



Surviving A Loved One's SUICIDE

by *Sam N. Foster, LCSW*

Editor's note: If you have lost a loved one to suicide, please read this book from the beginning. If you have picked this up because you have a friend who has lost a loved one to suicide, you may want to go directly to the appendix on page 7.

"Death's sting is two pronged... and, in the apportionment of the suffering, the survivor takes the brunt."

– Arnold Toynbee, 20th century British historian

Five months before I was born, my father committed suicide. My mother, wanting to honor him, gave me his name even though I was the third daughter. Our family never talked about his suicide and I didn't learn the truth about how he died until I was in my thirties. I grew up believing he had died of a heart attack at the young age of thirty-three.

While I was home visiting my mother, who had been diagnosed with terminal cancer, my sister finally told me the truth about how Daddy died. She had discovered newspaper articles about his death when she was only fifteen or sixteen years old.

My father had been the mayor of our small town at the time he died. His father was a highly-respected and much-loved minister who was well known in small towns and rural communities throughout our area of the state.

My father's suicide shocked our community. Yet, the community joined our family in keeping its secret. My sister, having made this discovery, had no one with whom to talk. She approached an aunt who told her to talk to my mother, but that option was clearly not available. The traumatic effect of my father's suicide thus came to a second generation with its original force and there was no outlet for grieving, for consolation, for wise counsel or help in understanding how this could have happened.

Our family closed the door on my father's suicide. The people around us respected the closed door and did not knock. Silence is a lonely and costly choice. It forces us to shut down big chunks of ourselves emotionally and use energy to protect the hidden pain. Isolation endorses the false notion that talking about the pain makes it worse when, in fact, the opposite is true. Talking and sharing with people who love us makes our burdens lighter and the pain becomes less intense.

Several years ago, my sister's youngest son committed suicide while he was away at college. His death was devastating to us, but we are able to talk with each other about it, to share our feelings, fears, and our memories. Having my sisters, who share so much history with me, has been a powerful resource for me.

Survivors need to let others know that talking about suicide is essential to healing. Do not close the door to compassion. We will all benefit as the walls of secrecy and separation tumble.

The Isolation of Survivors

Suicide is unnatural; it contradicts our intense desire to celebrate the triumph of survival in the face of what would seem certain death. We are inspired by people who conquer cancer, overcome massive injuries, cling to life by the sheer will to live. Our instincts force us to survive: if you're choking, you gasp for air; if you're in deep water and can't swim, you flail; you swerve to avoid an automobile accident. These aren't conscious decisions. Your body reacts before you can think.

When someone chooses to die, it forces us to consider our own feelings about life and death. Suicide is a frightening mystery. Although fleeting thoughts of suicide are common, and recurring thoughts are not rare, our behaviors generally affirm life.

It is healthy to focus on and affirm life, but our discomfort with death is hard on survivors of suicide. Survivors often feel alone, emotionally abandoned and stigmatized by their loved one's suicide. The people around them are uncomfortable talking, or even thinking, about suicide. So are survivors! But they have no choice. They must deal with their own conflicting feelings about their loved one's choice to die. When suicide is taboo to the people around them, they have no way to express their grief.

Suicide in the United States

There are approximately 31,000 suicides in the United States annually; each person committing suicide leaves an average of six survivors, which means there are 188,904 new survivors every year. Based on this estimate, there are approximately 4.5 million survivors of suicide in the United States today. These numbers, reported by the American Association of Suicidology (2003), are probably quite conservative. Nevertheless, they represent many, many people who have been abandoned suddenly by a loved one who made the unthinkable choice to die.

These 4.5 million survivors, however, make up less than 2 percent of the U.S. population. Most people can distance themselves from the painful reality of suicide. If you are reading this because someone you know is a survivor but you have been relatively untouched, please take the risk of caring enough to share the pain. Reading this booklet is an excellent place to start, but do not avoid talking about your friend's loss because you are afraid or shy to discuss suicide. Be courageous enough to face the unknown and unknowable with your friend. Your presence may make all the difference.

Confronting the Feelings

Powerful emotions merge and explode in the initial aftermath of a suicide. Grieving the loss of a child, spouse, parent, sibling, or other close relative or friend is quite painful enough, and the sadness and sense of loss at any unexpected death is greater because there is no time to prepare. But as a suicide survivor you face a more complicated grief because you must also deal with the fact that your loved one's death was voluntary.

