

# HOPE AND HEALING

## A Practical Guide for Survivors of Suicide



SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY  
CENTRE FOR APPLIED RESEARCH IN  
MENTAL HEALTH AND ADDICTION  
FACULTY OF HEALTH SCIENCES

# Acknowledgements

## Initial Development

This resource was developed by the Suicide Response Initiative of the Calgary Health Region, with support from the Alberta Mental Health Board. Original artwork supplied, and used with permission from the Calgary Health Region.

## Adaptation for British Columbia

This resource has been adapted, with permission for use in British Columbia, by the Centre for Applied Research in Mental Health and Addiction (CARMHA; [www.carmha.ca](http://www.carmha.ca)), Faculty of Health Sciences, Simon Fraser University. Permission to reproduce in whole or in part has been provided by Calgary Health Region.

Project Manager, Researcher & Writer

Joti Samra, Ph.D., R.Psych., Research Scientist, CARMHA

Ministry of Health Project Lead

Gerrit van der Leer, Manager, Mental Health and Addiction

## Adaptation supported by

British Columbia Ministry of Health

## Special thanks to

The Calgary Health Region for permission to adapt the booklet, with special recognition for the support of Catherine Davis, Suicide Response Coordinator, Calgary Health Region.

The many suicide survivors from across Canada who offered valuable feedback on the original development of this booklet. The numerous health professionals and other content specialists who reviewed material and offered suggestions.

The British Columbia Coroner's Service, R.C.M.P., and British Columbia Ministry of Health for assisting in revising content to reflect B.C. procedures.

P. Bonny Ball, of the Vancouver Suicide Survivor's Coalition, for assisting with adaptation of this resource.

Iris Bolton for permission to reprint "Beyond Surviving."

Elva Mertick for permission to reprint a selection from "Yours, Mine and Our Children's Grief."

## For further information or additional copies, contact:

British Columbia Ministry of Health, Mental Health and Addiction. The complete booklet can be downloaded from [www.health.gov.bc.ca/mhd](http://www.health.gov.bc.ca/mhd) or [www.carmha.ca](http://www.carmha.ca).

Also available at these websites is *Coping with Suicidal Thoughts*, a document to help individuals decrease thoughts of suicide, develop a safety plan and connect with helpful resources.

# HOPE AND HEALING: A practical guide for survivors of suicide

---

*This is a practical guide to help you through...*

*the first few moments*

*then the first few hours*

*then the first few days*

*then the first few years*

*...after the suicide of someone you love.*

This guide has been written with the help of many suicide survivors and the health professionals who work with them. We hope it will help you through this difficult time. Please share it with others who may benefit from the information.

The guide focuses on the practical matters that survivors need to deal with after a suicide. Further help and information are listed under Other Resources.

# Table of Contents

---

<b>When Someone You Love Dies by Suicide</b>	<b>1</b>
What Helps in the Short Term	2
Telling Others	3
Emergency Response and Investigation	5
Response to the Emergency Call	5
Investigation	6
Coroner's Inquest	9
 <b>Practical Matters</b>	 <b>10</b>
Arranging a Funeral	11
Dealing With Legal and Financial Matters	13
Disposition of Assets	13
Insurance	14
Financial Matters	14
 <b>Working Through the Grief</b>	 <b>22</b>
Your Grief is Unique	23
When Children Grieve	24
What Helps Healing in the Long Term	25
It Will Get Better	25
Later Reactions	26
Support Groups	27
Looking After Yourself	27
Important Phone Numbers	29
 <b>Other Resources</b>	 <b>30</b>
Survivor Support	31
Organizations	32
Books	33
Bibliography	34
 <b>Beyond Surviving</b>	 <b>35</b>

When someone you  
love dies by suicide





# When someone you love dies by suicide

---

*You will survive. Yes, the grief is overwhelming. It is hard to believe now, but one hour at a time, one day at a time, you will get through it. And then, as time goes on, the pain will lessen.*

## What Helps in the Short Term

Emotional reactions to a suicide are intense and overwhelming. Knowing what to expect will help you cope.

### Know What to Expect

Most survivors find it hard to think clearly. It may seem as if your brain is numb, that you keep forgetting things. You may replay the suicide over and over in your mind, and find you cannot stop asking, "Why?"

---

*You are not to blame for the choice  
made by another person.*

---

It is not unusual to feel overwhelmed by sorrow, physically ill and angry. You may feel ashamed or guilty. It is important to remember that you are not to blame for the choice made by another person. Sometimes, survivors think about suicide themselves. If you are having suicidal thoughts, talk to a counsellor about how to cope with the situation and keep yourself safe.

These reactions are normal, as are other strong feelings you may have. You are not going crazy — you are mourning the loss in your own way.

### Let others help you

The sense of confusion is so great that it can be very hard to cope at first so let other people help you. Look to your friends, family, place of worship, community and others for support. They can deal with people, make some decisions and help you remember what you need to know. Also, they can be there just to listen.

## Telling Others

### What to Say

One challenge you might face is telling others about the suicide. Although it is difficult to speak about suicide openly, it is important for family and friends to be told the truth. This allows them to help each other cope with their grief, and also helps you work through yours. In some situations, you might choose to say something as brief as, "She died by suicide and I just can't talk about it yet."

In addition to telling family and close friends, you will need to notify people with whom the deceased had regular contact. The list of people to inform might include clergy, school personnel, an employer and work colleagues, a doctor and a landlord. It is very hard to tell others what has happened and you may want to ask someone to help you make those phone calls.

