

Cruse
Bereavement
Support

Bereaved by suicide



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This booklet is based on an earlier version by Patrick Shannon, revised and updated with grateful thanks to Celia McCullagh, Val O'Garro and Val Harrison.

'The sheer emptiness that accompanied the news stopped all time for me. All I could think was a continual stream of questions asking "Why?", and "If only".'

Bereaved by suicide: your feelings

The death of someone close through suicide can be an overwhelming experience. The death of anyone close may be devastating, whether it is expected or not. A death by suicide is particularly distressing because it is both unexpected and, often, unexplained.

'I felt like a survivor from an extremely bad dream that played and replayed in my mind, robbing me of my sleep, sapping me of my energy, casting me to depths of sadness and despair that I had never before experienced until I even questioned my very sanity, my reason for being, my reason for living.'

Following a death by suicide, you may feel caught up on a roller coaster of emotions. You may feel:

- **shock and disbelief** – a sense of unreality and numbness – why did they do it?
- **anger and guilt** – how could they do this to me? – why didn't I know they were in trouble?
- **depressed** – hopelessness often accompanies feelings of helplessness irritable and restless – difficulty sleeping and concentrating are common following bereavement
- **ashamed** – suicide carries a strong social stigma
- **relief** – that the person's suffering is over, but also guilt about feeling relieved.

Often, with the right support, these emotions should lessen and cease to dominate your life. Most people do reach a point when they can accept the death and regain a sense of hope; when they can remember the good times, the anniversaries and birthdays and other special events, without feeling overwhelmed.

This booklet has been written to help you find your way through these difficult and distressing feelings.

The quotes are written by people who have firsthand experience of bereavement by suicide and who have kindly agreed to allow us to publish their words in the hope that they will help other people.

What are you likely to experience?

A death by suicide will provoke a mix of very powerful emotions: bewilderment, anger, guilt and fear.

Bewilderment

Sometimes a person will take their own life after many warnings and attempts, or after they have suffered for a long time from a distressing and painful physical or mental health condition. In such situations, those left behind may feel relief that the person's suffering is now over. Often, though, the death comes like a bolt from the blue, with no warning, leaving the bereaved feeling totally bewildered and asking again and again 'Why?'. 'What drove him to it?' 'Why did she take the pills?' 'Why didn't she talk to me first?'

You may try to reconstruct what happened, to imagine what was said or done before the person took their own life.

People often look to the inquest to provide the answers, only to find that the process and accompanying publicity simply adds to their confusion.

Anger

Initially you may feel disbelief. Then, as the reality of the suicide breaks through, you may feel angry and outraged. 'How could he do this to us?' 'How could she leave me to sort out this mess?' 'How could he be so selfish and cruel?'

This anger is natural. It may be directed at the person who has died, at the world, faith, or at anyone or anything else you blame for the suicide. It is a logical dimension of grief and is a common reaction among people bereaved in all kinds of other circumstances.

'Family, friends and colleagues mostly do not know what to say, or how to treat you. Unless they have already faced the enormity and finality of death themselves, how can they possibly understand the breadth and depth of your needs? Listening is the greatest skill that I found was missing. Kindness and giving are wonderful. Practical help can be wonderful.'

Suicide carries a strong social stigma. You may feel ashamed, and angry with the person who has died for making you feel ashamed. Your shame may make it hard for you to talk to other people, and other people may find it hard to talk to you.

You may regard the suicide as a rejection of your love and all you had to offer, or be angry with the person for not accepting how much they were loved and valued by their friends and family.

With the anger will come more questions: Why didn't he let us help? Didn't she know this would devastate us? Why didn't he see there were alternatives? Why didn't she talk to me and tell me how she was feeling?

Guilt

Guilt is often an expression of anger with yourself for not having done something to prevent the death, or for doing something that you feel may have contributed to it.



'I felt my world had ended. What would I do next? I felt kind of lost, and that part of me had died...I would have found some way to help him and save him, but it was impossible. I even started to question whether I had been a good mother to him.'

The guilt may be imagined – you may feel you should have noticed something or been more available to the person who has died. You may feel that somehow you failed them. You may think you could have stopped them taking their own life, 'if only...' – if only I had taken him seriously; if only I had picked up on that comment; if only I had visited her more often. You may think other people are blaming you for what happened. Compared with other bereavements, people may be less supportive after a death by suicide. This may simply be because they do not know what to say, but it may feel to you as if they are implying that you were in some way responsible for the death.

Whatever the reasons for the guilt, it needs to be put into perspective. Guilt is about blame; it suggests that the suicide could have been prevented. Suicide cannot be understood in

isolation from the rest of the person's life. It is probably impossible to identify an actual cause; there is likely to have been many, in combination. There was very probably nothing you could have done – and accepting that can also be very painful.

Fear

Many people find grief a frightening experience. The fear is partly a fear of intense emotion. It may also be a fear of a world from which one of your mainstays has gone.