Survivors often feel numb, or deny that their loved one committed suicide, as a way of dealing with the immediate needs—planning a funeral, responding to sympathy offered by other people. It takes a lot of energy to grieve the death of someone you love, but soon you must move past this phase and feel your feelings. Denial (“It can't be true.” “It didn't really happen.”) is one defense against trauma. Family members sometimes go to great lengths to persuade themselves that the death was accidental or the result of a homicide, even in the face of overwhelming evidence that it was suicide. This is a natural effort for protection, but it isn't healthy over the long-term.

Guilt is one of the earliest, very common, devastating emotions felt in the aftermath of a suicide. You may blame yourself, or question everything you remember doing or saying in the days or weeks before the death. The unanswerable “Why?” haunts you. In an effort to give yourself an explanation, it is easy to imagine you could have prevented that final decision. No matter how pleasant or unpleasant your last moment with your loved one was, a flood of guilt and self-doubt is normal. It is one of many sad legacies of suicide, but you can heal.

You may feel tremendous, and very realistic, fear about dealing with all that is now left to you regarding family, business, finances, and other details. You may be afraid that someone else you love will commit suicide, or you may generally be afraid that the world is not safe if something so horrible could happen.

Anger is also common among survivors. You may be angry at your loved one for abandoning and rejecting you. You may be angry at God for allowing this to happen, or angry at someone else who you blame for “causing” the suicide. Holding someone else responsible for your loved one’s suicide is a way to avoid the greater hurt of acknowledging their choice to die. You may be angry at yourself for not having done enough to make your loved one want to live.

Shame is another complicating aspect of suicide. Survivors often feel a sense of personal failure. The family feels indicted by the fact their loved one voluntarily abandoned them. How can that be explained? If we don’t understand it ourselves, how can anyone else? Suicide is stigmatized in our society and survivors often feel as if they are spreading some terminal disease. Suicide becomes the defining moment of the loved one’s life—the family feels responsible and others see the suicide as the consequence of a flawed family.

You may become depressed or be overwhelmed by feelings of helplessness and hopelessness when the reality of your loved one’s suicide finally sinks in. “I couldn’t save my loved one, therefore, nothing I do makes any difference.” Shame, confusion, guilt, and sadness can cause you to withdraw from friends and usual activities, and isolation fuels depression. You may contemplate suicide, paradoxical as that may seem since you know the effect a suicide has on loved ones left behind. Depression skews your perspective and distorts your thinking. If you reach this point, please get professional help. Surviving a suicide is traumatic and causes immeasurable pain, but it can get better.

All of the feelings I’ve described, and any others you may experience, are normal. Allowing yourself to acknowledge and experience your feelings is the beginning of healing. It is very painful but there is no other way to recover from your loss. Talk and share your feelings with close relatives, friends, support groups, or a professional therapist. Being alone with the memory of your loved one’s suicide is a dark and lonely place where the suicide is all-consuming. It is possible to remember what you cherished about your loved one’s life, together with the painful memories, but also with hope and meaning in your own life.

The Question of Forgiveness

Can my loved one be forgiven?

As I have dealt with the suicides of people I love, I have wondered about the possibility of forgiveness for them. God is the giver of life, and choosing to end your life without purpose (such as saving another person’s life) seems so contrary to God’s will. How can there be forgiveness when a person’s last act defies God? We cannot fully know a person’s heart and mind, as God does, but I am assured of God’s steadfast love and care, which is greater than I can imagine. “*For your Father knows what you need before you ask Him*” (Matthew 6:8).

As Jesus died on the cross for us, He prayed for those who killed Him, “*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing*” (Luke 23:34). Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever, and it is comforting to me to trust His continuing prayers for me and my loved ones, not because we deserve them, but because of God’s love and mercy.

Suicide may initially seem unforgivable. We see no hope, but there is hope in Christ. Even the worst thing that can happen, the darkest moment of our lives, does not have to overcome us. “*In Him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.*” (John 1:4-5).

As I remember my loved ones who have committed suicide, I remember the whole of their lives and trust that God—who knows us better than we know ourselves—deals mercifully and lovingly with each of His children. In the end we must turn our loved ones over to His love, grace, and mercy.

In the end that is where we all must stand: before the God who created us, loves us, and calls us to be His own; the God who suffered everything in the person of His Son, Jesus, so that we, by faith, would live with Him forever.

This can be a very difficult question, and it may help to talk with a pastor or a Christian counselor if you have more questions. If you don’t have someone you can talk to, Lutheran Hour Ministries (1-800-876-9880) can help you find someone to talk with in your area.

Can I forgive my loved one?