## Telling Children

### Tell the Truth

Children need to be told that the death was a suicide. While they may not need to know all the details, especially if they are very young, they need to know how the person died. Children can sense when they are being lied to and this creates an atmosphere of mistrust, fear and loneliness. If you do not tell them the truth, eventually they will find out through someone else. That would be far more painful.

Try to make the explanation fit the age of the child. For example, a younger child can be told, "He chose to die. He was so very sad and confused that he forgot he could get help." Children tend to ask about what they need to know, and often you need only to answer what they ask about.

### Show Your Grief

It is okay for children to see your anger, helplessness and confusion. This helps them understand that their own feelings are normal and okay. Check in with them to make sure they do not take on responsibility for your feelings. They need to know it is not their job to make things better for the family. Reassure them that you and others will still be able to take care of them.

## **Listen and Reassure**

Children will be confused when they are told the death was a suicide. They may ask a lot of questions to make sense of the news: "Didn't he love us?" or "Why was she so sad?" Answer the questions that you can. Tell them that you do not have all of the answers but you can always listen. Encourage them to talk about their feelings. You may find there are times when the children benefit from talking to someone else, such as a family friend or a counsellor.

Children will need plenty of reassurance that the suicide was not their fault, that they are still loved, and that other people they care about will not die too. Emphasize that there are always other solutions to problems.

## **Seek Help**

It may be too difficult to support children or reassure them when you are in the early stages of grieving. If this is the case, call on someone you trust or seek the help of a professional counsellor.

---

*Children need to be reassured that  
you and others will still be able  
to take care of them.*

---



# Emergency Response and Investigation

---

*The events and procedures that take place after a suicide can cause great anxiety for survivors. It lessens the distress if you know what will happen.*

## Response to the Emergency Call

When a sudden death is discovered, the BC Ambulance Service, the police and possibly the fire department may respond to the emergency call. When the police arrive, they will notify the Coroner's Office.

## Emergency Medical Services

BC Ambulance Service provides medical assistance and determines if death has taken place, or takes the person to a hospital for further care if death has not occurred. At this point the hospital takes over care of the person.

## Police

The police help in a number of ways. They provide safety for emergency personnel and other people who are present. They secure the scene, investigate the death, and collect identification, valuables and other items related to the investigation, for safekeeping.

Photographs may also be taken. The person who identified or reported the deceased may be asked to make a statement to the police. The same may be asked of those who found or spoke to the deceased. The police will attempt to notify the next of kin.

The police or Coroner take control of the scene, which is considered a crime scene until the investigation is completed and the cause of death determined. This is done for your protection and the safety of others.

## **Victim Assistance**

The police or Coroner may request a victim assistance support team (or you can request this) to provide support, information and referrals.

## **Fire Department**

The fire department may provide emergency health care until the BC Ambulance Service arrives, as well as extra help where needed.

---

*For further help and information,  
see 'Other Resources' on pages 31-33.*

---

## **Investigation**

An investigation is done to find out the circumstances of the suicide.

## **Coroner**

The Coroner's Service investigates all sudden, unexpected and unnatural deaths, including suicides, by authority of the British Columbia Coroner's Act. A Coroner is an independent investigator, appointed by the Lieutenant Governor in Council. There are 20 full time Coroners and 120 Community Coroners in the Province who provide services to local, and sometimes remote, communities. Coroners are on duty and available 24 hours a day.

The Coroner will investigate to determine the identity of the deceased and how, when, where and by what means he or she died. The investigation includes an examination of the scene of the death, an examination of the body, and may include a review of the medical/psychological history to determine if the death was a suicide. If the Coroner is unable to conduct an examination of the body at the scene, the Coroner's Service will transfer the body to a facility where the examination can be conducted.

## Items Collected at the Scene

The Coroner or police will take custody of items collected at the scene that are related to the death, including suicide notes. Items seized by, or on behalf of, the Coroner will be returned to next of kin after the investigation. Suicide notes will be returned to the person addressed in the note.

Police may collect and retain valuables, which will be returned to next of kin upon written request. If unclaimed by next of kin, items and valuables that are collected by police will be auctioned or destroyed.

## Autopsy

An autopsy may be ordered by the Coroner to assist in the determination of the cause or manner of death. Permission from next of kin is not required for a Coroner's autopsy. If there are any cultural or religious sensitivities around the autopsy, notify the Coroner. An autopsy may include complex laboratory tests and often results are not known for several weeks after the death. The Coroner will advise the family of the cause of death once it is determined.

## The Scene After the Investigation

If the death has taken place in the home, the next of kin are responsible for cleaning up the scene. Sometimes family members choose to clean the area themselves. However, when body fluids are present, it is wise to have a certified cleaning company perform the cleaning tasks. To identify a suitable firm, consult the telephone directory. Professional cleaning costs can be high but are often covered by household insurance. Contact your insurance provider for further information.

## Tissue and Organ Donations

After a suicide, survivors may find some comfort in donating the tissues or organs of the deceased. If you wish to do this, notify the Coroner. Tissues can sometimes be donated even when death occurs outside a hospital, within certain time limits (about 6 to 12 hours). Whether or not organs can be donated depends on a number of factors, including the condition of the body and whether the heart can be kept beating long enough to allow for organ transfer.

