

*The Nature of Words:
Guidelines for
Communicating with
the Bereaved by Suicide*

Olwen Schubert



SURVIVORS OF SUICIDE
BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT
ASSOCIATION INC (SOSBSA)

© Olwen Schubert 1999

The author has asserted her moral right.

This publication is copyright under the Berne Convention. No reproduction without permission. All rights reserved.

Enquiries concerning permission for use should be directed to:

Survivors of Suicide Bereavement Support

Association Inc (SOSBSA)

PO Box 334

SPRINGWOOD QLD 4127

Telephone: 1300 767 022

Mobile: 0411 037 990

ISBN No. 0 9586313 1 x

Author, typesetting,
proof reading and layout: Olwen Schubert
Secretary
Survivors of Suicide Bereavement
Support Association Inc (SOSBSA)

Printed by: UniPrint
Griffith University
Nathan Qld 4111

Published by: Survivors of Suicide Bereavement
Support Association Inc (SOSBSA)

Message from the Premier of Queensland

The Queensland government is committed to initiatives that will assist the bereaved by suicide in being recognised as grieving individuals who should be treated with due care and consideration.

Those who are involved in the communication industry — in all its myriad forms — are powerful advocates in conveying positive messages that influence public thinking.

This publication — *The Nature of Words: Guidelines for Communicating with the Bereaved by Suicide* — promotes a valuable message that words do matter; that words form a language capable of forming perceptions; and that words describe meaning. It is, therefore, the responsibility of the media to portray the bereaved by suicide with sensitivity.

The dictionary explanation of ‘to communicate’ is to partake or share with others; to transmit or exchange thought or knowledge. So in the true spirit of mutual transmission, it is important to recognise that words are a means of passage between people.

I strongly recommend this booklet to you and allow it to guide you through the appropriate language to use when communicating with the bereaved by suicide.

F
F 

President's Message

Survivors of Suicide Bereavement Support Association (SOSBSA) began from a simple idea. The thought of gathering a small group of people experiencing difficulty in the aftermath of suicide of a loved one to be of comfort to one another within a peer group. It was my initial idea that the sharing of similar experiences would be therapeutic for those affected by suicide.

At the time I had no idea of what this small group would become. It soon became apparent that there was a great need for some services, not only for the bereaved by suicide, but also for those at risk of suicide. Other than death by natural causes, I learnt that suicide was singularly the largest contributing factor of claiming Australian lives.

Other institutions began to hear of my work in this field and began contacting me in the hope of referring people associated with the issue of suicide to me.

It was clear there was a void in the fabric of our society, a gap that desperately needed filling, so SOSBSA was born.

This booklet is part of our strategy, developed to address one of the issues on the subject of suicide. Effective communication. Perhaps the single most important first step in helping the bereaved by suicide is to know you can talk about it.

SOSBSA have found that contrary to popular opinion in many cases, grief caused by suicide does not heal with the passing of time. Lives are disrupted for many years and affect family, career, education, as well as mental and physical health. Largely responsible for this are the taboos surrounding suicide. Consequently, people both bereaved and at risk of suicide feel unable to express their inner most thoughts. If these concerns are not expressed, do not just disappear; they are simply bottled up and cause unseen emotional pain for the sufferer.

We have developed this booklet for you — the friend, the mother, father, brother, sister, work colleague, neighbour, teacher, etc — in the hope that with the knowledge gained from within its pages you will feel more comfortable talking about the issue of suicide to those affected. In the process you will be offering those affected by suicide the support they need.

In closing, I would like to thank all of the people who, through their input and sharing of experiences with us at our bereavement support group meetings, alerted us to the community need and have made this publication an accurate one.

Bruce Dimmock

President



Introduction

As Secretary for Survivors of Suicide Bereavement Support Association Inc (SOSBSA) it has been a pleasure and a great satisfaction to have written this booklet, *The Nature of Words: Guidelines for Communicating with the Bereaved by Suicide* and I wish to thank all the Association members who, through listening to their stories I have been able to gather the necessary words to produce this much needed booklet.

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. I am also aware that power of words can be both comforting and empathetic or soul destroying.

It is hoped that by reading these guidelines, people may perhaps be able to walk in the bereaved by suicide's shoes, even if it is just for a moment. People cannot assume what another person truly feels, one can only approach that particular person in a manner that is non-judgmental and ask questions with empathy. These guidelines hopefully provide some insights into terminology that avoids platitudes, judgments and euphemisms.