You may feel full of rage and anger towards the person who committed suicide because you have been rejected, abandoned, and scarred for life by their choice. You have good reason to feel that way. But forgiving your loved one is an important step in your own healing. Suicide is a tragic choice made in the depths of despair when the person is unlikely to comprehend the ramifications of the act. Often we believe this has been done “to” us, but people who attempted suicide and lived describe it as an effort to escape some internal and seemingly unbearable pain. Judging from suicide notes and from the testimonies of people who attempted suicide, people who commit suicide seem to believe others will be better off without them. They don’t understand the emptiness, sadness, guilt, and unanswerable questions they are leaving for their families.

Depression is frequently a factor in suicide. Read and learn more about depression to help yourself understand something about your loved one’s experience of life and how depression finally came to consume them and cloud everything in their environment. If substance abuse was a factor, find out more about this self-destructive addiction. Understanding can help you accept your loved one’s suicide and forgive.

One barrier to forgiveness is to focus on the suicide as if it is the sum total of your loved one’s life. It isn’t. Suicide is a tragic ending, but does not change the life you shared before, or the things that you loved about them. Move past that barrier and remember the life you shared and still treasure.

Inevitably, you will search for answers to your loved one’s suicide. The search may lead to some illuminating insights, but eventually there will be at least one unanswered question: “Why?” One of the most difficult things we must do as survivors is let go of the demand to know the unknowable. God is here with you and wants to comfort you with His strength, mercy, and love. Read Psalm 23, printed in the back of this book. It is God’s promise of comfort to you.

Can I forgive myself?

Forgiving yourself is often a struggle because we tend to find answers to the unanswered questions by blaming ourselves. “I should have realized he was so depressed,” or, if you spoke shortly before the death, “I should have sensed something was different.” Often, people who commit suicide have suffered from clinical depression off and on for years before they finally give up and end their lives. Even so, you cannot predict that a person will commit suicide. Feelings of alienation, hopelessness, or helplessness, which characterize depression, touch most of us at some time. Depression affects millions of people, and most of them find things get better over time.

Suicide is a solitary decision. Often, people who commit suicide are very reserved emotionally. They may be open to helping others but unwilling to share much about themselves, leaving you to guess. But you cannot know what they will not share, and you cannot prevent a suicide if the person has made a clear choice to die. You are not responsible. The inner turmoil that leads to suicide is an unknowable struggle. Let go of blaming yourself.

You may have done or said things to your loved one which you regret. Perhaps your relationship had become distanced or hostile; perhaps you disapproved of their lifestyle and were judgmental; or maybe you were so caught up in your own life that you didn’t give them much time or attention in recent months or even years. Confess these things to God and He promises to forgive you. He says that if we confess the things we have done that hurt others, He will forgive us and purify us.

Regardless of how you behaved or how many times you hurt your loved one, you did not cause them to commit suicide. Your loved one made that decision independently.

Do’s and Don’ts for Survivors

Do:

- Acknowledge all your feelings. They are normal and need to be expressed.
- Seek out others for support. Find friends who will listen. Find out about Survivors of Suicide support groups in your area.

- Read inspirational literature, poetry, the Bible (Psalms 46 & 103, Romans 8 & 12), or books by people who have experienced profound grief yet found hope, peace, and joy in living. (I suggest *A Grief Observed* by C.S. Lewis.)
- Take one day at a time.
- Help others help you by asking for what you need—"I want to talk," or "I want to be alone," or "I want you with me but I don't want to talk."
- Find small ways to restore structure to your days—Make plans daily to go for a walk, meet a friend, or go to the library. Getting dressed and getting out can be very helpful.
- Be assertive with co-workers. Returning to work can be a blessing but it can be stressful to deal with a lot of questions. When I returned to work after my nephew's suicide, I sent a memo to co-workers briefly telling them what had happened and asking for time and space to be left alone.
- Seek professional help if you have persistent thoughts of suicide. It is not unusual to have fleeting thoughts, but if these ideas become fixed you need help shifting your perspective.
- Seek professional help if you feel "stuck" and don't seem to be moving— even slowly—toward a sense of resolution. Healing is always a long process, but you may come to a particular hurdle that you need outside help to get past.
- Cry, hug, and remember with family and friends.
- Listen to beautiful music; visit art galleries; take nature walks. Nurture your soul.
- Consider keeping a journal as a way of venting your feelings and witnessing your own healing.
- Remind yourself again and again: healing is a painful journey, but you can and will make it.