## **Autopsy Report and Proof of Death**

You may obtain copies of the autopsy report as well as certificates to prove death has occurred. In cases investigated by the Coroner, including all suicides, only the Coroner can sign and issue the Medical Certificate of Death required by the funeral home to register a death. If a Coroner has investigated a death, neither a family doctor nor a hospital may complete any documents as proof of death.

### **Proof of Death**

A Registration of Death certificate is the official government document certifying the death and is required by most organizations as proof of death. This certificate includes the name of the person, date and place of death, marital status, regular place of residence, sex and age. It does not give the cause or manner of death. Several copies may be needed. The Registration of Death certificate will be provided by the funeral home once the Coroner has determined the cause of death and released the body. A person may also order a Registration of Death certificate at any Vital Statistics Office or Government Agent Office or by following the instructions at [www.vs.gov.bc.ca/death/certified\\_reg\\_req.html](http://www.vs.gov.bc.ca/death/certified_reg_req.html).

### **Autopsy Report**

If the Coroner authorized an autopsy, next of kin may obtain a copy of the autopsy report upon request.

### **Judgment of Inquiry or a Verdict at Inquest**

Upon conclusion of the investigation or inquest the Coroner issues a Judgment of Inquiry or a Verdict at Inquest. These are public documents available at no charge upon request. The report will contain the medical cause of death and manner of death as well as a brief description of the circumstances. A Judgment of Inquiry or Verdict at Inquest is often requested by insurance companies in order to settle life insurance claims.

## **Coroner's Inquest**

A Coroner's Inquest may be held in some deaths investigated by the Coroner's Service. There are approximately 15-20 inquests held in B.C. yearly. If the person was in custody of police at the time of death, an inquest is mandatory. In all other deaths, the decision as to whether an inquest will be held lies with the investigating Coroner.

A Coroner conducts the Inquest. The presiding Coroner is responsible to ensure the jury maintains the goal of fact-finding, not fault finding. The jury may make recommendations in order to prevent future deaths in similar circumstances. The family of the deceased is not required to attend the inquest unless under a subpoena. The family may apply for standing at the inquest and may be represented by legal counsel or by an agent.

## **Contact Information for the Chief Coroner**

To contact the Chief Coroner and for other locations in B.C., contact the Chief Coroner's office:

The Chief Coroner for the Province of British Columbia  
Metrotower II  
4720 Kingsway, Suite 2035  
Burnaby, B.C. V5H 4N2

Telephone: 604-660-7745  
Fax: 604-660-7766  
Online: [www.pssg.gov.bc.ca/coroners](http://www.pssg.gov.bc.ca/coroners)

# Practical Matters





# Arranging a Funeral

---

*A funeral is an important ritual that gives family and friends a chance to reflect and grieve while being supported by others who care. It allows them to say goodbye and begin accepting the reality of the loss.*

## Making Arrangements

Guidelines and customs of funeral services vary and different cultures and religions have special rituals to recognize a death. Friends, family, clergy or the funeral director can help you decide which arrangements to make. To choose a funeral home, ask for suggestions from family and friends or check local listings in a phone book.

Children should also be allowed to take part in the funeral because it helps them as their grief unfolds. It is wise to talk with the children ahead of time about what will happen at the funeral and what behaviour is expected of them. On the other hand, if a child does not want to attend the funeral, assure them that it is okay not to be there and help them grieve in their own way.

## Funeral Service

In a traditional service, a ceremony is held in a place of worship or a funeral home chapel. You can decide whether the service will be public or private. A committal service is a brief service where final words of farewell are spoken. It happens at the end of the traditional service and may be done at the graveside, crematorium, or at the church/chapel.

---

*A funeral allows family and friends to say goodbye and begin accepting the reality of the loss.*

---

In a military service, the deceased is given military honours. This is available to any veteran or serving member of Canada's Armed Forces. A memorial service is similar to a funeral service, except the body of the deceased is not present.

If you choose not to have a service, you can ask a funeral home to care for the body of your loved one.

## Funeral Costs

The average cost of a traditional funeral in British Columbia is between four and five thousand dollars, although this amount can be much less if a family plans accordingly. The more elaborate the plans for the funeral, the more expense you will incur.

Many families rely on the deceased's life insurance to help cover costs. Other sources of financial help include the Canada Pension Plan (Lump Sum Death Benefit) or Veterans Affairs (for war veterans or members of the National Defense of Canada). Financial assistance for people already receiving assistance or for others who are unable to pay funeral costs may be available from B.C. Income Assistance. Keep all receipts, as they will be required when applying for any of these benefits. For further information, see 'Items to Apply For' starting on page 19.

## Talking About Suicide

It is okay to talk about the suicide at the funeral service. Make sure any mention of suicide in the service is done without judgment or reference to blasphemy. It may be appropriate to acknowledge the pain the deceased was feeling.

Celebrate the life of your loved one and talk about memories. Some survivors have found it helpful to place an open notebook on a table at the funeral and encourage others to write down their memories of the deceased. Allow yourself to grieve the relationship you shared.



# Dealing With Legal and Financial Matters

---

## Disposition of Assets

Disposing of a deceased person's assets is usually done through a will. A will is a written record that details how a person's belongings, or estate, will be divided upon death. The executors are responsible for taking care of the estate and should be notified as soon as possible after the death.

For basic messages about estates and wills (pre-recorded in English, Chinese and Punjabi):

Lower Mainland: 604-687-4680

Toll-free in B.C.: 1-800-565-5297

Online: [www.dialalaw.org](http://www.dialalaw.org)

### If there is a Will

Probating a will occurs when the will is proved valid by a court of law. If the estate is small or held jointly, there may be no need for probate. Any property held jointly (real estate, bank accounts, bonds) can be easily transferred to the surviving spouse or individual named. A bank may require probate if there is a large amount of money that is not held jointly, or for other reasons.

