

SURVIVING SUICIDE

HELP ~~~ HOPE ~~~ HEALING

FOR THOSE WHO HAVE LOST A LOVED ONE BY SUICIDE

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Provided by The Surviving Suicide Support Group  
A Program of Central Christian Church

AFTER SUICIDE:  
FOR THOSE WHOM SUICIDE LEAVES BEHIND

Surviving the suicide of a loved one is one of the most difficult challenges one will ever face. The "survivors," the ones whom suicide leaves behind, are besieged with intense grief. This grief hurts desperately, but must be borne. The grief that comes with suicide is unique. And so, these pages are written for the survivors and for those who want to help the survivors. It is hoped that these ideas will help one work through the grief and rebuild one's life. Remember that grief is like snowflakes or fingerprints. It is different for everyone. Choose the suggestions that may be helpful to you.

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## Suggestions for Helping Yourself Survive

In addition to the help of relatives, friends, and possibly a counselor, the survivor must make efforts to help him/her self. You are the one who sets the pace and limits of your grief. To some extent, you can shorten or lengthen the process of grief depending on your willingness to work through the grief.

1. Lean into the grief. You can't go around it, over it, or under it. You have to go through it to survive. It is important to face the full force of the pain. Be careful not to get stuck at some phase. Keep working on your grief.
2. As soon as you are able, begin to deal with the facts of suicide. The longer that the facts are avoided or denied, the more difficult the recovery could be. Get the facts straight about the suicide - - whats, whys, and hows. To know the facts relieves the survivor's doubts and allows them to face the truth. It is important to be honest with oneself and face the reality that the death was a suicide.

- 3. It may be helpful to make reference to the suicide at the funeral.**
- 4. The emotions of a survivor are often raw. It is important to let these feelings out. If you don't let your feelings out now, they will come out some other time, some other way. That is certain. You won't suffer nearly as much from "getting too upset" as you will from being brave and keeping your honest emotions all locked up inside. Share your "falling to pieces" with supportive loved ones, as often as you feel the need.**
- 5. You may have psychosomatic complaints which are physical problems brought on by an emotional reaction. The physical problems are real. Take steps to remedy them.**
- 6. Don't be afraid to ask for help from those close to you when you need it. So much hurt and pain go unheeded during grief because we don't want to bother anyone else with our problems. Wouldn't you want someone close to you to ask for help if they needed it? Some relatives and friends will not be able to handle your grief. Find someone with whom to talk. Seek out an understanding friend, survivor, or support group member.**
- 7. Most survivors feel it is important to see their dead loved one at the time of the death and funeral. Otherwise there can always be that nagging doubt "Is my loved one really dead?" Grief may take longer because the reality of the death isn't faced. Survivors often stay longer in denial when they have not seen with their own eyes.**
- 8. Keep a daily diary of your thoughts and feelings.**
- 9. Don't be afraid to say the word suicide. It may take months to be able to say it, but keep trying.**
- 10. For some survivors there is a tendency to withdraw to their room, isolate themselves from friends and family, and constantly dwell on their feelings. This may be helpful initially, but not when carried to an extreme.**
- 11. Some survivors throw themselves into their work or take flight in activity. This prevents the person from dealing with the grief. Save time to face your grief.**
- 12. Thinking that you are going crazy is very normal. Most grieving people experience this. Remind yourself that you are not losing your mind but are reacting to a devastating blow.**
- 13. Don't assume that everyone is blaming you or thinking ill of you. They probably are hurt for you but don't know what to say or how to say it.**
- 14. Be prepared that relatives may say seemingly cruel or thoughtless things because of their own pain, frustration, or anger.**
- 15. Do not be afraid to tell those around you exactly how you feel. You may need to remind another that you are not quite yourself. Tell them how much you appreciate their patience and understanding.**

