



AFTER A SUICIDE

CAMROSE POLICE SERVICE

TRAUMA AND CRIME SUPPORT SERVICES

780-672-4570

A person you are close to has died by suicide. This starts a journey in your life that you did not expect. Like the dandelion fluff in the wind, your life is blown apart and nothing will gather it together again

Understanding Suicide

WHY? This becomes the burning question after someone has died by suicide. It is a question for which the answer may never be found.

Suicide is not uncommon. Twelve people die by suicide every day in Canada. Men are 3 times as likely to die by suicide than women. It is the 2nd leading cause of death for people ages 15-34 years. Men aged 50-64 are the highest risk of suicide (Gov of Canada, 2021).

But even given the frequency of suicide, understanding of suicide is elusive. Most professionals agree that suicide is a combination of many factors. One way of looking at it is as a chemical reaction which happens when everything is in the right place and time to set off the reaction in that particular moment. The reaction stops or never happens if the right elements never come together. The act of suicide, as in the reaction, reflects a moment in time in the person's life when all the gathered elements- trauma, emotional stresses, mental health condition, failures, successes, losses are present. Jeffery Jackson calls this gathering of elements "The Accumulation of Pain." For suicidal people the pains of life do not dissipate and lessen the final explosion. Rather they are collected and hoarded. The pain grows until it is the only thought and removing all hope from life.

At some point, a catalyst is introduced and the desire to escape the pain overrides their natural instinct to survive.



What to Expect After a Suicide

A suicide is considered to be an unnatural death. Therefore, there are extra pieces of investigation into the death. First, the person who finds the deceased must call the police. The police will secure the scene and begin to gather evidence to support the cause of death. The Medical



Examiner (ME) is called as only the ME can give the final say on the cause of death in this case.

For the friends and family of the deceased, this can be a troubling and frustrating time. The police will take photos and remove personal items. They may block off part of a home to gather evidence and ask the family to leave the scene. Due to the time taken to investigate the scene, the body of the deceased may remain in place for longer than the family expects. Also, the ambulance will not take the body away, but rather the ME will arrange transport which may further delay events.

When the ME starts their investigation, they may request an autopsy. If there are any religious or cultural considerations, the family should get in touch with the ME as soon as possible. Part of the examination will be toxicology tests which could take weeks to return results. It is important to realize the ME does not have to ask the next of kin's permission to carry out the autopsy. The body will then be released back to the next of kin via a funeral home. The ME will then issue a Certificate of Death for the funeral home to register the death.

Family and friends also have to aware that they will be responsible for any clean up the scene. EMS and/or police do not do this task. Professional companies are available if the family is unable to carry this out.

Suicide grief

Death by suicide causes a grief reaction that is the same (we've lost a loved one) but different (the love one chose to end their life) than other grief reactions. This is because other factors shape the grief we feel when someone we love dies by suicide:

- **Suicide is violent and sudden.** Someone you loved has chosen to intentional take their life, usually in a manner they want to be life ending. Fifty-three percent of men and 51% of women die by hanging. Men use firearms 5 times more often than women (Gov of Canada 2020). You may be haunted by what you saw, smelled, or heard; or imaged as their final moments.
- **Guilt** – rarely does a death cause us guilt but in death by suicide, guilt is universal in survivors. We feel we could have, should have, would have.... But with guilt we have to remember – it is a false accusation (Jeffery Jackson). You are not responsible for your loved one's suicide in any way, shape or form. You cannot control the actions and

choices of another person even someone you loved and were close to. You can love and support a person with every ounce of your being but in the end, it was their choice not to stay.

