Loss & Grief: Tips for Coping and Recovery

Grief is what we feel when we experience the loss of someone or something we loved or valued. Grieving involves dealing with emotions, letting go, and finding a way to move on with the rest of your life.

More about grief...

-Grief can be thought of as a journey through stages. You will visit some stages more than once; you might skip other stages. There is no single way to grieve. Everybody grieves in her or his own way and time.

-Grief is a roller-coaster ride. One minute you think you will never survive, and the next you might feel inexplicably stronger. It’s exhausting to be buffeted by so many different and intense feelings.

-An early stage of grief may involve a period of shock, numbness or even denial. This period lets you function through necessary legal tasks, funerals, or other essential responsibilities.

-Sadness, confusion, rage, yearning, despair and remorse are all common emotions associated with grieving a loss. It’s a mistake to try to minimize or repress these feelings—the only healthy way to get “past” grief is to travel through it, however painful this mourning process may feel at the time.

-While in the throes of the mourning or grieving process, you may at times find yourself unable to think clearly, and may even wonder if you have “lost your mind”. You haven’t. Disorganized and confused thinking is another common reaction to grief and loss. In time you will be able to think clearly again. And although it may be hard to imagine, you will eventually recover your previous ability to find pleasure and meaning in your life.

-The intensity of your grief is likely to ebb and flow with holidays, special events, birthdays, or other important dates that come after a loss. This too is normal.
Suggestions for coping with loss…

-Participate in whatever ceremonies of mourning that feel right for you. Funerals can intensify painful feelings, but the religious and/or social support they represent can be comforting for many people.

-Seek out and rely on trustworthy support systems. These could include family members, friends, colleagues, counselors, clergy, or members of a support group. Sometimes the people you wish you could count on for support are unable to really be there for you. Find ones who can be—empathetic people who are willing to really listen to and accept what's going on with you. It's fine to want to be alone sometimes, but avoid isolating yourself.

-Exploring your feelings and thought through writing, painting, music or other forms of creative expressions can be a powerfully healing experience.

-Stick with your familiar routines, especially at first—even if it feels like you're just going through the motions. Routines can be comforting, and they'll get you through the day when it seems like nothing else can.

-Be gentle, forgiving, and patient with yourself. Allow yourself to feel vulnerable or to make mistakes.

-Accept your ups and downs. Some days will be better and some worse. Life will begin to even out eventually.

-Give yourself time. Time does heal, but how long that healing will take varies from person to person.

-Delay making major life decisions while you're still in the throes of the grieving process.

-Avoid long-term or habitual use of alcohol or other substances that numb your pain.

When to get professional help

People sometimes ask counselors for help if they don’t have a reliable support system or if they're uncomfortable talking with family and friends. Becoming “stuck” in one’s grief, prolonged feelings of helplessness or hopelessness or that life is no longer worth living all indicate a need for some form of counseling. Some people in mourning develop prolonged physical symptoms like difficulty sleeping, unusual fatigue, digestive problems or loss of appetite. All of these symptoms signal the need for professional help.

703.527.4077 1.800.273.TALK or 1.800.SUICIDE
In addition to the help of relatives, friends, and possibly a counselor and/or a support group, you need to make an effort to take care of yourself. You are the one who sets the pace and limits your grief. To some extent, you can shorten or lengthen the processes of grief depending on your willingness to work through it.

Accepting the Suicide...

- As soon as you are able, begin to deal with the facts of suicide. The longer you avoid or deny those facts, the more difficult the recovery can be. Get the facts straight about the suicide—the whats, whys and hows. To know the facts relieves your doubts and allows you to face the truth, however painful. It is important to be honest with yourself and to face the reality that the death was a suicide.

- The longer the facts are avoided, the more difficult recovery can be.

- It is helpful to consider that usually the victim was focused on ending the pain more than ending his or her life. But in his or her desperate and confused state, s/he was unable to think of another alternative to ending the pain.

- Consider making reference to the death as a suicide at the funeral.

- Get used to saying the word “suicide.” It may take months to be able to say it, but keep trying.

- Be honest with your close friends about the suicide. If you aren’t honest with them, then you will always wonder if and how much they know. You won’t be able to lean on them for support, and this leads to isolation and loneliness.

- Most survivors feel that it is important to see the person who as died at the time of the death and/or the funeral. Otherwise there may always be that nagging doubt: “Is my loved one really dead?” Survivors can stay in denial longer when they have not witnessed the body. But when the body has been altered through decomposition or self-injury, it’s important to be forewarned and supported in the viewing.