This publication endeavours to encourage:

- people in the communication industry to think before they write and to respect the grieving who are bereaved by suicide;
- government employees to be aware of appropriate language and to be more sensitive to the needs of the bereaved by suicide;
- police to show some sensitivity in dealing with the bereaved by suicide in their tragic circumstance;
- other family members, friends and neighbours to assist by comforting and maintaining care and support for those bereaved by suicide.

Words have the power to shape societal attitudes — the right approach provides an affirmation to the bereaved by suicide that someone truly cares!

I urge all who read this booklet to recommend it to everyone you know — for who knows, remember the saying — *there for the grace of God go I!*

Olwen Schubert
Secretary, SOSBSA

Why Bother with Guidelines?

We are all aware of the power of words and the images that words can so accurately portray within individual's minds, descriptive words that can conjure up a 'realistic' picture within the imagination. So, too, the indiscriminate use of words can cause additional hurt and further traumatise those already bereaved by suicide.

These guidelines relate to the portrayal of people bereaved by the suicide of a loved one, whether that person be a close family member, a close friend or a school mate. It must be understood that people grieve in different ways, yet they all need to be comforted either by touch or by word.

We hope that these guidelines will enable individuals to better deal with communicating with the bereaved by suicide. We wish to change the perceptions that prevail toward the bereaved by suicide:

- ... **from** the individual(s) as being on the outer fringe of society **to** their being accepted as an individual in grief;
- ... **from** an unreal expectation of people that the grieving individual(s) should get over it, as if it were a common cold **to** an understanding that grief has no time limits;
- ... **from** emotive platitudes **to** sincere warmth and empathy;
- ... **from** stereotyping **to** individualising;
- ... **from** equating the person's grief with the death of a much loved animal **to** understanding that this was a much loved human being;
- ... **from** impatience with the bereaved for his/her indecisiveness **to** comprehending that the individual's personal trauma, at times, cannot cope with decision-making;
- ... **from** mouthing inane irritabilities about inconsequential and petty matters **to** understanding that the recently bereaved by suicide feels that all this is absolute trivia compared to their loss and personal suffering.

It is time that the experiences of the bereaved by suicide be acknowledged, accepted and portrayed as another facet within the fabric of our community.

In writing about the issues concerning the bereaved by suicide or how they may be portrayed through the media, the following points need to be borne in mind:

- ... respect the rights of the bereaved by suicide, it is not important to know the details for the sake of sensationalism;
- ... grief affects different people in different ways depending on the relationship between the bereaved and their loved one lost to suicide;
- ... it may be viewed differently by people from other cultural backgrounds, religions etc;
- ... recognise that you may be able to help others by accurate reporting and by focusing on what others may be able to do to alleviate the suffering of the bereaved by suicide;
- ... if it is within your ambit, record services that may be available for the bereaved by suicide.

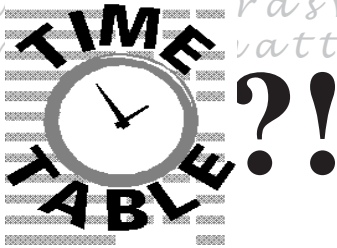
Words Do Matter

Language is a powerful tool — *the pen is mightier than the sword!* It is a critical force in shaping our thoughts, beliefs, feelings, perceptions and concepts. For instance, if you think about a descriptive paragraph such as:

As I sat on the bank of the harbour and watched the voluminous mists of fog rolling in from the sea to engulf the Golden Gate Bridge, encompassing all that lay in its path, including the starkness of Alcatraz, I began to shiver at the sudden coldness that enveloped me.

To each individual this short paragraph may conjure up different pictures in the mind's eye; and so it is critical that the descriptive words used to portray the bereaved by suicide are accurate, yet individual! It is, therefore, crucial to avoid stereotyping the bereaved by suicide. It may take one individual only a relatively short time to appear to be 'normal'; it may take another months; and it may take yet another some years to regain 'normalcy' — yet, it may also be a tenuous 'normalcy' for all who are bereaved by suicide; as they all have to learn to live 'without' — that is, without the loved one lost to suicide.

wordswordswordswordsword
matter matter mattermatter
mordswordswordswordsword
matter matter mattermatter

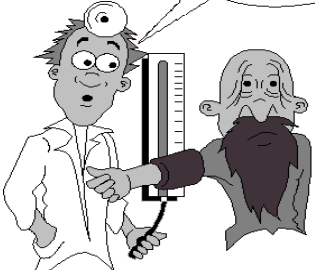


How long has it been now — 6 months? You should be over it and get on with your life!

