

WHY IS GRIEF AFTER SUICIDE DIFFERENT?

Grief after suicide is like grief that people experience after other types of sudden death. But, suicide raises extra issues because of the sudden and traumatic type of death. These can include the following:

Suddenness

Suicide can be sudden so we often do not expect it to happen. This prevents us from having an opportunity to say goodbye, tell the person how much we care about them, or resolve any issues there could be. In many situations the death can be violent, which can cause us to experience trauma. Please refer to the other information sheets about how trauma can impact us.

Why?

Those impacted sometimes have a desperate need to know why the suicide happened. At the beginning your search for answers may be relentless. However, it's important you reach a point where you feel you know or you let it go. You may have enough answers to satisfy yourself. Or you may recognise you may never know why or completely understand.

Guilt / blame

Guilt or blame are a common reaction and research suggests that guilt is felt more intensely amongst those bereaved by suicide. Family members and friends often feel guilty about not having foreseen the suicide or prevented it. They often replay the events over and over in their heads. There is a long list of 'if only' thoughts: 'If only I had been home', 'If only I had recognised how they were feeling', 'If only I hadn't said that'. It is important to eventually recognise that there is a limit to your responsibility. No-one is responsible for another's decision to end their life.

Relief

For those families who have supported their loved one through many years of chronic mental illness there may be feelings of relief. Such as 'At least now they are at rest', and a sense of freedom from the ongoing worry for their loved one. It is OK to feel this way. It does not mean that you wished your loved one was dead.

Blame

It is common for people to react to a sudden death by looking for someone to blame. Bereaved families, and in particular bereaved parents, often feel that they are held to blame in some way for the death; that there was something 'wrong' in the family or with their parenting skills. Members of families bereaved by suicide may also blame each other. Blame can be a way for some people to try to make sense of what happened. Holding on to blame in the long term can add further difficulties to the grieving process.

Not socialising / staying connected

Historically there was stigma attached to a death by suicide. It was a taboo subject and there are few traditions or customs guiding how to respond to such a death. Many bereaved mention they sensed a lack of support following a suicide. This may be because family and friends are unsure how to react. Sometimes the bereaved person distance themselves from others who could support them because they feel others will blame them, or they don't want people to see them crying, or don't want to have to explain what happened.

Feeling suicidal

The pain of grief may be so intense and unrelenting that those impacted may think 'I can't go on like this anymore'. Identification with the person who has died may make them feel particularly vulnerable. Some people impacted by suicide have suicidal thoughts. Finding support and/or professional help at these times is very important.

Anger

Those bereaved often feel rejected and abandoned by their loved one. This can lead to them also feel angry for suiciding or leaving them. Anger is a natural response to being hurt. It is helpful to talk about being angry and find ways to deal with it constructively.

Some questions commonly asked

Should I tell people it was suicide? It is helpful to be honest. Telling the story over and over again can be healing. If you avoid the truth it will take extra energy and worry to maintain the lie, and this can complicate the grief process.

What do I say when people ask me about the suicide? It can be helpful to work out ahead of time what to say to people. You may want to share more with some people than others. If you don't want to discuss it at that time, let them know. You can say something like "I don't want to go into that at the moment." It may be better not to discuss the method in too much detail. Some people are more vulnerable and may be influenced by this.

What do I say when people ask me how many people are in the family? This may be an awkward question for you. Your loved one will always be part of your life but it may be that you don't want to invite further questions. 'Do I include the person who has died or am I denying their existence if I don't include them?'

Say whatever you are comfortable with. This may depend on who is asking the question and their reasons for it. It may also depend on how you are feeling that day.

What do I say when my children ask about what happened? This may be awkward too. But it's important to avoid talking about the method of death, but be as truthful as you can and explain it simply according to their age / stage of development. Be mindful though you may not want to discuss it, or them to know about what happened, they may be aware already through their friends, school or Facebook. For more about this, see the Supporting children after suicide sheet in this pack.

¹ Wertheimer, A (1991) A Special Scar: The experiences of people bereaved by suicide. London: Routledge

This information has been compiled by StandBy – Support after Suicide with permission from Clark, S.J., Hillman, S.D. & Ministerial Council for Suicide Prevention, 2001, Information & Support Pack: for those bereaved by suicide or other sudden death, Perth, Australia: Ministerial Council for Suicide Prevention.

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