Expressing Yourself...

- Your emotions as a survivor are raw. It’s important to let these feelings come out. If you don’t express your feelings now, they’ll come out some other time, some other way. That much is certain. You won’t suffer nearly as much from “getting too upset” as you will from being “brave” and keeping your honest emotions all locked up inside. Share your “falling to pieces” with the loved ones who are able to support you—as often as you feel the need.

- Some people feel that the less said about a suicide the better, and that everyone should just try to forget it and “move on.” Studies show this to be the most damaging approach. Survivors need to release their feelings and resolve their questions, not lock their anguish deep inside.

- Don’t be afraid to tell those around you exactly how you feel. You may need to remind people that you are not quite yourself. Encourage their patience and understanding by telling them how much you appreciate it.

- At some point, you will probably be angry. Your anger may be directed at the deceased, yourself, others, God, or you may just feel angry. It is extremely important to get the anger out. This may be done by going to a remote spot and screaming, chopping wood, hitting a punching bag, playing tennis, swimming, pounding a pillow, etc. Anger that is not recognized and directed outward may turn back on you. Such anger unleashed at ourselves is very harmful.
Take an empty chair and put a picture of your loved one in it. Remember the good times and the bad, and express all of your feelings about what happened. It’s a way of articulating those confusing thoughts and of finishing unfinished business.

Some survivors find it helpful to keep a daily diary of their thoughts and feelings. Others turn to art or music as a way of expressing and managing their turbulent feelings.

If you are troubled and don’t know where else to turn, call a 24-Hour Crisis Hotline. 1-800-273-TALK, 1-800-SUICIDE or in Northern VA, DC and MD 703-527-4077. It’s free, confidential and always available.

Dealing with Your Grief…

Lean into the grief. You can’t go around it, over it, or under it. You have to go through it to survive. It is important to face the full force of the pain. Be careful not to get stuck at some phase. Keep working on your grief. Here’s where a grief counselor and/or a survivors’ support group can really help keep you on tract and moving forward.

You won’t suffer nearly as much from getting “too upset” as you will from being “brave” and keeping your honest feelings all locked up inside.

Some survivors throw themselves into their work or take flight in constant activity. Everyone grieves differently, but carried to an extreme this sort of response can prevent a person from dealing directly with his or her grief. Take the time to face your grief.

In times of severe grief be extremely careful in your use of alcohol or prescription drugs. Tranquilizers don’t end the pain; they only mask it. With continued use, this may lead to further withdrawal, loneliness, and even addiction. Grief work is best done when you are awake, not sedated.

Read recommended literature on suicide and grief. The reading will not resolve all of your pain or answer your guest ions, but it will offer understanding and some suggestions for helping you cope.

Don’t become discouraged that you are alone in your grief. Join a self-help support group. Such groups offer understanding, friendship, and hope. (You can find the support groups closest to you by calling CrisisLink at 703-527-4077, 1-800-273-TALK or by searching online at www.suicidology.org or www.afsp.org.

It is not helpful to compare yourself to other survivors of suicide. Remember that no two people go through grief or heal from trauma in the same way or according to the same ‘timetable.”

Remember that no two people go through grief alike.

Feeling depressed is common to those in grief. You may even consider suicide yourself. If you feel suicidal or find yourself unable to emerge from your depression, seek counseling right away.

Some survivors tend to isolate themselves from friends and family. And to constantly dwell on their anguished feeling. This may be helpful initially, but not when carried to an extreme over time.
Don't be afraid to ask for help from those close to you when you need it. Too much hurt and pain go unheeded during the grief process because we “don’t want to bother anyone else” with our problems. (Wouldn’t you want someone close to you to ask for help if s/he needed it?) Some relatives and friends will not be able to handle your grief. Find someone who can. Seek out an understanding friend, another survivor, or a support group member.

If your grief is intense and prolonged, it may harm your physical and mental well-being. If necessary, seek out a competent counselor. Check to see if your health insurance covers the charges. It’s important to take care of yourself. If you don’t, you can’t be helpful to others.

Dealing with Guilt…

Don’t assume that everyone is blaming you or thinking ill of you. Others are probably hurting on your behalf, but may not know what to say or how to say it.

Work on your guilt. Something beyond your control has happened. Blaming yourself for the actions of someone else is not only illogical, but also dangerously self-damaging.

It helps to admit your mistakes. You’re human. There is so much that you tried to do. There are things you didn’t do. Accepting your imperfections helps you work through your grief.

