

# Survivor Support Program

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## **Survivors of Suicide: What can I expect?**

This document is written from the perspective of survivors of suicide. The information below is based on their experiences in their own words. We hope that you will find it helpful as you are beginning the healing process after the suicide of someone close to you.

A sudden death is traumatic and can leave you feeling overwhelmed. While there are many different reactions and suggestions described here, keep in mind that every survivor has a different experience, both in the way they grieve and for how long. People respond to traumatic events in their own way, according to their individual coping skills, past experiences and supports.

## **A Different Kind of Loss**

Grief associated with death by suicide can be complicated. As well, it may seem very different than what is experienced after other kinds of losses. Survivors tell us that their emotions are intense and that their loss is complicated by uncertain support systems. Feelings are described as coming in waves and can be triggered unexpectedly. Knowing that other survivors have experienced similar, strong emotions can help you cope.

## **Common Emotional Reactions**

### **Shock**

The first thing many survivors recall is shock. Some call it being numb. Although it can be frightening, many survivors recall that the shock served a purpose—it allowed them to continue to function during a period of intense stress.

### **Shame**

Many survivors are unsure what to tell others, those they hope to count on for support. Some have experienced their circle of supports responding uncomfortably or negatively, while others have responded in more positive, surprising ways. In response to the shame, stigma and reactions of others survivors have often felt more isolated. Recognizing and preparing yourself for others' reactions can be helpful in dealing with the some of the pain associated with a suicide loss.

### **Guilt**

Sometimes fleeting, sometimes quite intense, many survivors report feeling guilty after a death by suicide. They often describe circumstances where they feel they could have reacted differently. Guilt is a complex emotion that many realize makes sense for them at the time given their close relationship to the person. Being able to talk openly in a supportive environment without judgement about those feelings is an important part of coming to terms with it.

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## Anger

Anger is commonly experienced after all deaths. For many survivors of suicide, they often describe their anger as being intense, others describe it as intermittent. The experience of anger is unique to each survivor. Unique in its intensity, duration and even the target.

## Other Reactions we have heard

- Not having the energy for one's old routines. Whether it's going to work or attending that yoga class many find their traditional rhythm disrupted. Getting back to old routines takes time and sometimes new ones are established in the interim.
- Concern for others around you. Often survivors are worried for other family members who are also dealing with the loss. It makes sense to care for those other family members. If you are unsure how to respond please check in.
- Holidays, birthdays and anniversaries are challenging events. Special occasions are often stressful to begin with. When complicated by a suicide, they can become more daunting. Often, we have heard that it helps to know your limits and to plan ahead.
- Feeling isolated. Old patterns of support are often disrupted. Survivors have often recognized, sometimes not right away, that other family members are grieving separately and differently. At the same time, friends or co-workers often respond in unexpected, and occasionally positive ways. Recognizing those patterns ahead of time and planning appropriately has been helpful.
- Significant distress. Some survivors have reported feeling in significant emotional distress as a result of the suicide, or perhaps connected to pre-existing circumstances. Short term distress management (see below) has been helpful.

## What has helped survivors cope with their loss

- Recognizing that grief ebbs and flows. There are many different reactions, physically and emotionally, to a death by suicide and those reactions will vary in intensity. Triggers might bring on certain feelings unexpectedly. Recognizing those triggers can help you prepare for them.
- Connecting to your support systems. While supports are sometimes unavailable during this period, when possible it's helpful to reach out for support. It also helps to recognize that those family members you might be counting on for support are grieving as well. Sometimes sources of support go untapped—for example, co-workers, friends or faith-based supports.
- Draw on your strengths for coping. Survivors have amazing reserves of strength for coping with the most stressful circumstances. Often they are able to return to activities that have helped in the past and helps ease the present circumstances.
- Self care is very important. Survivors have acknowledge that it's important to know their limits and to take care of themselves. Grieving is very hard work.

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- Trying new ways of coping. Survivors are often the boldest experimenters with new ways to cope. One area that has become popular is reading about loss. We have a reading list available which we will send to you.
- Remembering the person. When the time is right, survivors find comfort in remembering the person who died. This has allowed them to shift their focus away from the death circumstances to their life history. Remembrances, rituals and other ceremonies, while at times stressful can help keep their memory alive. It can be a chance to reminisce, to look at photographs or creating a memorial.
- Connecting to other survivors or support groups. After a death by suicide, survivors find comfort in grief support groups, often finding a place to share and compare with other survivors.
- Connecting to crisis services in your area for short-term relief has been helpful. In Toronto, an appropriate resource is Distress Centres, Toronto's 24-hour helpline at 416-408-HELP (4357).

The time after a suicide loss is never easy. There is no time limit on your grief. We hope that the words of other survivors, expressed here, will encourage you to have a safe journey forward.

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