

# Helping a Suicide Survivor Heal

Alan D. Wolfelt

## **Suicide and Silent Grief:**

Historian Arnold Toynbee once wrote, "There are always two parties to death; the person who dies and the survivors who are bereaved." Unfortunately, many survivors of suicide suffer alone and in silence. The silence that surrounds them often complicates the healing that comes from being encouraged to mourn.

Because of the social stigma surrounding suicide, survivors feel the pain of the loss, yet many now know not how, or where, or if, they should express it. Yet, the only way to heal is to mourn. Just like other bereaved persons grieving the loss of someone loved, suicide survivors need to talk, to cry, sometimes to scream, in order to heal.

As a result of fear and misunderstanding, survivors of suicide deaths are often left with a feeling of abandonment at a time when they desperately need unconditional support and understanding. Without a doubt, suicide survivors suffer in a variety of ways; one, because they are often shunned by a society unwilling to enter into the pain of their grief.

## **How Can You Help?**

A friend or family member has experienced the death of someone loved from suicide. You want to help, but you are not sure how to go about it. This will help guide you in ways to turn your cares and concerns into positive actions.

## **Accept the Intensity of the Grief**

Grief following a suicide is always complex. Survivors don't "get over it." Instead, with support and understanding they can come to reconcile themselves to its reality. Don't be surprised by the intensity of their feelings.

Since 1980, EveryStep's Amanda the Panda program has delivered love and caring through innovative services such as weekend grief camps, support groups, fun days, school visits and holiday support to inspire hope and healing after the death of a loved one. For more information, visit [everystep.org](http://everystep.org)  
**(515) 223-4847 | (877) 533-4847**

Sometimes, when they least suspect it, they may be overwhelmed by feelings of grief. Accept that survivors may be struggling with explosive emotions, guilt, fear, and shame, well beyond the limits experienced in other types of death. Be patient, compassionate and understanding.

## **Listen with Your Heart**

Assisting suicide survivors means you must break down the terribly costly silence. Helping begins with your ability to be an active listener. Your physical presence and desire to listen without judgment are critical helping tools. Willingness to listen is the best way to offer help to someone who needs to talk.

Thoughts and feelings inside the survivor may be frightening and difficult to acknowledge. Don't worry so much about what you will say. Just concentrate on the words that are being shared with you.

Your friend may relate the same story about the death over and over again. Listen attentively each time. Realize this repetition is part of your friend's healing process. Simply listen and understand. And, remember, you don't have to have the answer.

## **Avoid Simplistic Explanations and Clichés**

Words, particularly clichés, can be extremely painful for a suicide survivor. Clichés are trite comments often intended to diminish the loss by providing simple solutions to difficult realities. Comments like, "You are holding up so well," "Time will heal all wounds," "Think of what you still have to be thankful for" or "You have to be strong for others are not

Constructive. Instead, they hurt and make a friend's journey through grief more difficult. Be certain to avoid passing judgment or providing simplistic explanations of the suicide. Don't make the mistake of saying the person who suicided was "out of his or her mind". Informing a survivor that someone they loved was "crazy or insane" typically only complicates the situation. Suicide survivors need help in coming to their own search for understanding of what has happened. In the end, their personal search for meaning understanding of the death is what is really important.

### **Be Compassionate**

Give your friend permission to express his or her feelings without fear of criticism. Learn from your friend. Don't instruct or set explanations about how he or she should respond. Never say, "I know just how you feel." You don't. Think about your helping as someone who "walks with," not "behind" or "in front of" the one who is bereaved.

Familiarize yourself with the wide spectrum of emotions that many survivors of suicide experience. Allow your friend to experience all the hurt, sorrow, and pain that he or she is feeling at that time. And recognize tears are a natural and appropriate expression of the pain associated with loss.

### **Respect the Need to Grieve**

Often ignored in their grief are the parents, brothers, sisters, grandparents, aunts, uncles, spouses, and children of persons who have completed suicide. Why? Because of the nature of the death, it is sometimes kept a secret. If the death cannot be talked about openly, the wounds of grief will go unhealed.

As a caring friend, you may be the only one willing to be with the survivors. Your physical presence and permissive listening create a foundation for the healing process. Allow the survivors to talk, but don't push them. Sometimes, you may get a cue to back off and wait. If you get a signal that this is what is needed, let them know you are ready to listen if, and when, they want to share their thoughts and feelings.

### **Understand the Uniqueness of Suicide Grief**

Keep in mind that the grief of suicide survivors is unique. No one will respond to the death of someone loved in exactly the same way. While it may be possible to talk about similar phases shared by survivors, everyone is different and shaped by experiences in his or her life.

Because the grief experience is unique, be patient. The process of grief takes a long time, so allow your friend to proceed at his or her own pace. Don't criticize what is inappropriate behavior. Remember that the death of someone to suicide is a shattering experience. As a result of the death, your friend's life is under reconstruction.

### **Be Aware of Holidays and Anniversaries**

Survivors of suicide may have a difficult time during special occasions like holidays and anniversaries. These events emphasize the absence of the person who has died. Respect this pain as a natural expression of the grief process. Learn from it. And, most importantly, never try to take the hurt away.

Use the name of the person who has died when talking to survivors. Hearing the name can be comforting and it confirms that you have not forgotten this important person who was so much a part of their lives.

### **Be Aware of Support Groups**

Support groups are one of the best ways to help survivors of suicide. In a group, survivors can connect with other people who share the commonality of the experience. They are allowed and encouraged to tell their stories as much, and as often, as they like. You may be able to help survivors locate such a group. This practical effort on your part will be appreciated.

### **Respect Faith and Spirituality**

If you allow them, a survivor of suicide will "teach you" about their feelings regarding faith and spirituality. If faith is a part of their lives, let them express it in ways that seem appropriate. If they are mad at God, encourage them to talk about it. Remember, having anger at God speaks of having a relationship with God. Don't be a judge, be a loving friend.