Don't:

- Have unrealistic expectations of a time frame for healing. Allow at least a year, getting past the first anniversary of the suicide, before expecting your life to begin feeling normal again.
- Make major decisions impulsively to escape the pain. You will take the pain with you. A good general rule is to wait at least a year before making a life-altering decision such as selling your home or relocating to another city.
- Avoid people out of a sense of shame. You have not done anything shameful.
- Misinterpret others' silence and lack of helpfulness as not caring about you. People often don't know what to do or say when a friend loses a loved one to suicide.
- Create a shrine, which will perpetuate mourning in an unhealthy way and cause you to focus unendingly on the suicide.
- Shut down feelings you believe are unjustified. Feelings are your honest experience. Denying what you feel only makes things worse.
- Hesitate to set limits with people who are curious. You need to be assertive in the face of insensitivity about your grief.
- Use alcohol or other drugs to numb your feelings.
- Feel guilty if you laugh or forget about the suicide for a few minutes. Accept it as a gift.
- Compare yourself to others who grieve differently.
- Guess what others are thinking. Your guess is likely to be negative and inaccurate.

Moving Through the Pain

It is natural to want to avoid pain, but healing comes when you move through the pain. That is why you need to talk, and that requires finding caring people who will listen. Others are often timid when talking about feelings, especially feelings about suicide. When you withdraw and shut down they may be relieved and join you in avoiding the subject. But that is not what you need to heal. We survivors can help ourselves and others by articulating our needs and asking for support. You may be disappointed in the response you receive from a close friend but be surprised at the sensitive concern expressed by a casual acquaintance. Be open to receiving support and finding unexpected friendships.

Survivors of Suicide support groups meet in cities throughout the United States. A directory of support groups is available from the American Association of Suicidology (contact information is in the back of this book). Many survivors say sharing with others who understood how they felt and accepted all their emotions helped them move forward. Most went reluctantly at first but were grateful afterwards that they had pushed themselves to go. If there is not a support group in your area, consider starting one. The AAS also offers guidelines for starting a support group.

Birthdays and holidays are acutely painful points in any grief journey. Expect that and try to prepare yourself. Make plans for that day. Decide what will be best for you: to travel or stay at home, go to work or take the day off, be with family or be alone to read and meditate. The anniversary of the suicide itself may be the hardest time of all. If it happened on a holiday or special family day, the suicide will now overshadow what had been a joyous time. You may want to find some way of remembering your loved one and celebrating their life with a simple but meaningful ritual. A special candle, an annual contribution to some cause that was important to your loved one, or any other creative way your family finds to remember lovingly can shift the focus from the suicide to your loved one's life.

Moving On—Living in Faith

It is hard to believe life can ever be normal again. Although you are changed forever by such a tragedy, life can be rich and meaningful again. The pain will never go away completely but it can become more like a dull ache than a hemorrhaging amputation.

Moving on with your own life does not minimize or lessen your love and loss. It is not about forgetting but about not allowing your own life to be sacrificed to emptiness or bitterness. If you experience prolonged mourning and unrelieved grief, it may be because you are not letting go of your sense of guilt. Seek help from a supportive church community, a caring pastor, a Bible study group, or a Christian friend to discover God's love, forgiveness, and peace. God promises to be your refuge and strength, to be with you and to help you through the maze of your grief.

When suicide dominates your thinking about someone, the value of that person's life is overshadowed. Moving ahead with your own life helps you claim and affirm the life of your loved one, allows you to remember the happy times together and the loveable qualities of the person you lost. It may help your own healing to find some way to support a mission or worthwhile interest in which your loved one had invested time and energy. When you are past the initial shock and acute grief, try to think creatively of how you could do this. Perhaps your loved one cared for and worked for children, the environment, or music, and you can further that cause with your own contributions.

Tragedy forces us into pain and change. The process of healing is your opportunity to shape that change. Tragedy causes you to take your own life more seriously and to value each day, every friend, each loved one more deeply. I hope your journey will be one of hope and healing today and every day to come.

A Final Note

Could This Happen Again?

One of the great fears you may face as a survivor of suicide is that it could happen again in your family. It is true that the risk of suicide is greater when there is a family history.

Although there is nothing genetic about suicide, when one person in a family commits suicide, it seems to introduce that as an option. Many people who have attempted or seriously considered suicide report feeling a sense of having been given “permission” by the suicide of a relative, even if they had never known the relative. This is a tragic legacy and you need to reject it intentionally.

Although there is no gene that causes people to commit suicide, there is evidence of a genetic predisposition toward substance abuse, depression, and mental illness, which can cause desperation that leads to suicide. A family history of violence or abuse also is a risk factor in suicide and may be related to substance abuse or mental illness. Learned behavior is a powerful factor in either supporting destructive genetic predispositions, or lessening the likelihood these predispositions will flourish. In other words, if a family learns new behaviors to break a cycle of family violence and abuse, it also reduces the likelihood of suicide. Family attitudes that encourage treating substance abuse and mental illness can be significant in counteracting the negative power of these hereditary factors.

