



Grief after suicide

The death of someone close to us is one of life's most stressful events. When the death is from suicide, family and friends must cope with sadness at the loss plus all their feelings of confusion and sometimes even anger. It takes time to heal and each of us responds differently. We may need help to cope with the changes in our lives. But in the end, coping effectively with bereavement is vital to our mental health.

If someone close to you has just committed suicide, we hope this pamphlet will help you understand that you are not alone in your struggle and that help is available. If you have a grieving friend or relative, this pamphlet may help both of you understand and cope with this difficult time.

HOW COMMON IS SUICIDE?

Approximately one 1 of 4 people knows someone who has committed suicide. The deceased leaves behind a network of family and close friends who must cope with the same inner turmoil that you are probably trying to understand and cope with now.

AM I TO BLAME? COULD I HAVE HELPED?

No you are not to blame. After a suicide, family members and friends often go over the pre-death circumstances and events, blaming themselves for things they think they should or should not have done. "If only I had persuaded him to get help!" or "If only I hadn't told her I wanted a separation..." Even though suicide is an individual decision, it is a very natural and common reaction for survivors to feel guilt or responsibility. People who are left behind should seek out bereavement counselling or support groups to help relieve this feeling of responsibility.

WHAT ARE THE STAGES OF GRIEVING?

There are many different stages of grieving. The 3 stages outlined below are ones which most people will experience. However, people do not usually flow from the first through to the last in a logical order. Some people may jump back and forth between stages, and the length of time it takes to go through the different stages may vary.

Stage 1: Numbness or Shock

Initially, people function almost mechanically. You may also feel anger, confusion or even relief depending on the circumstances. These feelings are normal. Many people at this stage will keep an emotional distance from others to protect themselves and to avoid discussing the death.

Stage 2: Disorganization

It is normal to feel lonely, depressed and tearful at this point. You may have problems sleeping or eating. Some people may feel sorry for themselves and even hallucinate. You may agonize over things you think you could have done for the deceased. At this stage, you may need to reach out to someone and discuss your feelings.

Stage 3: Re-organization

You will begin to feel more comfortable and may find that there are moments in your day when you do not think about your loss. Your feelings will not be as intense and you will be able to focus on daily tasks. At this point, most people need encouragement to re-enter life's mainstream.

But remember, there is hope and help. You may never get over the death itself, but you will overcome the grief.

IS ANGER OR RELIEF A NATURAL REACTION?

While all kinds of loss are painful, the issues are different when dealing with a death by suicide. The length of time it takes to work through the stages of grief also varies depending on the circumstances.

Feelings of anger, confusion and relief are natural. Do not deny them. If the deceased person had been depressed and/or had previously attempted suicide, there is nothing wrong with feeling relieved that the burden is gone or that you are angry because you have another burden to carry.

if you do not work through these feelings, you will prevent yourself from moving forward in the bereavement process. Not moving forward is dangerous; it can cause mental and physical illness and can tear families and friendships apart. It can stop people from coming to terms with the suicide. You must face your feelings before you can work them out.

HOW DOES SUICIDE AFFECT THE FAMILY?

It is important to realize that not all members of the family will grieve in the same way or go through the same stages at the same time. Every family member needs room and understanding to go through the bereavement process in his/her own way.

Be honest with children about the cause of death. Otherwise, they will go through the grieving process again when they learn the truth. Be careful not to ignore or forget the grief experienced by children. They need help dealing with it but should not be "protected" from it.

HOW WILL MY FRIENDS REACT?

Generally friends are well meaning. They want to give support and help but they may not know how. They may be afraid that they will overwhelm you or think that you want to be alone.

Guide them. Tell your friends you want and need to talk about your loss. By opening up, you will help yourself and help your friends help you. People who talk out their feelings are usually the people who recover most quickly from a loss by suicide.

If your friends seem uncomfortable talking about the death, or even being with you, it may be a reaction to your discomfort. If you are uncomfortable talking about the circumstances, don't. Your friends will already know. Let others simply respond to the death of your loved one.

AS A FRIEND, WHAT SHOULD I DO?

Try to understand and be patient with a grieving friend. Do not ignore or overwhelm a person who has suffered a suicide in the family. NEVER BLAME ANYONE. Suicide is a decision made by one person, and judgements should not be made about the family.

Do not try to accelerate the process of bereavement. It can take a long time for a person to work through the grief, to deal with the confusion and to come to terms with his/her feelings.

Treat your friend as you would treat anyone who has lost a family member. Be available to listen or to help out with the chores.

Encourage your friend to consider outside help from counselling agency or support group in the community. In a Suicide Bereavement Group or similar self-help group, your friend will be able to discuss his/her mixture of feelings with other people who have suffered a similar loss.

Acknowledge your friend's feelings of guilt; it will help him/her to come to terms with the fact that he/she is not to blame.

DO YOU NEED MORE HELP?

If you are bereaved and feel you need more assistance than friends and family can provide, contact a community organization, such as the Canadian Mental Health Association, which can help you find additional support.

The Canadian Mental Health Association is nation-wide, voluntary organization that promotes the mental health of all and supports the resilience and recovery of people experiencing mental illness. CMHA accomplishes the mission through advocacy, education, research and service.

Visit the CMHA website at www.cmha.ca today.

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