- **Stigma** – suicide is often misunderstood and makes people uncomfortable. There may be blame or shame directed towards those left behind. Religious and cultural norms may isolate the survivors. Other groups will want to know all the details.
- **Loss of privacy** - As suicide is considered an unnatural death, the police and medical examiner will be involved. The medical examiner may decide to do an autopsy that will further scar the body. As a survivor you may feel your grieving process is being watched, weighed, public and dragged out.
- **Anger** – Many survivors of suicide feel angry with the deceased person, with care providers, friends of the deceased, and themselves. It is normal for humans to look for someone or something to blame. This goes back to understanding the Why of suicide. We are reluctant to place the responsibility on the person who died by suicide.
- **Disconnection to the deceased person** – As survivors we have lost a person not due to disease or accident but as a result of their choice to leave us. This can disconnect us from the feelings of love we had for them, and the joy and value they brought to our lives. We can feel conflicted around their memories and this can lead to feeling disconnected from their memory.
- **The Blame Game** – Iris Boulton in her book *My Son...My Son*, writes one of biggest challenges is the blame game. Whose fault is this death? The wife? The friend? The doctor? The survivors are looking to remove the responsibility from the person who died from suicide. This can turn into anger and lashing out at other people who are also grieving this loss.

It is unclear how much control the person has on their decision to end their life but most people who die from suicide have a debilitating mental health condition. Saying this does not judge them but it is to place responsibility on the shoulders it belongs on.





Moving on

When do you move on? That will be a very personal question and each person will have a different answer. You will hear many people tell you "it's time to move on", "tomorrow is another day", or "life goes on." But first and foremost, you have to be able to confront the many emotions that the suicide has left you with. It may be months or even years before you feel ready to "move on."

Accepting the suicide is a key to healing from suicide grief. But suicide leaves behind so many unknowns which are

Unfinished business

The hardest task of grieving a person who died by suicide is the fact that the deceased person chose to leave life behind. This is the cause of much of the guilt, anger, disbelief, and shock we feel after the suicide. But first, we must accept the death and its cause; and then move on to understand it may not have been a "choice" as we define the word:

Adina Wroblewski in her book, *Suicide: Why?* Wrote:

"Choice implies that a suicidal person can reasonably look at alternatives and select among them. If they could rationally choose, it would not be suicide. Suicide happens when...no choices are seen."

Suicide is not a desire to end their life but a need to end their pain. Accepting this can help us let go of the "WHY?" which haunts us and feeds some of the anger and guilt we feel over what has happened.

Also, you may be questioning why you or the life they had was not "good enough" to hold them to this world. This can create a wall in your acceptance of their desire to end their pain with death. Does this mean we are lacking? Others may actively blame you as the spouse, partner, or parent of the person who died by suicide.

You have to remind yourself that you are not the cause of their decision. Suicide is a result of an emotional illness not our actions as parents, spouses, or partners.

Accepting Suicide

Jeffery Jackson indicates in his writing that in order to accept suicide we have to acknowledge some basic realities:

Myth: It's my fault that this happened or it's ____ (insert name of partner, doctor, boss, parent, etc.) fault....

Fact: Suicide is a severe emotional disease that often defies diagnosis and treatment. The external circumstances of the person's life are not the true cause of the suicide. Suicide is a desire to end internal pain.

Myth: If I had managed to stop this suicide attempt, everything would've have been okay.

Fact: You have no way of knowing what would have happened if this attempt at suicide had ended differently. Many people go on to make other attempts and the end result is the same. Even when a person undergoes professional treatment, they may end their life in suicide.

Myth: The person I lost was a saint and who could never do anything wrong.

Fact: The person who died by suicide was like any other human. Able to do good and bad in their life. But that person loss a battle with an emotional disease.

Myth: The person I lost was a bad person for having taken their own life.

Fact: The person was suffering from deep emotional pain which for most people is not understandable. They should not be judged.

Myth: I should have seen this coming and done something...

Fact: You are only human and cannot predict the future or read a person's mind. Often, a person who has planned for suicide appears calmer and happier because they have a plan to escape. Or they hide their feelings behind a mask we cannot see behind.



Myth: I should have been able to save her/him.

Fact: You cannot control everything and everyone around you. People make choices and you cannot always change those choices.

Myth: I can never be happy again.

Fact: Your life has changed forever, but your life will go on. New events, new people in our lives, new places will come into our life. You may feel you are "leaving" the person behind but you are healing and living your own life.

