

SURVIVORS OF SUICIDE FACT SHEET

A survivor of suicide is a family member or friend of a person who died by suicide.

Some Facts...

Survivors of suicide represent “the largest mental health casualties related to suicide” (Edwin Shneidman, Ph.D., AAS Founding President).

There are currently over 32,000 suicides annually in the USA. It is estimated that for every suicide there are at least 6 survivors. Some suicidologists believe this to be a very conservative estimate.

Based on this estimate, approximately 5 million American became survivors of suicide in the last 25 years.

ABOUT SUICIDAL GRIEF

The loss of a loved one by suicide is often shocking, painful and unexpected. The grief that ensues can be intense, complex, and long term. Grief work is an extremely individual and unique process; each person will experience it in their own way and at their own pace.

Grief does not follow a linear path. Furthermore, grief doesn't always move in a forward direction.

There is no time frame for grief. Survivors should not expect that their lives will return to their prior state. Survivors aim to adjust to life without their loved one.

Common emotions experienced in grief are:

Shock

Denial

Pain

Guilt

Anger

Shame

Despair

Disbelief

Hopelessness

Stress

Sadness

Numbness

Rejection

Loneliness

Abandonment

Confusion

Self-blame

Anxiety

Helplessness

Depression

These feelings are normal reactions and the expression of them is a natural part of grieving. At first, and periodically during the following days/months of grieving,

survivors may feel overwhelmed by their emotions. It is important to take things one day at a time.

Crying is the expression of sadness; it is therefore a natural reaction after the loss of a loved one.

Survivors often struggle with the reasons why the suicide occurred and whether they could have done something to prevent the suicide or help their loved one. Feelings of guilt typically ensue if the survivor believes their loved one's suicide could have been prevented. At times, especially if the loved one had a mental disorder, the survivor may experience relief. There is a stigma attached to suicide, partly due to the misunderstanding surrounding it. As such, family members and friends of the survivor may not know what to say or how and when to provide assistance. They may rely on the survivor's initiative to talk about the loved one or to ask for help. Shame or embarrassment might prevent the survivor from reaching out for help. Stigma, ignorance and uncertainty might prevent others from giving the necessary support and understanding. Ongoing support remains important to maintain family and friendship relations during the grieving process. Survivors sometimes feel that others are blaming them for the suicide. Survivors may feel the need to deny what happened or hide their feelings. This will most likely exacerbate and complicate the grieving process. When the time is right, survivors will begin to enjoy life again. Healing does occur. Many survivors find that the best help comes from attending a support group for survivors of suicide where they can openly share their own story and their feelings with fellow survivors without pressure or fear of judgment and shame. Support groups can be a helpful source of guidance and understanding as well as a support in the healing process.

CHILDREN AS SURVIVORS

It is a myth that children don't grieve. Children may experience the same range of feelings, as do adults; the expression of that grief might be different as children have fewer tools for communicating their feelings. Children are especially vulnerable to feelings of guilt and abandonment. It is important for them to know that the death was not their fault and that someone is there to take care of them. Secrecy about the suicide in the hopes of protecting children may cause further complications. Explain the situation and answer children's questions honestly and with age-appropriate responses.

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF SUICIDOLOGY

The American Association of Suicidology (AAS) offers a variety of resources and programs to survivors in an attempt to lessen the pain as they travel their special path of grief. These include:

- Survivors of Suicide Kit: an information kit consisting of fact sheets, a bibliography and sample literature.
- Survivors of Suicide: Coping with the Suicide of a Loved One booklet and A Handbook for Survivors of Suicide.
- Surviving Suicide, a quarterly newsletter for survivors and survivor support

groups.

- “Healing After Suicide”, an annual conference held every April, for and about survivors.
- Suicide Prevention and Survivors of Suicide Resource Catalog: a listing of books, pamphlets, etc. which can be ordered from AAS. Includes resources for children and those who care for them.
- Directory of Survivors of Suicide Support Groups – print version available for purchase and an online version available at www.suicidology.org.
- Guidelines for Survivors of Suicide Support Groups: a how-to booklet on starting a support group.

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Additional Resources

- o American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) (www.afsp.org)
- o Survivors of Suicide (www.survivorsofsuicide.com)
- o The Link National Resource Center (www.thelink.org)

<http://suicidology.org/associations/1045/files/Kit2008.pdf>