In British Columbia, any will that does not provide sufficiently for family can be challenged under the Wills Variation Act. Contact a lawyer for more information.

### If there is no Will or Your Situation is Complicated

If there is no will, or if no will is found, the deceased died 'intestate' and you may also need advice from a lawyer. If your situation is complicated for other reasons, such as marital separation or common-law relationships, you may need to contact a lawyer.

### **If you need help finding a lawyer:**

The Lawyer Referral Service can refer you to a lawyer in your area if you think you need legal help but don't know where to look. The lawyer you choose will meet with you for up to 30 minutes for a nominal fee.

Lower Mainland: 604-687-3221

Toll-free in B.C.: 1-800-663-1919

Online: [www.cba.org/BC/initiatives/main/lawyer\\_referral.aspx](http://www.cba.org/BC/initiatives/main/lawyer_referral.aspx)

### **Insurance**

You will need to notify all insurance companies (house, car, life) of the death. In Canada, generally life insurance policies must have been held for at least 24 months to be valid if the death is by suicide (there may be exclusions so check your policy). However, there may be special circumstances where a policy held for less than 24 months may be challenged in court by the family of someone who died by suicide. Consult your lawyer or insurance provider for more information.

### **Financial Matters**

A number of financial matters need to be dealt with after a death. You may want to ask other family members or close friends to help you deal with some of these matters during this difficult time.

---

*You may want to ask family members  
or friends to help you deal with  
financial matters.*

---

It is strongly recommended that you seek the advice of a professional before making any major decisions that may affect your financial or personal situation.

## First: Gather Documents

The first step in dealing with financial matters is to gather the documents of the deceased. This must be done before you (or your financial advisor or the executor of the will) can take care of matters related to the estate. Set up a folder to keep all the personal documents and records of legal and financial matters. Record keeping is most important and will make the executor's assignment much easier. Your executor should also help you determine which documents need to be kept and for how long.

### Personal Documents

- Death Certificate

You must have the death certificate before you can cancel, transfer and apply for benefits and obligations.

- Birth Certificate

- Driver's License

- Marriage Certificate

- Passport

- Last Will and Testament

- Social Insurance Number

### Banking and Financial Documents

- Bank Account Numbers, Passbooks, Statements (chequing and saving)

- Bank and Credit Cards

- Investment Records (stocks, bonds, RRSPs, GICs)

- Lease and/or Rental Contracts

- Loan Agreements (monies owed or owing)

- Mortgage Papers

- Safety Deposit Box Number (and location of key)

### Health Documents

- B.C. Medical Services Plan Care Card

- Supplementary Health Care Plan number

### Property Documents

- Land Title(s)

- Personal Possessions (art work, jewelry)

- Vehicle Registration(s)

## **Other Documents**

- Employee Benefit Booklets
- Insurance Policies (life, medical, home, car, business, mortgage)
- Membership Cards  
(sport/recreation clubs, professional associations, libraries)
- Pension Information
- Previous Tax Returns
- Utility Account Numbers (phone, gas, water, electricity)

## **Then: Cancel, Transfer and Apply for Benefits and Obligations**

Once all documents have been gathered, you will have to cancel, transfer and apply for various financial benefits or obligations. Be aware that there are fees associated with some of these matters.

This chart lists the most common items to address. Phone numbers for B.C. and Canadian contacts are listed here. For regional information, check your telephone book.

To connect to any B.C. Government Office, phone Service BC (Vancouver 604-660-2421; Victoria 387-6121, Toll-free in B.C. 1-800-663-7867). You will be transferred free of charge. Service BC can also help you determine which B.C. Ministries you need to talk to.

### **Items to Cancel**

- Health Insurance BC  
Vancouver: 604-683-7151, Toll-free in B.C.: 1-800-663-7100  
You will be asked to provide the name, address and health care number of the deceased. Premium and Pharmacare Assistance will also be recalculated, as needed.
- Group Health Plan  
If the deceased was covered under a group plan administered by a third party such as an employer, union or pension office, contact that party. If the deceased was the account holder and other family members were covered under the same account, the group plan will be able to advise whether coverage will continue for family members.



Insurance Policies

Notify all insurance companies with whom the deceased had policies (e.g., car, home, business, or life insurance). You may also need to contact the person's employer to cancel workplace insurance policies.

Leases/Rentals

Cancel any lease or rental contracts in the name of the deceased, or transfer them to another name.

Driver's License

Contact your local ICBC office.

Memberships (sport clubs, professional associations, libraries)

Cancel memberships, or transfer them to another name as appropriate.

Passport

If the deceased held a valid passport at the time of death, return it to the nearest passport centre or mail it to the processing centre. Include a copy of the death certificate or a letter stating why you are returning the passport.

Veterans Benefit

1-866-522-2122

Pension or compensation benefits continue for one year after death. There may be other Veterans Affairs benefits available (e.g., assistance with funeral expenses and burial in a veteran's grave). See also 'Items to Apply For', starting on page 19.

### **Items to Transfer**

Joint Bank Accounts, RRSPs, GICs

Any accounts held in common can be transferred to the survivor. You will need to contact your financial advisor or the bank holding these accounts for specific information on how to transfer the accounts.