After a death by suicide, you may fear that another family member, or even you yourself, may do the same thing. Thoughts of suicide are not uncommon in people who have been bereaved; such feelings are an understandable reaction and it is important that you acknowledge this and seek help.

Sometimes the stigma and conspiracy of silence that can surround suicide will give rise to fear. These are the words of one young woman whose father died by suicide when she was ten years old: 'Because no one talked about his death, no one talked about his life either...I was terrified someone else would die and it would be my fault.'

The suicide note

Many people say that if only a note had been left it might be easier to understand the reasons for the suicide. But a note does not necessarily provide an explanation. It is important to put the note into perspective. It does not tell the whole story; it simply reflects the feelings of the person at the point when they actually wrote it.

It can also be very hard to receive a note to which you can't reply. People often find it helps to write a reply even though the person they loved is no longer alive to read it.

'I went to see [my son] every day before the funeral...I wrote him a letter about what I wanted to say to him and, after reading it out to him, I gave him the letter in his hands and gave him a gift. This made me feel important to him.'

Children bereaved by suicide

Parents have a natural instinct to shield children from hurt and upset. You may feel you shouldn't tell children all the details of the death. It is common for adults to want to protect children from the details of any bereavement, and particularly likely when the death was by suicide.

You need to think very carefully about it.

Children tell us it is better and less frightening to know than not to know. If children are not told the facts of what has happened, in words that they understand, they may create their own 'facts' or let their imagination invent them.

Children may overhear adult conversations or may pick up rumours and gossip at school. Keeping the truth from children may not be the protection we think it is. Children have vivid imaginations and can sometimes believe that something they did or did not do caused the person to take their own life. Perhaps they came home late, got a bad school report, failed an exam, or got into a fight.

'I couldn't understand how [my dad] could just have died, and at first thought he must have had an accident. My mum explained that he had killed himself because of his depression...

'Although this was difficult to hear, it was better to know than to imagine something worse.'



What can help

'I still despair the loss. I never know when I will receive a random hit that stops me abruptly and sets off one or more of my emotions, vividly reminding me that I remain a survivor of suicide. Maybe this is as good as it gets. But I assure you, it definitely is a whole lot better than it was.'

You should not feel you have to carry your burden of grief and overwhelming emotions alone.

You can do things to help yourself.

- Look after yourself – try to eat well, even though you may have no appetite
- Be gentle on yourself – you may feel to blame in some way but try to keep your sense of perspective and don't be too hard on yourself.

Talking to other people often helps.

- Talk to a close friend, a family member, your doctor, a faith leader, someone you trust and with whom you feel able to share your thoughts and feelings.
- Talk to other people who have been bereaved by suicide – many people find there is a level of understanding and acceptance that can only be found with another survivor of bereavement by suicide. Groups for people bereaved by suicide are becoming more widely available (see sources of help on the next page).
- Talk to someone from a bereavement or suicide support organisation with specialist expertise in helping people in your position.

If you feel suicidal yourself, you must seek help – from your GP, from a suicide or bereavement support organisation or from someone you trust. The other coping mechanisms can help, but the first thing to do is seek help.

Take time to be alone if that is what you want – not everyone finds it helpful to talk to a counsellor or to attend a group. Some people find peace more readily in quiet moments on their own.

You may want to write down some of your thoughts and feelings – some people like to keep a diary; others find it helpful to write letters to the person who has died. Do what feels right and makes sense to you.

There is no timetable for grief. There may be times when you feel you are beginning to cope and other times when you feel you'll never be able to cope again. Gradually, over time, you should find you focus less intensely on the circumstances surrounding the suicide and can remember the person and their life as a whole – anniversaries, special events, good memories and all the positive things about them too, as well as the sadness of their dying.

'There are now so many things that are good for me and my future that I can count my blessings when I look back...Two years on, the second anniversary, I lit a candle and put a photo next to it. This felt really good, as if I have taken that first step to move on, yet without ever forgetting him.'

Further reading

A Special Scar: the experience of people bereaved by Suicide by Alison Wertheimer, published by Routledge.

Sources of help

Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide is a self-help organisation that offers free, confidential advice and support. They can be contacted via their national helpline: **0844 561 6855** – 9am to 9pm daily, or by email: sobs.support@hotmail.com



You're not alone

How Cruse helps bereaved people

Cruse Bereavement Support is the leading national charity providing bereavement support services in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. We provide advice, information and support to anyone who has been bereaved (children, young people and adults), whenever and however the death has occurred.

Cruse offers face-to-face, telephone, email and website support. We have a national helpline and local services throughout England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Our services are provided by trained volunteers and are confidential and free.

You can also call the Samaritans for support on **116 123**.

Cruse books and publications

Cruse Bereavement Support stocks a wide range of books, leaflets and resources on bereavement. Please visit our website at cruse.org.uk or telephone **0208 939 9530** email info@cruse.org.uk

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You can find Cruse on the web at

cruse.org.uk

where you can also find details of your nearest local branch.

Cruse's children and young people's website is at

hopeagain.org.uk

Our national helpline freephone number is

0808 808 1677

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