- 16. Some feel that the less said the better and that everyone should try to forget. Studies show this to be the least effective and usually the most damaging approach. Survivors need to release their feelings and resolve their questions, not lock their troubles deep inside.**
- 17. Work on guilt. Something beyond your control has happened. Blaming oneself for the actions of another is illogical and dangerously self damaging.**
- 18. Read recommended literature on suicide and grief. The reading will not solve all of your pain and questions, but it does offer understanding and suggestions for coping.**
- 19. If grief is intense and prolonged, it may harm your physical and mental well being. If it is necessary, seek out a competent counselor. Check to see if your health insurance covers the charges. It is important to take care of yourself. Then you can be of help to your family also.**
- 20. In a time of severe grief be extremely careful in the use of either alcohol or prescription drugs. Tranquilizers don't end the pain; they only mask it. This may lead to further withdrawal, loneliness, and even addiction. Grief work is best done when you are awake, not drugged into sleepiness.**
- 21. It helps to admit our mistakes. We are human. There is so much that we tried to do. There are things we did not do. Accepting our imperfections aids us in working out our grief.**
- 22. If you feel guilt, ask yourself what things specifically are bothering you the most. Talk over your feelings of guilt with a trusted friend or professional, or confess your guilt to God. Telling the truth about why you feel guilty will help. Forgive yourself, ask the forgiveness of your loved one, and of God. Then try to realize what happened is past. There is nothing that you can do about it now. Become determined to live life to the best of your ability now. God's forgiveness should help us to begin to forgive ourselves.**
- 23. You can learn from your guilt and adopt a new lifestyle for the future. From past mistakes you may be able to change for the better.**
- 24. Depression is common to those in grief. Be aware of withdrawing from others and isolating yourself. You may even consider suicide yourself. Be sure to get counseling help if you feel this way.**
- 25. Some survivors find it helpful to give the clothes to the needy and to rearrange furniture. Be cautious about moving. Later, after the pain subsides, you may regret moving from the happy memories.**
- 26. It may be beneficial to concentrate on helping other family members and friends, but don't ignore problems that may be building inside you.**
- 27. Take an empty chair and put a picture of your loved one in it. Tell all your feelings about what happened, remember the good times, and tell of your guilt. It is a way of articulating those confusing thoughts and finishing unfinished business.**

- 28. It is easy and understandable to feel sorry for yourself, but, unchecked, self-pity can lead to anger, bitterness, and depression.**
- 29. Some survivors build a wall around themselves because they are afraid of being hurt again. They miss so much of life this way. It is important to love and enjoy the people in your life instead of distancing from them.**
- 30. Become involved in the needs of other people. Doing things for others builds one's self confidence and self-worth.**
- 31. Join a self-help support group. Such groups offer understanding, friendship, and hope. Surviving Suicide, a support group for adult survivors, meets at Central Christian Church (3375 S Mojave Road 702/735-4004) on the first and third Tuesday of each month. The Suicide Prevention Center of Clark County also provides a Survivors of Suicide support group. Information about that group is available by calling the Suicide Prevention Hot Line at 731-2990. A volunteer will return your call.**
- 32. Don't become discouraged that you are alone in your grief. Sometimes it is helpful to contact other survivors of a suicide. When you read about a suicide in the paper you may want to write a short note to the survivors and give your phone number.**
- 33. If appropriate, encourage community education on what it is like to survive the suicide of a loved one. Many people truly care but they don't know what to do or say.**
- 34. Your anger may be directed at the deceased, yourself, others, God, or you may just feel angry. It is extremely important to get the anger out. This may be done by going to a remote spot and screaming, chopping wood, hitting a punching bag, playing tennis, swimming, pounding a pillow, etc. Anger that is not recognized and directed outward may turn back on you. Such anger unleashed at ourselves is very harmful.**
- 35. It is best to be honest with your close friends about the suicide. If you aren't honest with them, then you will always wonder if and how much they know. You won't be able to lean on your friends, and this leads to isolation and loneliness.**
- 36. It is helpful to consider that usually the victim wanted to stay and to live. Yet, at the same time, he or she couldn't live, so, in confusion, gave in to suicide.**
- 37. At the anniversary of the suicide, birthday, and special holidays get together with a few understanding friends or relatives, or somehow find a way to escape the full brunt of the occasion. It is important to plan the day. It won't be great, but it can be less painful if you don't expect too much of yourself or others.**
- 38. It is not helpful to compare yourself to another survivor of suicide. It may not seem that you are adjusting as well as they are. Remember that no two people go through grief alike.**
- 39. If you are troubled and don't know where to turn, call a 24-hour Suicide Prevention Hot Line. In Las Vegas that telephone number is 731-2990.**