**Land Titles**

Phone Service BC for your regional Land Title and Survey Authority. If there are questions regarding the taxability of the transaction, also contact the B.C. Ministry of Small Business and Revenue.

**Stocks/Bonds**

Ask your financial advisor or bank for information on how to transfer these assets.

**Utility Accounts (phone, gas, water and electricity)**

If your household utility accounts were in the name of the deceased, transfer them to a new name. Contact each utility for information on how to do this.

**Vehicle Registration**

Contact your local ICBC office to transfer the registration of vehicles registered in his or her name.

### **Items to Apply For**

**Allowance for the Survivor**                                    1-800-277-9914

This benefit for widows and widowers is based on income qualifications. Proof of marriage is required (common-law relationships will be considered). This benefit is retroactive only for a few months, so should be applied for immediately.

**Children's Benefit**    1-800-277-9914

There may be benefits available for children under the age of 18 or for children between 18 and 25 who are full-time students. If you are the caregiver of children of the deceased who are under age 18, you should apply for this benefit on their behalf. However, if any of these children are living on their own, they can apply themselves. Dependent children between 18 and 25 and in full-time studies should apply for this benefit themselves.

- CPP Lump Sum Death Benefit                            1-800-277-9914  
This benefit is based on the CPP contributions of the deceased. You will need to provide a copy of the death certificate or statement of death, your birth certificate, and social insurance number.
  
- CPP Survivor's Benefit                            1-800-277-9914  
This benefit is based on the CPP contributions of the deceased. The amount of the benefit awarded will depend on the age of the surviving spouse or common-law partner and other dependency factors. Benefits for children may also be available.
  
- Guaranteed Income Supplement                    1-800-277-9914  
Surviving widows/widowers over the age of 65 may be entitled to this benefit. This benefit is based on income qualifications.
  
- Mortgage Life Insurance  
Mortgage life insurance is not the same as mortgage insurance. Some policies will not cover deaths by suicide. Review the policy or consult with the bank for specific information. The mortgage company will require a copy of the death certificate.
  
- Veterans Benefits                                    1-866-522-2122  
If the deceased was a veteran, you may be eligible for benefits including funeral expenses and burial in a veteran's grave. Contact Veterans Affairs for details.
  
- Hardship Assistance  
Phone Service BC and ask for your Regional Ministry of Employment and Assistance. Assistance is available for families who find themselves in immediate financial need, whether due to all income sources stopping, or assets and income being temporarily frozen.

## **Other Financial and Legal Matters**

Other financial matters that need to be addressed include loans and personal debt, income taxes, GST credit and lawsuits.

### **Loans and Personal Debt**

- Loans (individual or co-signed) from a bank, company, or other institution. These may or may not be insured.
- Personal loans, either owed to the deceased or owing to others.

### **Income Taxes**

- A final tax return must be filed. If the death occurred between January 1st and October 31st, the final return is due by April 30th of the next year. If the death occurred between November 1st and December 31st, the final return is due six months after the death. If tax returns from previous years have not been completed, they must also be filed.

You may want to get a clearance certificate before you distribute any property under your control. A clearance certificate certifies that all amounts for which the deceased is liable to Canada Revenue Agency have been paid, or that security has been accepted for the payment. If you do not get a certificate, you can be liable for any amount the deceased owes. Contact Canada Revenue Agency (1-800-959-8281) for more information.

### **Employer**

- Contact the employer to collect a final paycheque and discuss where to send the T4 slip. Employee benefits may apply.

### **GST Credit**

- Contact Canada Revenue Agency (1-800-959-8281) for information on GST credit.

### **Lawsuits**

- Judgments either for or against the deceased may need to be settled by the estate.

# Working through the grief





# Working Through the Grief

---

*Grief is more complicated when a death is sudden. There was no chance to say goodbye. Very strong emotions arise as a result of the suicide, such as extreme sadness, anger and shame, and this complicates your grieving. Survivors often feel guilt, and so you must remember that you are not to blame for the choice made by another person. The search to find out "why" is a painful yet important part of working through the grief. Often, there are no answers.*

## Your Grief is Unique

The grief process is different for each person. While some aspects of grief are predictable, grief does not happen in neat, orderly stages, but rather as a chaotic process that varies from person to person. The aspects of grief that everyone has in common are explained below.

### Numbness and Shock

Survivors usually feel numb and in shock when they first find out about the suicide, and for several weeks after or even longer. This feeling is like sitting on the side of a play about your life, but not really taking part in life itself. Nothing seems real. The feeling of shock has a purpose — it cushions you from the pain of what has happened. Over time, the numbness fades and you will proceed with your grieving.

---

*The grief process is different  
for each person.*

---

## **Loss and Disorganization**

As you grieve, you will experience a range of thoughts and very strong emotions. Survivors commonly feel intense anger, sorrow, loneliness and guilt. At times you might feel as if the suicide never really happened. There can be times when everything in life seems meaningless. You might be obsessed with the thought that you could have prevented the death. It is common to have trouble sleeping and eating during these times.

## **Reorganization and Acceptance**

As time goes on, your thoughts and feelings will change. Instead of feeling pain all the time, you will feel it some of the time. “From a sadness that is with us frequently to a sadness that is always a part of us but no longer gets in our way. We can begin to be happy and move on in our lives.”\*

## **Grieving Takes Time**

Grieving takes time, and the amount of time is different for each person. Occasionally survivors get stuck as they work through their grief. If this happens, a counsellor can help. Clinical depression is different from normal grief in that it is more intense and prolonged. If you are concerned about depression, please contact your doctor.