It's not like I've got the flu! Why can't you understand how I feel? I haven't 'got over it!' I am still hurting so much!



Judging by the tests, you're suicidal. I think we'll regulate you for a week or two, give you some pills and then send you on your way. How does that sound?!



Is being deaf the hardest thing about being bereaved by suicide?



To summarise:

1. Avoid words that may hurt and further traumatise people bereaved by suicide.
2. Avoid stereotyping or stigmatising people who are bereaved by suicide.
3. Accurately portray people who are bereaved by suicide and remember each case is unique.
4. Remember that they, like you, have feelings and should be treated with due care and consideration.
5. If you are aware of services that may benefit the bereaved by suicide, let them know.

Language and the Bereaved by Suicide

In the general community, as well as in government, there is a considerable lack of interest in the ‘forgotten people’ — the bereaved by suicide. Even those who would like to make a difference in the lives of these grieving people, do not know how to talk to them, how to comfort them, how to empathise with them.

There are so many misconceptions about the suicide victims themselves. Words describing them as: mentally ill; drug addicts; schizophrenics, nut cases and misfits. In the majority of cases, this is the great untruth. Yet the language reinforces negative assumptions and stereotypes about them, as well as the bereaved by suicide, as they are often held to blame by our society for the death of their loved one. Statements such as: ‘What kind of mother/father was she/he for her/his son/daughter to kill themselves?!’ or ‘What kind of daughter/son was she/he to drive her/his mother/father to suicide?!’

Even family and close friends of the bereaved by suicide sometimes do not feel free to broach the subject of suicide, after all it is not a gentle word — it is like utter-
insidious like **cancer**. So do we do? Bury our hoping that ‘the prob-
away? Or act positively municate with the within a social per-
inoffensive and accept-
comfort to the bereaved and think: ‘If I were in I like to be treated? gain from my family and



ing the big ‘C’ and it is what as a community heads in a paper bag, lem’ will somehow go and learn to com-
bereaved by suicide
pective that will be able, and of great
by suicide. Just stop their shoes, how would
What comfort could I friends?’

The following are a few pointers to think about and to use when you approach a person who is bereaved by suicide.

Do's	Don'ts
<p>Do ask, 'How are you REALLY doing?'</p>	<p>Don't ask them how they feel if you aren't willing to listen.</p>
<p>Do remember that you can't take away their pain, but you can share it and help them feel less alone.</p>	<p>Don't change the subject when they mention the person who died.</p>
<p>Do accept their moods whatever they may be, you are not there to judge. Be sensitive to shifting moods.</p>	<p>Don't tell them what they should feel, act or do.</p>
<p>Do allow them to talk about the person that has died as much and as often as they want.</p>	<p>Don't be afraid to ask about the deceased person and to share memories.</p>
<p>Do extend invitations to them. But understand if they decline. Above all continue to call and visit.</p>	<p>Don't think that death puts a ban on laughter. There is much enjoyment in the memory of the time they had together.</p>
<p>Do put on your calendar the birth and death date of the person and remember the family the following year(s). That you remember the person who died is very supportive.</p>	<p>Don't push them through the grieving process, it takes a long time to heal and they never forget. Don't encourage the use of drugs or alcohol. Don't say you know how they feel.</p>
<p>Do get literature about suicide and the grief process to help you understand.</p>	<p>Don't avoid them because you feel helpless or uncomfortable, or don't know what to say.</p>
<p>Do use the words 'suicided' or 'completed suicide'.</p>	<p>Don't say or write 'commit suicide' as it reinforces the belief that suicide is a crime.</p>

Stereotyping/Discrimination

Stereotyping of the bereaved by suicide may lead to discrimination and thereby remove their individuality or over-simplify their predicament.

They are discriminated against in several different ways:

1. Friends, work colleagues, acquaintances shun them.
2. Some churches will refuse to conduct funeral or memorial services for the suicide victim on the grounds that they consider it a sin.
3. Some police will prolong releasing documents, such as notes left by the suicide victim.
4. Some police will treat the suicide lightly and will take their time in attending the scene of a suicide.

