

Helping Deal With Suicide Grief

Helping those who have experienced the
suicide of a family member or close friend

Suicide is a very sensitive and complex issue in every culture, some attaching more shame to the act than others, but this is only by degrees. Anyone whose life has been touched by this kind of loss understands how it permeates the lives of those who are left to grapple with its impact. In some families, the reverberation of a loss due to suicide can endure for several generations.

Helping those who have experienced the suicide of a family member or close friend:

What makes this loss more difficult than other kinds of death is that the person who died facilitated in some way their own demise. They did not die because a disease arose up within their body, or because they suffered an external trauma. Rather, suicide requires an act of self-violence that is unthinkable for the average normal person.

And this is one key to understanding the act itself. An average normal person may indeed feel depressed from time to time. An average normal person may also experience times of turmoil and stress. An average normal person might even think in a moment of real despair that there is no way to continue on with life. But, the average normal person gets through such passages in life.

When we consider the finer details in most suicide cases, there is almost always something underlying that person's life that is not average and is not quite normal. They may truly be a fine and wonderful person in many regards of who they are and what they do in life. Struggling with an extraordinary circumstance does not make someone a bad person. Many times, when families begin to talk about their loved one, we find that they were on medications, or suffering some severe stress, or going through a dramatic change in their life.

For some reason(s), their loved one was not able to decompress their pain in ways that most people in modern society would, such as seeking out a professional therapist, a support group, a trusted clergy person or close family member or friend. Looking back, many family and friends admit that their loved one was somewhat isolated and that their thought process wasn't always clear, neither to themselves or to others.

Sometimes, rarely, but sometimes, there are no signs that anyone could have detected. What we can understand from this is that the loved one deeply held within themselves the stress and pain that distorted their thoughts and feelings to the extent that what seems completely irrational to most human beings became a rational and sane conclusion for them.

Most major Christian denominations have come to the understanding that no one “in their right mind” could commit such an act. To take one's own life runs so deeply against the grain of human existence, of the very nature of our being that wants to survive even in very difficult circumstances, that it is almost certain no one can commit this act without a severe distortion of their intellectual and emotional capacities.

Thus, most Christian theologians today recognize that God's love can extend grace for this person's agonized end, just as God's love can extend grace for someone suffering a painful death due to cancer or other diseases. This is also true of other major faith traditions. Even so, there is still within most cultures and many religious traditions a real stigma about this issue.

They usually need to tell their story many times

Offer your family members or friends your quiet support. Let them talk, even about the details of how the death occurred. When any kind of death happens, those who experienced it closely want to tell the story of their final hours with their loved, and they usually need to tell it many times before they begin to review their loved one's life in a fuller manner. There is nothing different

about someone whose loved one died due to suicide. They need to tell their story. Accept it for what it is: trust in you to bear with them some of the pain of their loss.

Gently encourage them, not right away, but over time, to recall stories of their loved one not associated with their death. Again, this is true for any kind of death, but especially for the more extraordinary and traumatic death. As they begin to remember their loved one, they will gradually re-encounter that life as it was in a broader context. Someone who commits suicide is not just that one act. There were many creative, loving and even wonderful acts otherwise. Uplifting those memories helps to balance the painful memory of how they departed from life.

In time, encourage them to recall other stories of their loved one...

Many kinds of deaths are “senseless,” and suicide is one that strikes us as unusually so. A freak car accident that results in brain death and organ donation, an infection that takes over a young body, refusing to respond to antibiotics, a small brain bleed that becomes fatal, a fall from a ladder while cleaning leaves out of the gutters and so many other examples, all make us stop and wonder about life, death, God, religion, the universe itself.

It is not unusual then, for family members and friends to question themselves and their values after such an event occurs. They will wonder what they did wrong, or how they could have seen this coming, or why God didn't do something to prevent their loved one from their demise. Their questions can go on for a long time. It isn't helpful to them, actually, to try to *answer* these kind of questions.

It *is* helpful to listen, to acknowledge how painful their loss is for them, and to offer them support. The best support is just that, support. Not advice or guidance, necessarily. Just offer to be with them when they feel they cannot process their hurt alone. Offer to drive them to a nice park where they can

look at green trees and perhaps children playing at a distance, or simply a quiet restaurant. Giving them a chance to see and experience something a little different while you are with them allows their mind and heart to “breathe” a little.

Suicide creates a complicated grief. Be there for them without “answers”

As one would with any kind of significant loss, be as calm and gentle as possible. Suicide creates several layers of grief. It is a “complicated” grief, one that takes time to work through. Often, those who are closest to the deceased feel the greatest guilt. They want so badly to have figured out a way to have prevented this from happening. It may be that they will never quite know “why.” That is often the way it is with death and dying. In and of itself, it is a mystery. How much greater the mystery is when the questions are as difficult and elusive as the answers themselves.

What we can always remind those who suffer with this loss and its consequent grief is that we love them, and that God loves them, as well as their beloved who has died. And then, lend them your strength and be there for them when they need you most.

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