Depression often goes untreated, but it is an easily treatable illness. Many excellent antidepressants are available, and psychotherapy is helpful in learning new patterns of thinking and behaving which allow you to deal with hurtful life experiences without letting them overwhelm and destroy you. Likewise, substance abuse is a treatable illness which requires commitment and support. Twelve step programs are available throughout the country and have enabled millions of people to turn their lives around.

The key to refusing a legacy of suicide is to focus on what you are able to control and not be victimized by genetic factors, which are beyond your control. Learn about depression, substance abuse, cycles of violence, suicide, or whatever negative influences are powerful in your family. Mental illness and substance abuse are not moral weaknesses that you need to hide, they are medical problems for which it is important to get treatment. Be open and honest; admit your need for help. You are not alone.

God reassures us that, even though we sometimes feel overpowered by darkness, His goodness is greater and He will give us the strength to overcome. *“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”* (Romans 12:21).

Appendix

Being a Friend to a Suicide Survivor

Tolerating another person’s experience of emotional pain is very difficult, but it’s an important part of caring. There are lots of reasons why you may think you are not prepared to help your friend.

- *You may think that you have nothing to offer or be afraid that you won’t know what to say.* Just your presence can be very reassuring. You may be frightened by your own strong emotions, confusion, and inability to comprehend someone’s choice to die. Your discomfort may make you eager to read your friend’s quietness as, “I want to be alone.” Your friend needs reassurance that you will not be judgmental or shy away from expressions of honest emotion.
- *You might be afraid of crying.* Your tears will not increase your friend’s pain, but may show you are willing to share the grief.
- *You may think you need to have answers for all your friend’s questions.* No one has all the answers. You don’t need to ask a lot of questions, either. Be patient. Listen. Encourage. Be thoughtful.

Some things you can do to help:

- Talk about the person who committed suicide. Friends tend avoid mentioning the person, or if they do, there is an apology or embarrassed silence. But survivors often say they long to hear the name of their loved one. My nephew committed suicide several years ago, only a few days before Christmas. Some time later I mentioned him in a Christmas card to my sister. She said that no one else had mentioned him and, although it made her sad, she was glad that I had remembered him.
- Look for opportunities to talk and remember together. Be sensitive to your friend's grief, but also remember the loved one's life. The memory will be painful, but talking about the person helps to affirm their life and stop focusing on the suicide. Suicide ended a life, but did not erase it.

God is the ultimate healer, but we are instruments of His love and grace. A scriptural passage “dropped” on a survivor without being willing to share in their suffering is unlikely to be comforting. Pray for your friend, asking God to heal the pain and to help your friend feel God's presence, peace, and hope. Pray that you will find the courage to face this tragedy with your friend and will know how to offer comfort.

Helping Children Deal with Suicide

Young children have an awesome sense of their own power to have caused bad things to happen. When children lose a loved one to suicide, they need a lot of reassurance, sensitive attention, and straightforward but simple answers. Trust them to ask for the information they need. Encourage them to talk about their feelings and listen carefully so you will know how to give information without overwhelming them.

When a ten year old child's mother or father commits suicide, the child loses not only the parent who died, but often loses the emotional support of the surviving parent and grandparents who are exhausted by their own grief. This is a time when another relative or family friend may offer essential, loving, attentive emotional support to that child.

Because it seems shameful and is difficult to talk about, suicide is often the impetus for creating a family secret. But secrecy creates an atmosphere where openness, honesty, and intimacy cannot thrive. When children discover the truth later, they may not have the resources to deal with it. The family is the best place for a child to learn about a loved one's suicide, so they can participate in a family experience of love and grief.

Resource Information

- American Association of Suicidology –
Crisis Help Line: 800-273-TALK(8255)

www.suicidology.org • phone: 202-237-2280

4201 Connecticut Avenue,
Suite 408, Washington, D.C. 20008,

The AAS offers a national directory of survivor support groups, guidelines for starting a support group, and a handbook to help people caring for child survivors.

- Survivors of Loved One's Suicides (SOLOS) –

www.suicidal.com

This web site is designed for support of survivors.

Psalm 23

*The LORD is my shepherd,
I shall not be in want.*

*He makes me lie down in green pastures,
He leads me beside quiet waters,
He restores my soul.*

*He guides me in paths of righteousness
for His name's sake.*

*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for You are with me;*

Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.

*You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies.*

*You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.*

*Surely goodness and love will follow me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the
LORD forever.*

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