## **When Children Grieve**

Children do not show their feelings in the same way adults do. Sometimes they look as though they have not been affected by the death. They may cry for a while and then return to play, not because they are not upset, but because their words and behaviour do not always reflect how they feel inside. You may see their grief expressed in their play. They may talk about their feelings with other children rather than with adults.

It is common for children, as they grow, to grieve the loss of their loved one at a later time. They may have new feelings and new responses to the death, even years after the suicide. They often ask different questions as they go through their development and try to understand what happened from a more mature point of view. Be available to talk about it with them or have them talk to someone else they trust.

---

\* Mertick, E. (1991). *Yours, Mine and Our Children's Grief: A Parent's Guide*, Alberta: Alberta Funeral Service Association.



# What Helps Healing in the Long Term

---

*It is important to know that you will heal and the pain will lessen.*

## **It Will Get Better**

Healing does not mean forgetting. It means that the sadness and other feelings do not get in the way of your life as much as they did in the beginning. As you heal, you can make a promise to remember the deceased and make a commitment to the survival of the family or group of friends.

---

*When you are open about the suicide,  
you give others permission to talk about it too.*

---

## **Keep on Talking**

Some survivors seek out information about suicide and grieving; others choose not to do so. Many survivors say they talked their way through their grief. As you heal it is vital to talk about your memories of the person who died by suicide. Find a safe person, or several people, who will let you talk and are comfortable hearing about your pain. The people you choose to talk to may or may not have experienced the suicide with you.

When you are open about the suicide, you give others permission to talk about it too. Keeping the suicide a secret adds to the burden of shame. A lot more people than you realize have been touched by suicide.

At times you may need to be distracted from your grieving. That is okay. Do not feel guilty about losing yourself in something else for a while.

## **Hold on to Your Memories**

Often survivors, both adults and children, have found comfort in holding on to items that remind them of their loved one, such as furniture, clothing, jewelry or favourite objects. You might like to put together an album with photos of the deceased. You can also build a collection of memories by asking other people to tell you their stories of the deceased and recording them in a notebook.

## **Do What Works for You**

Sometimes friends and family want to help but they do not know what to do. They may feel uncomfortable talking about suicide because of the stigma attached to it. They may be worried about making people cry when they bring up the subject. They might act strangely and not mention the suicide at all. Do not let this get in the way of your talking about it when you need to. Tell people it is okay to mention the suicide and let them know they can help you by simply listening. Most people really do care.

Remember to choose to do what feels right for you, not what pleases other people. It is okay to say “no” when invited to do something you do not feel ready to do.

## **Later Reactions**

Some survivors feel even more pain and emptiness several months after the death. The tasks of planning the funeral and dealing with financial and legal matters are complete. Friends and family have offered their sympathy and then needed to get back to their lives. Be prepared for this and reach out for help when you need it.

## **Difficult Days**

There will be many times through the years when coping with the loss becomes more difficult, such as the anniversary of the death, birthdays and holidays. You may feel more on edge in the weeks leading up to them. It will help you to plan ahead and talk to other family members about how they want to spend the day. This gives everyone a chance to support each other and talk about their grief. Some ideas

are to write a card to the deceased and place it in a significant place or remember the deceased by going to a place that has some connection with them.

## Finding the Answers

You may never know the answer to, "Why?" Many times survivors mistake a "triggering event", such as a relationship breakup, for the "cause" when, in most cases, the person was in extreme emotional or physical pain for a long time. As you work through your grief you will gradually learn to live with questions that cannot be answered.

## Support Groups

As time goes on, you may find it helpful to talk to other survivors of suicide. The healing power of a shared experience is very strong and talking to others who have lost someone to suicide can help you work through your own grief. If you would like more information on support groups in your area, see Other Resources (pages 31-33). This section also lists books that other survivors have found worthwhile.

## Looking After Yourself

### In the Short Term

In the beginning, your grief journey may take all your energy just to get through the day, especially if you have to care for others or deal with practical matters. During this time you may find it difficult to make healthy decisions. Grieving takes energy so forgive yourself when you simply can't do the things you 'should' do. The more you take care of yourself, the better you will be able to get through each day.

- Make time for you. Use your alone time to think, plan, meditate, pray, remember and mourn.
- Surround yourself - with safe people and safe places to support you on this difficult journey.
- Accept help. Do not be afraid to tell people what you need. Often, people may not know what to say or how to help unless they are told directly.

## In the Long Term

As time passes, you will find the courage and resources to keep going and have the energy to be more purposeful about taking care of yourself.

- Manage your health. Eat a balanced diet and get physical exercise, try to drink plenty of water and avoid or limit intake of alcohol, caffeine and tobacco. Check out [www.canadian-health-network.ca](http://www.canadian-health-network.ca) for more information on all aspects of your health.
- Keep a journal. Record your thoughts and feelings, hopes and dreams. Writing them down may help make them more real.
- Talk things out. Confide in a trusted friend, family member, colleague, member of the clergy, or professional counsellor.
- Practice relaxation techniques. Try relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, music or art therapy or visualization.
- Read. Read about suicide, grief and the ways in which people have used their spirituality to cope in times of tragedy. Sources of information include your local library, bookstores, the Internet, funeral homes, community agencies or places of worship.
- Create a list of resources. Include the people and organizations that can help you and your family when things are not going well.
- Take a break from your grief. See a movie, visit a museum or art gallery, pursue a hobby or walk with a friend.
- Re-establish a routine in your life. Survivors often find the structure and distraction of returning to work or getting a new routine helpful.
- Give back to your community. Many survivors have found a sense of peace and fulfillment in shared compassion and using their experiences to help others.
- Take small steps. Recognize each step forward and reward yourself in some way.