40. Remember the commandment "Love Your Neighbor as Yourself." Of all the times in your life this is one where you need to take gentle care of yourself as you would care for someone else trying to survive.
41. The best remedy for heartache is to lead as happy a life as possible. You and your genuine friends understand that you have done your best to work through your grief and now you are trying to reinvest in life. If others don't understand, don't worry about them. Surviving and rebuilding your life is what is important.
42. When you are ready, aim at regaining a healthy, balanced life by broadening your interests. As a survivor you should take time to think through which activities can bring you some degree of purpose. Remember to start slowly and move carefully in this direction - with friends who are supportive and understanding. Think about taking up something you've always wanted to do: going back to school; volunteering; joining church groups; community projects; or hobby clubs.
43. Practice taking one moment - one day- at a time. Say to yourself, "I have decided to live!" Recognize that you have been hit with a terrible tragedy and yet you have still survived.
44. You had no choice and no control over the suicide but you do have a choice to survive and live through it. It may be the hardest task that you will ever have to perform, but you will survive!

These suggestions were gleaned from *Suicide: Prevention, Intervention, Postvention* by Earl Grollman, Beacon Press, 1971; *Understanding Suicide* by William Coleman, David Cook Publishing Co., 1979; *After Suicide* by John Hewitt, Westminster Press, 1980, and from suggestions by Mickey Vorobel, a survivor.

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## Suggestions for Coping As a Family

**It is important to sit down together to talk, cry, rage, feel guilty and even to be silent. Communication is the key to survival in the aftermath of suicide. At the same time there should be respect for each person's individual way of handling grief. Some family members will grieve privately, others openly, and others a combination of these two styles. In many ways each family member must grieve alone. Here are some suggestions to help with family grief.**

1. Pay attention to your family members when you're with them. Let them know that you love them.
2. Be sensitive to how other family members feel.
3. Listen to what is meant as well as what is being said.
4. Accept the other person and what they say.
5. Don't give each other the silent treatment. This has many negative effects.
6. Sit back and listen. Let other family members have an opportunity to talk.
7. Be sure to hug and touch each other at every opportunity.
8. If depression, grief, or problems in your family are getting out of control, seek the advice of a counselor.
9. Recognize that anniversaries, birthdays and special holidays will be difficult for the family and each member of the family.
10. Remember you can't help anyone if you are falling apart. Do what you can do, get help for what you can't do, and trust in the help that God gives.
11. Studies show that a bereaved person's self-esteem is extremely low. Survivors should work on their image of themselves and help each family member to think and feel good about themselves.
12. If there is a suicide note, discuss as a family what to do with it. If you think it will only bring you pain, then have a private burning and commit its contents to God.

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## Suggestions for Helping Survivors

Bereaved people, especially suicide survivors, need the support, love, and concern of their relatives and friends. Often a survivor is like someone who has trouble standing by him or herself. It is up to us to reach out to help. Their basic needs are for kindness and caring. With time,

understanding, and the concern of their friends, the survivor's feelings of grief will soften. The following suggestions would apply to both the time immediately after the suicide, including the funeral, and for as long as necessary afterwards.

