

When Your Loved One Died by Suicide

Finding Your Way in Grief

More than 30,000 people die by suicide in the United States each year, including almost 2,900 right here in California. But for you, the statistics are far more sobering and far more personal. Making sense of suicide and finding the ways to travel this unique journey through grief is a daunting challenge, indeed!

Perhaps for you, this death came after several attempts and you often thought about this possibility. More likely, however, you realized too late that your loved one was in such emotional pain and you wish you would have known when or how to reach out much earlier. This grief is unique, however, because there are so many unanswered questions. Reading this article might be your first attempt at making sense out of this seemingly senseless event.

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The emotions you feel right now are likely deep and intense. Some suicide survivors describe *embarrassment*, perhaps even leading you to question how much you want your family and friends to know about your loved one's death. The emotional, physical, and mental issues that led to your loved one's death, however, can be very complex. The severe clinical depression at the root of many—if not most suicides—is a very real illness.

Of course, your embarrassment is compounded by well-meaning friends, who because they don't know what to say, simply choose to stay away. They fear saying something that would further hurt you, so they don't come, they don't call, and they don't speak. Right now, you may need to be extra forgiving—of yourself and of them.

You might also feel *anger* now, an emotion experienced by most grieving people during their bereavement. Maybe your anger is directed at other family and friends thinking they should have seen your loved one's pain. Perhaps it is directed toward God, wondering why He didn't do something differently.

And perhaps it is directed at your loved one as you wonder how he or she could do this and leave you to try to reassemble the pieces of your shattered life. Though some people say that anger is wrong, it is a real part of the grief process, experienced by people from all ethnic backgrounds, cultures, and religious perspectives.

Guilt can also be particularly strong during the grief that follows suicide. "What did I miss?" or "Why didn't I do something differently?" are the questions that plague our minds, especially in the darkness of night when sleep will not come.

When you feel yourself sinking into the hopeless quicksand of "what ifs" and "if only's," you might find it helpful to write an imaginary "letter" of apology to your loved one, asking for his or her forgiveness. Recalling memories—the months and years you had together—may also help you put your guilt in the context of your entire relationship.

Fear might be troubling you now, too. You've heard that "suicide runs in families" and other pieces of popular cultural advice. What if this happens again in your family or friendship circle? Facts are of course a great remedy for fear. Talk to a mental health provider or a counselor at a suicide prevention center about ways to prevent suicide in

your family. Learn the warning signs of approaching suicide—and don't be afraid to ask the hard questions of friends and family members who seem to be depressed.

Reach out. The most important way to help yourself right now is to find a support group or professional who understands grief after suicide. Groups and individual support from clergy or counselors, as well as the care of one or two supportive friends will make the most difference for you right now. Grief is not best coped with alone, so find someone to travel this journey with you. We would be honored to help you find a group and other supportive people in our community.

Finding Your Way on this Journey

Remember. Acknowledge your sadness but also celebrate the life you shared. The event of your loved person's death does not diminish the value of his life. He or she undoubtedly contributed many things to you, your family, your friendship circle, and the world. Write them down. Talk about them. Don't allow the good memories to be erased by his or her death.

Look up. The spiritual questions that follow a death by suicide can be daunting. Talk to a member of the clergy. Worship in a faith community near you this weekend. Hear the absolute promise that God doesn't want you to walk this road of grief alone.

Learn. In time, you will want to find ways to help others who walk this unique journey through grief or perhaps help prevent suicide in your community. Find out how you can volunteer. Discover the warning signs of approaching suicide. Learn how depression can be diagnosed and treated so that you can help direct a friend or family member to competent help. For more information, call the national suicide crisis line at 800/SUICIDE or point your web browser to www.suicidology.org.

You are not alone in your grief. Growth is possible—even when your loved one died by suicide.

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**Laguna Hills
Chapel and Crematory**
25301 Alicia Pkwy.
Laguna Hills, CA 92653
(949) 581-4300
FD 1293

**Irvine
Arrangement Center**
4010 Barranca Pkwy., Ste. 200
Irvine, CA 92604
(949) 296-1010
FD 1818

**San Juan Capistrano
Arrangement Center**
31920 Del Obispo, Suite 270
San Juan Capistrano, CA 92675
(949) 325-0143
FD 1916

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