---

*Whatever you do, make sure it feels right to you.*

---

# Important Phone Numbers

---

**Emergency** ..... **9-1-1**

**If you are feeling suicidal or looking for information about suicide:**  
(Interpreter services available) ..... **1-800-SUICIDE (784-2433)**

**S.A.F.E.R. Counselling Service** ..... **604-879-9251**

Offers individual counselling and group support to those who have lost a loved one to suicide, no matter where they live in B.C. Also offers short term counselling for residents of Vancouver who are in a suicidal crisis, have made a suicide attempt or are concerned about someone who is suicidal. Provides consultation, information and referral throughout B.C.

**Information and referral or if you are in an emotional crisis:**

Contact your local Crisis Centre; See the emergency pages of your phone book for the phone number.

**B.C. Nurse Line** ..... **1-866-215-4700**

TTY for deaf/hearing impaired: ..... **1-866-889-4700**

Puts you in touch with a Registered Nurse any time day or night. Interpreter services available. Pharmacist available through the Nurseline after 5pm.

**B.C. Mental Health Information Line** ..... **1-800-661-2121**

Free information and referral about mental health and mental illness. Not a crisis line. Office hours Mon-Fri 9-4; Pre-recorded messages and directory of services 24 hours/day.

**Family Doctor:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Community Health Centre:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Child Care:** \_\_\_\_\_

**People and places I can call for support:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## Other Resources





## Other Resources

---

*Suicide survivors have found these organizations, websites and books to be especially helpful. For other resources, ask at your public library, local mental health organizations and regional health authority.*

### **Survivor Support**

#### **Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention (CASP)**

**[www.casp-acps.ca](http://www.casp-acps.ca)**

Health care professionals, survivors and volunteers working to reduce suicide and its impact. The website includes a list of Survivor Support Groups in Canada, the “Blueprint for a Canadian National Suicide Prevention Strategy” and other Canadian references.

#### **Journey Through Suicide Grief**

**[www.journeythroughsuicidegrief.com](http://www.journeythroughsuicidegrief.com)**

Online suicide survivor support sponsored by CMHA-Prince George, B.C..

#### **B.C. Bereavement Hotline**

**1-877-779-2223**

**[www.bcbereavementhelpline.com](http://www.bcbereavementhelpline.com)**

Helpline and referral for the bereaved.

# **Organizations**

## **Centre for Suicide Prevention/Suicide Information and Education Collection**

**[www.suicideinfo.ca](http://www.suicideinfo.ca)**

An extensive library and resource centre providing information on suicide and suicidal behaviour. Not a crisis centre.

## **The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention**

**[www.afsp.org](http://www.afsp.org)**

Contains numerous resources on suicide prevention, surviving suicide and grief and bereavement.

## **National Center for Grieving Children and Families**

**[www.dougy.org](http://www.dougy.org)**

This site contains specific sections for age groups with activities to help cope with death. It is sponsored by the Dougy Center, the first centre in the United States to provide peer support groups for grieving children.

## **Grief and Loss**

**[www.aarp.org/families/grief\\_loss/](http://www.aarp.org/families/grief_loss/)**

This site provides numerous resources.

## **Metanoia**

**[www.metanoia.org/suicide/](http://www.metanoia.org/suicide/)**

This site provides information and resources addressing suicide as well as grief and loss.

## **Youth in BC**

**[www.youthinbc.com](http://www.youthinbc.com)**

A web-based hotline for youth.

## Books

- Bolton, I. & Mitchell, C. (1983). *My Son...My Son: A Guide to Healing After a Suicide in the Family*. Atlanta, GA: Bolton Press.
- Chalifour, F. (2005). *After*. Toronto, Ont: Tundra Books.
- Farr, M. (1999). *After Daniel: A Suicide Survivor's Tale*. Toronto, Ont: HarperFlamingo Canada.
- Fine, C. (1997). *No Time to Say Goodbye: Surviving the Suicide of a Loved One*. New York, NY: Doubleday.
- Fine, C. & Myers, M.F. (2006). *Touched by Suicide: Hope and Healing After Loss*. New York, NY: Gotham/Penguin.
- Fitzgerald, H. (2000). *The Grieving Teen: a Guide for Teenagers and Their Friends*. New York, NY: Fireside Books.
- Grollman, E. A. (1999). *Living When a Young Friend Commits Suicide or Even Starts Talking About It*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Linn-Gust, M. (2001). *Do They Have Bad Days in Heaven? Surviving the Suicide Loss of a Sibling*. Atlanta, GA: Bolton Press.
- Lundine, D. (1997). *Making Meaning of the Madness: One Man's Journey Through Grief*. Langley, BC: Tall Timbers Press.
- Neeld, E. H. (2003). *Seven Choices: Finding Daylight after Loss Shatters Your World*. New York, NY: Time Warner Books.
- Rando, T. A. (1991). *How To Go On Living When Someone You Love Dies*. New York, NY: A Bantam Book/ published in arrangement with Lexington Books. Originally called Grieving.
- Smolin, A. & Guinan, J. (1993). *Healing After the Suicide of a Loved One*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.
- Stimming, M. & Stimming, M. (Eds.). (1999). *Before Their Time: Adult Children's Experiences of Parental Suicide*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