1. Make an extra special effort to go to the funeral home. The shock, denial, and embarrassment are overwhelming for the survivors. They need all the support they can get. Due to the cause of death, in most cases the coffin is left closed.
2. When going to the funeral home, do as you would normally do at any other type of wake. It will not be easy, since you sincerely want to comfort the bereaved person, but really don't know what to say. Just a few words can be a help. "I am so very sorry, I just don't know what else to say to you as I have never been through what you are going through now." "Please accept my deepest and sincerest sympathies; my heart goes out to you." When the person is close, take their hand, by all means hug them and don't feel the need to say anything.
3. Don't be afraid to cry openly if you were close to the deceased. Often the survivors find themselves comforting you but at the same time they understand your tears and don't feel so all alone in their grief.
4. Don't say "It was God's will" or "God called your loved one home because He needed some flowers in His Garden." Such explanations do not console.
5. Survivors can tend to become more paranoid than the average person. The guilt is so overwhelming that when people do not attend the funeral or send a card the guilt increases. A note or visit in the weeks and months to come is of great help to the survivors.
6. Don't try to comfort the survivor by saying "It was an accident, a terrible accident." The survivors need to start dealing with the fact of suicide.
7. Do not say "He or she was on drugs or drunk." You weren't there during the suicide, so how could you possibly know? It is not helpful or necessary to give reasons for the suicide.
8. Survivors may ask "Why?" It is best to say "I don't know why and maybe I'll never know."
9. Be aware that the survivor's grief is so painful that sometimes it is easier to deny that it ever happened. Be patient and understanding. Sometimes this denial gives them a breather before the reality comes crashing in again.
10. Come to the survivors as a friend who sets aside prejudice and judgment. Show genuine and sincere interest.
11. Don't say that the suicidal person was not in his or her right mind or was "crazy". The majority of people who complete suicide are ambivalent and tormented; they may have a character disorder or are neurotic, but they are not insane. Telling the survivors that the person was crazy may invoke worries of inheriting mental illness. Suicide is not inherited.

- 12. Be a good listener. Survivors have a tendency to repeat and ramble. They may have a tremendous sense of guilt. It is helpful to listen over and over and over again.**
- 13. Be patient. Often the survivor is the first one to realize that they are not easy to get along with, but they need people to persevere with them until their grief eases.**
- 14. Don't say "snap out of it." Often the survivor reacts to such a statement by pushing down his or her feelings and thoughts which slows the process of working through ones grief.**
- 15. Be the type of friend with whom the survivor can talk and feel comfortable and accepted. Be available to spend time with the survivor. Most people find the best way to work through their emotions is to talk them out with someone they trust. When the survivor tells about their feelings often they are helped in understanding what is going on. Talking also releases some of their pressures. Often while talking the survivor comes up with his or her own solutions.**
- 16. Survivors have every right to feel sensitive. Some people deliberately avoid the survivors. They will cross the street or pretend that they don't see the survivors. This adds to their guilt. Such actions are not done out of malice, but rather out of confusion about what to say. It is not important to make every effort to befriend the survivor and to reach out.**
- 17. Encourage the bereaved to talk. It is of not help to say "Don't talk about it." Let the person pour his heart out. It is helpful to share pleasant and unpleasant memories; to get in touch with what they are feeling; and to express what they think.**
- 18. Vicious and cruel remarks are sometimes made. They hurt the survivor deeply. Don't repeat such remarks and try to help the originators of the remarks to realize the hurt that they are causing the survivor.**
- 19. Don't start telling the survivors that your child or friend "almost" tried to commit suicide an you "know" how they feel. Your loved one is still alive and theirs is dead.**
- 20. Never say "you'll get over it in time." Hopefully, the survivor will learn to deal with it and cope with it in time, but never will they "get over it."**
- 21. Discussing the signs of suicide with a survivor is not helpful since the suicide is a fact. Telling them "there must have been signs indicating depression" only lays more guilt on the survivor.**
- 22. Be sincere if you ask "How are you coming along?" and then really listen to what the survivor says. Don't prevent him from talking. Don't change the subject or walk away.**
- 23. The anniversary of the suicide is a very painful time. Relatives and friends should make every effort to be available, to listen, to call, to visit, to send a note, to do little acts of thoughtfulness.**
- 24. Accept the survivors feelings. Practice unconditional love. Feelings of rage, anger, and frustration are not pleasant to observe or listen to, but it is necessary for the**

survivor to recognize and work on these feelings in order to work through the grief rather than become stuck in one phase.

25. As time goes on, it is still appropriate to say that you are sorry or to reminisce about the loved one. It is comforting to survivors that their loved one hasn't been forgotten and that people are still concerned about them as survivors.

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