

When Someone Close to you Dies by Suicide

The suicide of someone you love can be devastating. You may have many intense emotions all at once. You may feel shocked, confused, angry, or guilty. You may wonder if you could have done something to prevent the suicide. These thoughts and emotions are normal, and, although it will take time, with the right support, you can move forward with your life.

Understanding grief

There is no "right" way of grieving after a suicide. Grief is a process of healing that people experience in different ways. Even if someone you love died months or years ago, your grief may resurface at certain times, such as during the holidays or special seasons, on birthdays, or on the anniversary of the death. Your grief may never be entirely over, but it can become gradually more manageable. Try not to set time limits on your grief or compare your feelings to anyone else's. As you mourn, you may feel these emotions:

Shock. Feelings of numbness and disbelief are common when someone dies by suicide. Right after a loss, people often cope with their grief by denying the reality with thoughts such as, "This can't have happened" or "I can't believe it."

Anger. After a suicide, you may blame doctors or others for not preventing the death. You may blame the person who died for leaving you, or you may feel angry with the world in general, wondering why such tragedies occur.

Guilt. Intense grief makes it hard to think clearly, so you may at times have thoughts that you know aren't realistic. You may dwell on all the "what ifs" even if you know that you did the best you could at the time. Questions like "What if I had taken them straight home?" "What if I had gone downstairs and checked on them?" might occur.

Despair. You may feel very sad, lonely, or helpless. You may wonder how you will ever cope without the person who died. In most cases, these feelings are a sign of your love for the person who died and the pain will eventually diminish.

Some of these emotions may occur at the same time or may seem to come and go for a while. When these strong emotions occur, there are many ways to cope.

Coping with the loss

Ask for help from family and friends. Stay in touch with the people closest to you and let them know what you need. After a loss, you may find it hard to do simple tasks. You may need someone to share a meal with you or help you clean the house. This kind of practical support will help you get through the initial shock.

Talk with people you love about your grief. Sharing your pain may make you feel less alone with your loss. Expressing your feelings is critical after a loss. Give yourself time and permission to grieve. Grief can't be rushed or ignored.

Consider joining a support group for people who have lost friends or relatives to suicide. Joining a group can be especially helpful if you would prefer not to discuss all aspects of the suicide with your family and friends, or if you've tried and they don't seem to understand how

you feel. You can join an online group or one that has regular, in-person meetings. Visit the website for the [Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention](#) to access resources and information, and to search by province for local support groups and resources under "Survivor Support Centres."

Take care of yourself. Keep up your usual sleep and exercise routines, and eat regular meals even if you eat less than normal. Doing something active rather than just thinking to resolve emotions is healthy. Examples include journaling, writing letters, and walking. All of these will help you find the energy you need to keep moving forward despite your loss.

Respect your beliefs. Spiritual beliefs can be a comfort after a loss. You may find reassurance, stability, and peace in the rituals and customs of your faith or culture.

Talk with your doctor if your grief feels unmanageable or if it causes physical symptoms such as a loss of appetite or difficulty sleeping. It's especially important to do this if you have signs of depression, such as difficulty concentrating, withdrawing from others, or an inability to enjoy activities that you used to love. Get professional help right away if you feel so hopeless that you sometimes think of hurting yourself. Call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-TALK (800-273-8255) to be connected immediately with someone in your community who can help.

The deep grief after a suicide usually becomes less intense over time but if it doesn't, a therapist or other counsellor can help you find ways to cope. Your doctor may also be able to prescribe medication that can ease painful symptoms.

What to tell others

Breaking the news of suicide can be one of the hardest things you will ever do. Here are some tips.

- **Tell your closest relatives and friends first.** These are the people who will be able to support you best right after a suicide.
- **Make sure people are in a safe and quiet place or are with others who can support them when you tell them about the suicide.**
- **Be gentle but direct.** Avoid saying that you aren't sure what happened if you know that someone died by suicide. This could strain your relationships at a time when you need support if people hear the truth from others.
- **Remember that people who were close to the person who died may need reassurance that the suicide wasn't their fault.** You may want to explain that people who kill themselves are often suffering from a chemical imbalance as a result of depression or another psychiatric illness. Most people would have taken steps to prevent the suicide if they knew that the individual was in imminent danger.
- **Think carefully about what to tell children.** Give children information that's appropriate for their age so they'll be able to understand it. Very young children may or may not fully understand what death is and may feel even more confused by the word *suicide*. It may be best to give them basic information now and provide details when they are old enough to understand. Children who are older may have many more questions and need more information. A professional such as a child psychologist can suggest how to answer questions sensitively. The site for Suicide Awareness Voices of Education, or [SAVE](#), also has

information on how children of different ages may react to suicide and what you can say to them. Visit SAVE and click on "What to Tell Children" in the "Coping With Loss" section.

Living with the loss

You will always remember the person you lost, but most people find that over time the pain eases. People who have lost someone to suicide are referred to as "suicide survivors" because they are the ones who have to survive after someone has died by their own hand. Here are some ways to move forward.

Find a special way to observe days you associate with the person you lost. Get together with close family or friends so you won't feel alone on days such as birthdays and anniversaries. If getting together isn't possible, arrange to talk by telephone or have a videochat.

Remember that beginning to laugh and enjoy life again doesn't mean you've forgotten the person who died. Moving on can be one of the best ways to honour the memory of someone you love. Ask yourself what they would want you to do.

When you feel ready, consider finding a permanent way to honour the person you lost. You may want to plant a tree, donate money to a cause the person supported, or do volunteer work for an organization concerned with a physical or mental health condition that the person had.

Think about creating an online memorial. A growing number of websites and other media allow you to post remembrances or tributes to someone who has died by suicide. These include the SAVE Named Memorial on the site for the [Suicide Awareness Voices of Education](#) and the [Suicide Memorial Wall on the site for Parents of Suicides \(POS\)-Friends and Families of Suicides \(FFOS\)](#). The POS-FFOS site also has a password-protected Suicide Grief Chatroom that allows you to talk about your concerns with people who've had a similar experience.

Celebrate the person's life, rather than focus on how they died. Given the often unexpected and tragic circumstances surrounding a death by suicide, it is normal to focus initially on the act itself. Remembering all of the wonderful contributions of a person's life, the things the person accomplished, and the ways the person touched others can be tremendously healing, and a positive way to remember the loved one who has died.

Learn about suicide. Suicide typically has very complex causes, and learning about these can help you make peace with the loss, especially if you blame yourself or another person for not having done more to save the person. A good place to start is the website for the [Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention](#), as well as the [American Association of Suicidology](#). Both sites house extensive material on subjects related to suicide, including current research. You can also access suicide information on the following association websites: [Suicide Information and Education Resource Centre](#), the [International Association for Suicide Prevention](#), and the [Suicide Prevention Resource Centre](#).

The suicide of someone you love will likely be one of the most painful experiences of your life, but most people find that their grief eases over time. By allowing yourself to grieve and ask for help when you need it, you can begin to move forward again.



