

PATHWAYS CENTER

for GRIEF & LOSS

COPING WITH SUICIDE LOSS

The loss of a loved one by suicide is often shocking, painful and unexpected. Your reactions may be intense and different from anything you have ever been through. You probably have nothing you can compare this experience to, and that can be scary. Perhaps you can relate to some of the following experiences:

- *Be intensely preoccupied with the event, needing to tell and retell what you saw or experienced.* If this is the case for you, identify one or two people you feel safe with who will listen when you need to talk. Talking about it is your way of trying to understand and believe this really occurred.
- *Review of conversations or signs that this was going to happen, asking “why?” and desperately searching for reasons.* Almost everyone who knew someone who died by suicide will revisit the last time they talked with the person and question why they didn’t suspect the possibility of suicide. As you repeatedly do this you will eventually learn how to live with the questions rather than finding all the answers.
- *Being angry at the person who died or blaming yourself or others for not being able to prevent the suicide.* If this is you try looking at the situation from someone else’s viewpoint. Would the person who died or someone not personally involved see it the way you do? If you are open to looking at it differently, it may help you ‘let go’ of some of the intensity of these feelings. Admit your anger and look for healthy ways to express it.
- *Feeling guilty either for not doing more, or for what you did.* Be gentle with yourself, give up self-criticism. Talk to and be as forgiving with yourself as you would a close friend.
- *Feeling shame, embarrassment, perhaps rejection.* If you are feeling the stigma of your loved one’s actions, remember their death is a statement about the pain they were experiencing and a desire to end that pain, not a reflection on you.
- *Having mood changes- sadness, anxiety, irritability, crying spells.* Realize there is no right or wrong way to feel, allow yourself to cry or talk things through as you need to. Keep a journal, listen to or create music or artwork. Find *your* mode of expressing feelings. If your mood changes seriously impact on your ability to function over a period of time seek professional help.
- *Difficulty concentrating, forgetfulness, fear you are “going crazy.”* Initially your loss may be the only thing you can think about. Nothing else seems important. Eventually you will find your concentration will improve and you will be able to focus on other things.

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- *Difficulty sleeping, having intense dreams, intrusive thoughts or flashbacks about the deceased or the incident.* Know that these may occur, similar to aftershocks of an earthquake as your mind tries to make sense of what has happened. These are temporary and should lessen over time. Try to identify what your “triggers” are so you can be more prepared to deal with them or perhaps avoid them. If these become unmanageable, discuss them with your doctor.
- *Unsure what to tell others about the death, especially children.* Secrecy about the suicide will usually cause further complications. Provide basic facts and answer children’s questions honestly with age-appropriate responses. Ask a counselor, friend or clergy to help if needed.
- *Concerns about the “afterlife” of the person who died.* Many who have experienced a suicide loss raise such questions. Seek out a trusted clergy or spiritual mentor who can explore beliefs with you. Remember *all* of your loved one’s life not just the end.
- *Fear that the suicide will overshadow other memories.* Consider meaningful ways to honor your loved one’s memory- create a memory collage or book, share stories, plant a tree or garden.
- *Feelings of hopelessness or despair.* If you are feeling this way for any length of time, and particularly if you have had thoughts of harming yourself, it is very important to reach out, talk with someone, and get the help you need.
- *Physical discomfort such as neck tension, upset stomach, headaches, fatigue.* The stress of this loss affects every area of your life, including physically. Be sure to find ways to give yourself breaks from the stress. Allow yourself to relax and do something you enjoy. Take part in pleasantly distracting activities- gardening, movies, reading, television, sports, and exercise. Alcohol is a depressant, so limit its use.

Though a natural process, grief can be unpredictable. Because of the nature of the loss you may feel different and isolated from others. Your relationship with your loved one was unique, so don’t compare your grief with others. Talking with a bereavement counselor or meeting with others who have had similar experiences can be helpful as you realize that others share many of the reactions, questions, and feelings you have. This provides you with the affirmation and encouragement you need as you learn what has worked for others. Call the Pathways Center for Grief & Loss at (717) 391-2413 or (800) 924-7610 to learn more about the support available to you.