## Bibliography

- Alberta Funeral Service Association. (2001). *Funerals: An Information Guide*.
- Alberta Health and Wellness. (2000). *Suicide Grief: Let's Talk About It*. [pamphlet]. Alberta: Alberta Health and Wellness.
- Boles, M. (2002). [Personal communication, July 10, 2002].
- Bolton, I, Mitchell, C. (1994). *My Son...My Son: A Guide to Healing After Death, Loss or Suicide*. Atlanta: Bolton Press.
- Centre for Mental Health, NSW Health Department. (1999). *Care and Support Pack for Families and Friends Bereaved by Suicide*. New South Wales: NSW Health Department.
- Chance, S. (1993, Winter). *Knowing "What to Expect" Helps Survivors Cope. Surviving Suicide*, p. 2-3.
- Fine, C. (1997). *No Time to Say Goodbye: Surviving the Suicide of a Loved One*. New York: Doubleday.
- Goldman, L. (2000, May/June). *Suicide: How Can We Talk to the Children?* The Forum Newsletter, p. 1-3.
- Grollman, E. (1988). *Suicide. Prevention, Intervention, Postvention*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Mertick, E. (1991). *Yours, Mine and Our Children's Grief: A Parent's Guide*. Alberta: Alberta Funeral Service Association.
- Mertick, E. (1998). *Grieving: "Our Time"*. Alberta: Alberta Funeral Service Association.
- Paraclete Press. (2000). *Journey Through the Shadows. Hope for Healing After Someone You Love Has Completed Suicide*. [videotape]. Massachusetts: Paraclete Press.
- Paraclete Press. (2000). *Light Amongst the Shadows. How to Help Those You Care For When Suicide Occurs*. [videotape]. Massachusetts: Paraclete Press.
- Red Deer City RCMP Victim Services. (2001). *Dealing with the Loss of a Loved One*. Red Deer: Red Deer City RCMP Victim Services Unit.
- Ross, E. (1987). *After Suicide: A Unique Grief Process*. Iowa: Lynn Publications.
- Supporting Suicide Survivors. (1999, November). SIEC Alert, p. 1.
- Wroblewski, A. (1991). *Suicide: Survivors. A Guide for Those Left Behind*. Minneapolis: Afterwards

# Beyond Surviving





# Beyond Surviving

---

*Know you can survive. You may not think so, but you can.*

*Struggle with why it happened until you no longer need to know why or until you are satisfied with partial answers.*

*Know you may feel overwhelmed by the intensity of your feelings but all your feelings are normal.*

*Anger, guilt, confusion and forgetfulness are common responses. You are not crazy; you are in mourning.*

*Be aware you may feel appropriate anger at the person, at the world, at God, at yourself. It's okay to express it.*

*You may feel guilty for what you think you did or did not do. Guilt can turn to regret, through forgiveness.*

*Having suicidal thoughts is common. It does not mean you will act on those thoughts.*

*Remember to take one moment or one day at a time.*

*Find a good listener with whom to share. Call someone if you need to talk.*

*Don't be afraid to cry. Tears are healing.*

*Give yourself time to heal.*

*Remember, the choice was not yours. No one is the sole influence in another's life.*

*Expect setbacks. If emotions return like a tidal wave, you may only be experiencing a remnant of grief, an unfinished piece. Try to put off major decisions.*

*Give yourself permission to get professional help.*

*Be aware of the pain of your family and friends.*

*Be patient with yourself and with others who may not understand.*

*Set your own limits and learn to say no.*

*Steer clear of people who want to tell you what or how to feel.*

*Know that there are support groups that can be helpful, such as Compassionate Friends or Survivors of Suicide groups. If not, ask a professional to help start one.*

*Call on your personal faith to help you through.*

*It is common to experience physical reactions to your grief, e.g., headaches, loss of appetite, inability to sleep.*

*The willingness to laugh with others and at yourself is healing.*

*Wear out your questions, anger, guilt or other feelings until you can let them go. Letting go doesn't mean forgetting.*

*Know that you will never be the same again, but you can survive and even go beyond just surviving.*

*Reprinted from Beyond Surviving – Suggestions for Survivors, with permission from Iris Bolton and the National Resource Center for Suicide Prevention and Aftercare, A Project of the Link Counseling Center.*

By using Hope and Healing: A Practical Guide for Survivors of Suicide (“Service”) you acknowledge and agree that any information contained on or provided through the service is provided on an “as is” basis. While every effort has been made to ensure accuracy, we do not provide any express or implied warranties on the accuracy of the information. By using this Service you acknowledge that there may be errors and that such errors, once known, will only be corrected through later editions of the Service.

By using this Service you acknowledge that you understand and agree that the information contained on or provided through this Service is intended for general understanding and education only and that this Service is not intended to be and is not a substitute for professional medical or legal advice. Always seek the advice of your physician, psychiatrist, psychologist, nurse or other qualified health care provider, before you undergo any treatment or for answers to any questions you may have regarding any medical condition that may result from your grieving after losing a loved one to suicide.

Nothing contained in Service is intended to be or is to be used for medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Nothing contained in Service is intended to be or is to be used for legal advice.



*Hope and Healing: A Practical Guide for  
Survivors of Suicide is dedicated  
to the survivors of suicide who  
openly shared their experiences and  
told us about the need for this  
booklet. Your ideas and insights are  
woven throughout the pages.*