In some instances the bereaved by suicide are portrayed as negligent in their duty of care, especially in the case of youth suicide. Some may think that they are persons to fear; that somehow their tragedy is catching; that it is better to ignore them; that they are a burden and bear a great shame and should be hidden from society — stigmatised. The bereaved by suicide are normal people that have undergone a monumental tragedy and are trying in the best way they know how to cope with everyday living and surviving.

By stereotyping or discriminating against the bereaved by suicide devalues the person and implies that they be deemed unworthy and undeserving of society's consideration.

Words, as well as actions, can certainly demean and dehumanise the bereaved by suicide and demoralise their already battered self-esteem. Often, it is not only what is said, but how it is said and the body language that attends the words, i.e. 'with a shrug of the shoulder and a lifting of the eyebrows say "It was God's will. Get on with your life, it isn't the end of the world!" and walk away'.

Looking from the Outside In — A Friend's Story

Myvanwyn Trigger

When someone turns to a friend for emotional help and support, it is usually because they know that whilst in their over-emotional state, they cannot see problems rationally. By talking to a friend helps to 'make sense' of the situation. Suicide is different — there is bewilderment on both sides. It is not a situation that can be 'made sense' of and often this inability to understand causes us, 'the comforter', to step back. We do not know what to say, how to help or how to respond, as we may say the 'wrong' thing. Our friend's emotions may be totally unpredictable and we are terrified of how we may respond to these moods. So we stay away — saying nothing, doing nothing, feeling guilty, sad and confused the whole time.

A year ago I tried to help a young friend get help for her suicidal husband; it became a nightmare. There were too many referrals, no understanding or blatant disinterest and in the end he suicided — but fortunately was revived. The doctor who discharged him didn't even give him a referral for counselling, as he 'seemed okay'. The experience shattered his wife and shocked me. So I decided to do 'something' — what I had no idea. However, on moving to the city, I saw an ad for SOSBSA and, with trepidation, dialled the number. '*Come along to our suicide bereavement support group*', invited the voice on the phone. 'But my friend didn't die', I worried out loud, rather illogically. 'Will the others feel that I'm intruding? I don't want to insult them'. (How? Was it because I'd be talking about a 'live' friend?). '*It will be okay. Please come*'.

On the night of the meeting I felt 'gut sick'. I worried that I'd be the only one who hadn't lost someone to suicide, that I'd be the only one crying

and howling, that I'd be considered a voyeuristic intruder. The temptation to turn away was enormous but I 'felt the fear' and went in anyway.

I've met some wonderful people — strong, brave, vulnerable, heartrendingly sad, compassionate and confused — all at different stages in their grief. We've cried together, laughed together, been testy, been quiet, been hopeful and me — well I've howled and probably said the wrong things, but it hasn't been a big issue because I've been prepared to try to understand their grief and just 'be there'! In fact understanding their grief has been much easier than understanding the cause of their grief — the suicides!

Over and over again you will hear your friend ask these questions: 'Why? Why? Why?', 'How can it be?', 'What was it that made them suicide?', 'What has happened in their lives?', 'Why didn't they tell me?', 'Why didn't I guess?', 'There must be some way of knowing?'. In essence, 'give me something I can live with'. All these questions and more, and unfortunately, there appears to be no answers to ease their turmoil. We just don't know, but we will endeavour to learn and understand in the hope that we may be able to offer a realistic alternative to those at risk of suicide.

As I have explained earlier, this is just a way in which I've been able to gain some understanding of the progression of suicide grief though, of course, each person grieves individually, just as each completed suicide is unique.

I'm proud now to say I belong to a suicide bereavement and awareness group. It has been interesting now that when I'm with a group, there are many people who try to catch a 'quiet word' with me. 'Help me understand' is what they are trying to say and in a very small way, I think I do.

Don't be reluctant to approach the bereaved by suicide because, now that you've cared enough to read this booklet, you too have some understanding of their grief — there's nothing to fear in not having answers, it is your comfort and care, just being there, that matters.

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
Support 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

Recommended Reading

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, ISBN 0306456303.

Alison Wertheimer

*A Special Scar: The Experiences of People Bereaved by
Suicide*, Routledge Publishing, London/Melbourne.