Children and Suicide

- Tell the truth in age-appropriate language. Children know when they are being lied to and when something has happened. It is better you tell them than someone else.
- Don't wait – tell them as soon as possible. Again, before someone else. What children image is often worse than the truth.
- Go to a safe, quiet place. If the person died in the home, find an alternative place to go.
 - Avoid graphic detail while being honest. Give basic facts.
 - Acknowledge their feelings and assure them their feelings are normal.
 - Children understand death is permanent at about age 6. Be prepared for questions and provide answers.
 - Give them the choice to attend the funeral.



Iris Boulton's Suggestions for Surviving

Iris is a Director of a Counselling Center in Georgia, a lecturer, and a consultant. She has written a number of books on grief and surviving grief. Her son Mitch took his own life in 1977 and prompted her to write *My Son...My Son...* She offers some suggestions for people who are grieving a person who died by suicide.

- Know you can survive. You may not think so, but you can.
- Struggle with “why” until you no longer need to know “why” or are satisfied with your answers.
- Know you may be overwhelmed with your feelings, but that your feelings are normal.
- Anger, guilt, confusion, forgetfulness is common. You are not crazy—you are mourning.
- Be aware you may feel anger at the person, at the world, at God, at yourself, at your family—normal.
- You may feel guilty for what you did or did not do.
- Having suicidal thoughts is common. Seek help. Do not act on those thoughts.
- Take each moment and then each day, one at a time.
- Find a good listener.
- Don't be afraid to cry.
- Give yourself time.
- Remember, the choice was not yours, you and no one else is the sole influence on someone's life or choices.
- Expect setbacks. Don't panic if your emotions return in waves.
- Try to put off major decisions for a year.
- Give yourself to get professional help.
- Be aware of the pain of your family and friends.
- Be patient with yourself and others.
- Set limits and say no.
- Steer clear of people who tell you what to feel or do.
- It common to physically experience your grief (headaches, loss
 - of appetite, insomnia)
- The willingness to laugh is healing.
- Wear out your questions, anger, guilt, or other emotions until you are able to let go of them.
- Call on your personal faith or belief system to help you cope.
- Know that you will never be the same again, but you can survive and will go beyond just surviving.

Jeffery Jackson suggests:

1. New milestones may bring feelings of guilt. Your life will move on without the person who has died by suicide. You may feel you are betraying that person, but we need to learn to leave their suicide behind while bringing positive thoughts of them forward with us.
2. Holidays, birthdays, and the anniversary of their death may be very difficult. The “first” of each of these may be the hardest. Plan for this trigger filled day or skip it—what feels right for you. Remember, they are just days—24 hours—and will pass as any other day.
3. Being happy is not a sign you no longer care about the person who died. Take whatever happiness life gives you and don't feel guilty for enjoying everyday life. Your grief can become a smaller piece of your life as time goes on which is normal.
4. Seek support where you can – a trusted listener, counsellor, pastor, or support group. You may find others less willing to talk about the person or your loss. They may move on faster than you are able. Lean on people who are willing, ready, and able to help you.

Books

After Suicide Loss: Coping with your Grief by Jack Jordan and Bob Baugher

Healing After the Suicide of a Loved One by Ann Smolin and John Guinan

Life After Suicide: A Ray of Hope for Those Left Behind by E. Betsy Ross

No Time to Say Goodbye by Carla Fine

Why Suicide by Eustace Chesser



Life is a balance of holding on and Letting go... (Heidi Caswell)

Resources

If you or someone else is in immediate danger call 911

CAMROSE POLICE SERVICE 780-672-4444

CPS TRAUMA AND CRIME SUPPORT SERVICES 780-672-4570

Helplines

988 Mental Health Crisis Line: 24/7 call or text

Kids Help Phone (age 5-29) 1-800-668-6868

Hope for Wellness for Indigenous Persons 1-855-242-3310

Veterans and RCMP Members and Families 1-800-268-7708

AB Mental Health Helpline 1-877-303-2642

National Trans Line 1-877-330-6366

Brite line (2SLGBTQIA+) 1-844-702-7483

The humble dandelion is a symbol of mental health struggles. It is a resilient plant who is the first to poke its head out of the ground in spring and stands up to the most brutal of weather. When it enters its seeding phase, the smallest puff of air sends its many seeds off in many directions. It reminds us how even the sturdiest of plants can be blown away by simple things. But each seed has the potential to become a new plant.