

Coping After a Loved One's Suicide

Losing someone you know to suicide can be a uniquely difficult experience. Although survivors of someone's suicide may experience grief reactions common to other forms of loss, they also may experience other difficult and powerful emotions.

Common Reactions

Confusion/Shock

Suicide is often sudden and sometimes unexpected (e.g., the person seemed to be doing better), resulting in shock and confusion. Confusion is greater when it is unclear whether the death was actually a suicide, leaving loved ones to wonder. Questions about what happened and how it happened may never be answered, and survivors may struggle with coping and trying to understand.

Shame

Survivors of a loved one's suicide may feel shame. There is stigma around suicide in our society, causing survivors to feel uncomfortable telling anyone about the suicide or being unable to acknowledge that their loved one took their own life. Survivors may also worry that the suicide causes others to judge them as a partner/family member/friend to the person who died. This may manifest in pressure to keep the death a secret or pretend it never happened. This can cause serious emotional strain and make dealing with feelings and getting support much harder.

Guilt

Survivors may experience feelings of guilt for not being able to do something to prevent their loved one's death. They may feel a powerful sense of responsibility, that the person's death was somehow their fault. Some survivors also feel guilty if they feel any sense of relief, which can happen if their relationship with the person who died was ambivalent or painful or if the person had made previous suicide attempts. Survivors may fear being seen as insensitive or uncaring if they express this relief.

Anger

Survivors often feel angry with the person who died, wondering, "Why did you do this to me?" Underlying this sense of anger may be feelings of rejection and inadequacy (e.g., "I wasn't enough to live for"); it is also common to feel guilt for being angry. Survivors may feel angry at God or a higher power, others who were not able to prevent the person's death, or themselves as well.

Blame

It is not uncommon for survivors to search for blame in others, especially if they feel partly responsible for the suicide themselves. Finding someone to blame enables survivors to stop feeling the anger they feel toward the person who died (anger they may feel is inappropriate or wrong to have). Blaming may give survivors a sense of control, as it can be an attempt to find answers to questions that may never be answered.

Trauma

It is not uncommon to have disturbing and graphic images of a loved one's suicide play in one's head. If the survivor witnessed the suicide, the images may play over and over in their mind. If the survivor did not witness the suicide, their imagined fantasies of the event may be even more disturbing. These reactions can be likened to PTSD symptoms that people experience after a traumatic event. Sometimes these reactions are short-lived, but in other cases, they may persist for a while.

Coping Strategies

There is no “right way” to grieve your loss. Grief is personal and individual. You may experience a wide range of powerful emotions, no emotions at all, or somewhere in between. The way you feel and react is also likely to fluctuate day to day or even hour to hour and will change over time. The following guidelines may be helpful as you deal in your own unique way.

- Take things one day at a time.
- You may feel unusually exhausted, nervous, or restless and/or have physical reactions to grief like headaches and loss of appetite. An increased focus on coping skills, self-care, and social support is important.
- Take the tasks of daily living at your own pace—it’s OK to cut back on responsibilities. Ask for extensions or help when possible. That said, it can be helpful to stick to at least some of your usual routine.
- Most people struggle with what to tell other people. Do what feels right for you.
- Keeping in contact with others is important, even if it is difficult. Being around people can be helpful as a distraction and for support.
- Friends and family may not always know what to say or how to help. Share your thoughts and feelings with them, and if you have a sense of what you need, ask for it (e.g., “I just need you to listen,” “I need you to give me a hug,” “Please help distract me”). It’s okay not to know what you need or not be able to articulate it.
- If possible, avoid making major decisions or big changes in your life when feeling overwhelmed by grief. If you can’t put off a major decisions, consult with trusted friends, family, and mentors to help you see things clearly.
- People often feel guilty if they have moments of feeling normal, laughing, or having fun after someone they care about has died, especially by suicide. It’s OK to have good moments. Fun and laughter can be healing.
- Joining a support group with other survivors can be very helpful. Other ways to get support include online forums for survivors, individual counseling/therapy, and talking with a trusted member of your community (e.g., religious/spiritual leader, mentor).
- Anniversaries, birthdays, and holidays can be particularly difficult. Think about whether you’d like to continue old traditions on these dates or start new ones. Symbolic remembrances of your loved one, such as writing them a letter or creating a ritual to honor them, may be helpful in your healing process.
- Healing and moving on does not mean forgetting and is not a reason to feel guilty.
- Expect setbacks. Grieving is a process. So is healing. Try to be kind to yourself if you feel like you’re not “getting over it,” grieving takes longer than you or others expected, or if you think you’re not “dealing” well with your loss.
- Having your own suicidal thoughts is common. This does not mean you will act on your thoughts. However, survivors are at increased risk of suicide, so if you do feel concerned about your suicidal thoughts or you are engaging in risky behaviors (e.g., substance abuse, self-harm), seek professional help.
- Accepting that you may not be the same after a loved one’s suicide is painful and difficult, but you can heal and go on.