Coping With the Suicide of a Loved One or Friend

Every year, 35,000 people in the U.S. have so much pain in their lives they decide to die by suicide. Their pain may stop, but for those who knew and loved them, the death of a loved one may be just the beginning of years of pain and suffering.

Suicide and attempted suicide are so widespread. There are few families, neighborhoods or workplaces that have not dealt with this terrible problem, at some point.

Any sudden death is a shock. When it is a suicide, a survivor’s grief can be even worse. The closer you are to a victim of suicide, the higher the toll may be on your own emotional life.

Throughout life, we learn to deal with death. We see it as a possible consequence of illness, accident, violence or aging. Little by little, we prepare for the inevitable, hopefully making peace with death before it actually happens to us or someone we love.

But, a sudden death catches us unprepared for the shock, especially if someone dies by suicide.

Don’t be surprised if you, as a friend or family member, have trouble handling the news. You may be overwhelmed at first, with some of these strong feelings:

- **Shock.** You keep asking yourself if you are dreaming or if this really happened. How could this news be true?
- **Denial.** You may look for someone or something to blame, denying the idea that your friend could choose to die by suicide.
- **Anger.** You may find yourself angry at your friend, for taking himself away from you. Or, you may be angry about the circumstances that led to his death. If you are a family member, you may worry about the legacy your loved one has left behind and how it will affect children in the family.
- **Guilt.** People blame themselves—a lot or a little—for not doing whatever they could to prevent suicide.
- **Despair.** Expect sadness and feelings of vulnerability or hopelessness to follow you for a time. You might even find yourself considering suicide.

After all, you have been dealt a sudden shock, and it may echo in powerful nightmares or uncontrollable crying. You may be on an emotional rollercoaster for weeks or even months before you are able to process what has happened.

While you heal, try to hold on to what is positive in your life. That will help you put this tragedy into perspective.

At the same time, know that not everyone will understand your pain. Some people can be insensitive; and others are not aware how hurtful their comments or questions can be.
“Suicide is a taboo issue, and our religious background will color our view,” explains psychiatrist Gabriela Cora, M.D., M.B.A. “It is so taboo that people have strong feelings about it for different reasons.”

Suicide prevention activist Kevin Caruso offers this advice on Suicide.org: “The best way to deal with the stigma, ignorance, and insensitivity immediately after a suicide is to stay far away from anyone or anything that would cause problems for you. Do not give people the chance to be insensitive.” The good news is that there are people who understand and care.

How to cope

- **Surround yourself with loving, supportive people.** This is the time to call on friends, clergy and anyone else willing to offer a shoulder to cry on. Not everyone is comfortable talking about suicide, so you may have to let them know you want to talk about it. Don’t be afraid to ask for the help you need.

- **Don’t be afraid of your strong feelings.** They are yours and they are real. The only way you will get through grief is to go straight through it, not around it.

- **Deal with the facts of the suicide.** Don’t avoid using the word suicide. Take the mystery out of suicide to help you gain closure.

- **Find your own way to grieve.** It may mean you need to keep busy or do nothing for a while. Find comfort in nature, art, music or water. Find what works for you.

- **Take good care of yourself.** Sleep. Eat right. Tend to your spiritual needs.

- **Talk to people about your feelings, and don’t hesitate to express yourself honestly and openly to a supportive person.**

- **Do not blame yourself or assume others blame you.**

- **Don’t expect too much of yourself.** Healing takes time. It may take months or years. Go at your own speed, not on someone else’s schedule.

- **Be prepared for good days and bad.** All wounds do not heal in a smooth, even fashion. You will have setbacks, as well as sudden bursts of positive energy.

- **Change family traditions, your travel routes or other habits if they bring up painful reminders.**

- **Look for support groups or individual counseling.** Let others with similar experiences share their support and coping skills with you.

- **When the time comes, give yourself permission to get on with your life.** Focus on the future and be grateful for what lies ahead for you. Take what you have learned from this experience and put it to good use.

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