Coping with Suicide

Family members, friends or co-workers of someone who has committed suicide will probably experience the intense grief, guilt and confusion that often result from this kind of loss. The suicide of a loved one is a tragic and unexpected event that leaves many people struggling to cope with unanswered questions, difficult emotions and unique challenges for healing.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE QUESTIONS WHICH ARE UNIQUE TO SUICIDE

- Why did the person do it?
- Why didn’t they ask for help?
- What could I have done to prevent this? Is it my fault?
- Didn’t they know how much I would miss them?
- How could God let this happen?

It is natural part of the grieving process to ask questions after someone has died. In particular with suicide, these questions are an attempt to understand and make sense of what happened. You may find yourself questioning your relationship with the individual, your faith in God, and the professionals who may have been treating your loved one. You may seek answers to the questions above from every imaginable source. In the end, you may find that no one has all of the answers except the loved one who has died.

Gradually, as part of healing process, you may begin to accept that you may not be able to answer the questions. Also, you may come to realize that answering these questions will not change what happened. Sometimes, it can be helpful to try to answer the questions by such answers as: “I don’t know why and maybe I’ll never know.”

As time passes, some survivors of a loved one’s suicide also find it helpful to ask new questions that they can answer. Instead of asking “Why?” ask yourself, “What will I do now?” and “How am I going to cope with this loss?”

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE COMMON GRIEF REACTIONS?

- Alternating emotions: shock, denial, anger, sadness, confusion, shame, guilt,
- Sense of failure and self-blame
- Decreased concentration and increased forgetfulness
- Tearfulness
• Irritability
• Feelings of emptiness, abandonment and loneliness
• Relief
• Fear and Anxiety
• Dreams about the deceased
• Physical reactions: headaches, insomnia, exhaustion, loss of appetite, chest pains and tightness in the throat

THE GUILT

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of dealing with the death of a loved one by suicide is the intense guilt that those left behind feel. Many people will spend hours, both night and day, thinking about what they did or did not do in the weeks or even years leading up to the suicide. These thoughts often result in self-blame, feelings of failure and depression. It is important to understand this common reaction to suicide.

To heal from this loss, it is essential to find a way to let go of this guilt and learn to not blame yourself for the actions and choices of others. Part of dealing with guilt is to accept and forgive your human imperfections and acknowledge regrets without blaming yourself for the choice made by your loved one. It may help to talk about your self-blame and guilt with a trusted friend, family member, counselor or religious support. Many people find it helpful to ‘talk’ to the deceased person, or write them letters about how you feel and what you feel guilty about. The reality is that the suicide of your loved one was beyond your control.

COPING

• Be patient with yourself. Healing from grief takes time.
• Accept your feelings and find someone to talk to.
• Keep to a routine and structure in your day,
• Eat healthy meals regularly and rest. You may be exhausted.
• Exercise regularly. A little bit of walking goes a long way.
• Write in a journal.
• Plan activities that you enjoy with people and by yourself.
• Ask for and accept the help of others.
• Have hope that you will survive this loss.
• Don’t assume that others are blaming or judging you.
• Read books about grief and suicide bereavement.

HEALING

Healing from suicide loss involves learning how to live with the reality that your loved one committed suicide. It is about learning how to continue living without your loved one being physically present in
your life. You can choose to heal from this tragedy by focusing on taking care of your emotional and physical health. It is about having hope for the future and choosing to live each day of your life.

Resources:

*After Suicide Loss: Coping with Your Grief* by Bob Baugher, Ph.D. and Jack Jordan, Ph.D.

*Bereavement and Support* by Marylou Hughes

*How To Go On Living When Someone You Love Dies* by Therese A. Rando, Ph.D.

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