Queensland Health Scientific Services (QHSS)

John Tonge Centre for
Forensic Sciences
COOPERS PLAINS Q 4108
Phone: (07) 3284 9200

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 oft times 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! This is said in the context of allowing yourself to truly mourn at the onset of your grief journey, it is only then that the upheavals that may come later, will be endured and overcome.

The master 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 organise the funeral, finalising 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, acknowledgment 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 as path to recover — 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 always will 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.

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 realise 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 it *is* the very real truth. In the beginning although the grief was raw and agonising, 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. In time you may be able to *forgive* yourself and absolve your ‘guilty’ or you may *accept* that you will *feel* guilty for the rest of your life. Either way is fine.

The Funeral Director*

The police, other family members or close friends may help you to contact a funeral director. The funeral director will notify the Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages to inform them of the death.

The suicide victim may have left a Will or a note requesting special instructions regarding their funeral.

The funeral director plays an important role in assisting with the formalities at this difficult time. Consider everything that is suggested to you carefully, you are newly bereaved and need to take things slowly. Family members and/or close friends may be able to help you in your decisions, so that the funeral director may then be able to fulfil your wishes. Remember that this is a ritual of goodbye for you, your family and friends, so take your time to organise this farewell that will mean something to you.

Although it may seem difficult, many family members and friends find it beneficial and important to spend time with their loved one and the funeral director can arrange this. Children also have the opportunity to do this, if at all reluctant, do not force the issue.

What if ... the suicide victim has requested a private funeral just for the immediate family?

Be aware that other family members and close friends feel isolated by this decision and so perhaps you may like to organise a special memorial service for the rest of the family and friends, so that they too, may say their goodbyes.

You can do so without the funeral director's assistance. If you choose a church, then organise the memorial service with the priest/minister; if you want to have a special service at a park, perhaps even plant a tree; if you want to have it on a beach, river etc request help from other family members and friends and ensure that you request and gain permission from your local council.

What About Cremation?

Services for burial and cremation are the same. However, cremation may be less expensive. A religious ceremony need not be conducted for a cremation. The cremated remains may be retained by the family. The ashes may be scattered or as the Australian Cemeteries and Crematoria Association recommend, the ashes to be placed in a memorial, either within the grounds of a crematorium or elsewhere (such as in an urn buried in your garden or under a tree or rose bush) as it becomes a focal point to visit and pay respect to the deceased.

Funeral Notice

The funeral home can place a notice stating the deceased's name and information relating to the funeral service. The family may request 'no flowers' but a donation to a specific charity.

Music/Readings and Poetry/Wakes

The funeral home can organise for an organist, musician or soloist. The family may wish to have a special music recording on tape or CD that they would like played. The deceased may have written poetry and/or family members may wish a special poem, saying or psalm that they would like to use at the service. The funeral home can offer a refreshment service after the funeral or people may choose to hold a wake at a home of the family/relatives.

Flowers and/or Donations to Charities

The funeral director may organise the flowers after consulting with the family. In the case of a donation, funeral homes have a variety of envelopes from different charitable organisations or, if a particular charity envelope is not available, ordinary envelopes are used and these are placed at the entry of the funeral service or can be deposited in a box provided on the day of the service. Either the funeral home or family/friends will ensure that the nominated charity receive the proceeds.

This Thing Called 'Grief'

The dictionary describes the word 'grief' as: misery, sorrow, pain, unhappiness, angst and woe. So what does 'grief' really encompass? It is:

- ◆ depression
- ◆ regret
- ◆ ache
- ◆ melancholy
- ◆ agony
- ◆ sadness

The first letter of these six words spells DRAMAS and one of the definitions of the word 'drama' is TRAGEDY!

When a person suffers from 'grief' its effects on that person depends not only on the particular family/partner or friend who has suicided, but also their relationship to each other and one another.

Grief is a suffering of the heart, mind and soul/body. It is 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.

Organ and Tissue Donations

If the suicide was not completed in the first instance and the person is on life support, you may wish to endorse organ and tissue donation. Before you make this decision, you need to talk to your family so that all within the family are comfortable with the decision.

Australian Organ Donor Register

HIC, GPO Box 711

HOBART TAS 7001

Fax: (03) 6215 5693

Free-call: 1800 777 203 (Business hours)

Email: aodr@hic.gov.au

For more information about organ and tissue donation contact:

Queenslanders Donate

Princess Alexandra Hospital

Ipswich Road

WOOLLOONGABBA QLD 4102

Phone: (07) 3240 2350

Email: queenslanders_donate@health.qld.gov.au

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Deaths

The funeral director will accommodate the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, as when someone dies in an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, they contact the next of kin, an Elder and everyone rallies together to provide support.

Issues of death and dying are very spiritual and they generally prefer to be buried rather than be cremated, as the land is very significant to them.

Multicultural Support for Grief and Loss

Our community is made up of people from diverse cultural, religious and spiritual backgrounds. While death is a common experience to us all, the associated rituals, traditions, attitudes and emotional responses are reflected in these diverse backgrounds. Understanding and attending to the unique beliefs, cultural and spiritual needs of the person who has died and their family and friends who are experiencing grief and loss provides them with a measure of peace and comfort.

When someone dies, it is important for family/friends to discuss the cultural and spiritual needs of the deceased person and themselves. If it is appropriate, this can be done with the help of a funeral celebrant, minister of religion or spiritual leader. The funeral director will accommodate these needs within the health and safety guidelines.

*Excerpts from *At Peace in the Redlands*, Redland Shire Council

Services to be Contacted

A list of services that may need to be contacted includes:

- ◆ Australian Taxation Office
- ◆ Bank, credit union, building society or mortgage provider
- ◆ Business licences
- ◆ Centrelink (if the deceased was receiving social security payments)
- ◆ Clubs and organisations
- ◆ Electricity and gas utilities (to finalise accounts)
- ◆ Employers
- ◆ Department of Veteran Affairs (if the deceased person is an ex-serviceman)
- ◆ Hire purchase companies
- ◆ Insurers
- ◆ Landlords
- ◆ Local authorities (councils, state authorities)
- ◆ Medicare (phone: 13 2011)
- ◆ Post Office
- ◆ Professional association or trade union
- ◆ Queensland Electoral Commission (local, state and federal government)
- ◆ Queensland Transport (to cancel driver's licence)
- ◆ Residential Tenancies Authority (if the deceased person has been renting)
- ◆ Telephone company
- ◆ Tertiary education institution

Bereavement Allowance and Funeral Benefits

Centrelink may provide a number of payments that assist eligible people, such as a bereavement payment that assists the bereaved to adjust to changed financial circumstances following the death of a partner, child or person for whom they have been caring.

Refer to the Yellow Pages for the telephone number applicable to the relevant benefit.

If the deceased was eligible veteran, the Department of Veteran Affairs may also provide financial assistance.

Department of Veteran Affairs

AMP Place
10 Eagle Street
BRISBANE QLD 4000
Phone: (07) 3223 8333
Free-call: 1800 113 304