If you continue to feel guilty, ask yourself what things specifically are bothering you the most. Discuss your guilty feeling with a trusted friend or professional. Telling the truth about why you feel guilty will help. Forgive yourself. Ask for forgiveness of your loved one, and – if you’re a believer – of God. There’s nothing that you can do about it now. Learn how to live life to the best of your ability now.

Other Feeling and Reactions…

You may have psychosomatic complaints which are physical problems brought on by an emotional reaction. The physical problems are real. They are your body’s way of expressing the stress you’re under. Take steps to remedy them.

If you sometimes think that you are going crazy – it’s very normal. Most grieving people experience this feeling. Remind yourself that you’re not losing your mind but are reacting to a devastating blow.

Thinking that you are crazy is very normal. You are not.

Some survivors feel driven to give away clothes, belongings or other reminders of their loved ones. Be careful about making such decisions in the early days. Later on, after the pain subsides, you may wish you had held onto some of these valued mementos.

Be prepared for the possibility that relatives or other individuals who were close to the person who died might say seemingly cruel or thoughtless things because of their own pain, frustration, or anger.
Caring for Yourself…

- Remember the commandment “Love Thy Neighbor as Thyself.” Here’s one time in your life when you need to take as gentle and patient care of yourself as you would someone else trying to survive through grief and trauma.

- Practice taking one moment – one day – at a time. Say to yourself, “I choose to live!” Recognize that you have been hit with a terrible tragedy and yet you have still survived.

- On the anniversary of the suicide, or on the person’s birthday or other special holidays, get together with a few understanding friends or relative, or find another way to escape the full brunt of the occasion. It is important to plan the day. It won’t be great, but it can be less painful if you don’t expect too much of yourself and others.

- Doing things for other builds one’s self confidence and self-worth. But don’t ignore problems that may be building inside yourself.

- When you’re ready and if so moved, become an advocate for suicide prevention by offering community education on what it’s like to survive the suicide of a loved one. Many people truly care, but they don’t know what to do or say.

- When you are ready, aim at regaining a healthy, balanced life by broadening your interests. As a survivor you should take time to think through which activities can bring you some degree of purpose. Remember to start slowly and move carefully in this direction – with friends who are supportive and understanding. Think about taking up something you’ve always wanted to do: going back to school; volunteering; joining church groups; community projects; or hobby clubs.

- The best remedy for heartache is to figure out how to lead as happy a life as possible. You and your true friends understand that you have done your best to work through your grief and now you are trying to reinvest in life. If others don’t understand, don’t worry about them. Surviving and rebuilding your life is what is important.

REMEMBER…

You had no choice and not control over the suicide, but you can choose to live through it. It may be the hardest task that you will ever have to perform, but you will survive.

You had no choice and no control over the suicide, but you do have a choice to survive it.
Here are some suggestions from others who have lived through and beyond the sudden loss of a loved one.

- 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, forgetfulness are common responses. You are not crazy—you are in mourning.
- Be aware you may feel appropriate anger at this person, at the work, 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 into regret through forgiveness.
- Having suicidal thoughts is common. It does not mean that you will act on these thoughts.
- Remember to take one moment or day at a time.
- Find a good listener with whom to share. Call someone when you need to talk.
- Don’t be afraid or embarrassed to cry. Tears are healing.
- Give yourself time to heal.
- Expect setbacks. If emotions turn like a tidal wave, you may only be experiencing a remnant of grief, and 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 what or how to feel.
- Know that there are support groups that can be helpful.
- Call on your personal faith to help you through.
- It is common to experience physical reactions to your grief, such as headaches, loss of appetite, insomnia.
- 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 that you can survive and even go beyond surviving.
Surviving the Holidays After the Loss of a Loved One

At holiday time, many people are dealing with the loss and are often caught in a dilemma between the need to grieve and the pressure to get into the spirit of the season. Holidays or not, it is important for the bereaved to find ways to take care of themselves. The following guidelines may be helpful:

Stay connected to your feelings.
Give yourself time to express your emotions. Find out how you can best express your feelings — by talking or writing or sharing with another, by meditating, by exercising, or by keeping active in holiday activities. Everyone has his or her own style. Both tears and laughter can be healing. If you will be surrounded by others at certain times over the holidays, think about where you could retreat to during periods when you become overwhelmed or just want to be alone. Consider involving one other person as a “supportive ally” to look out for your best interests during the turbulent time.

Plan ahead: Think about what will be helpful for yourself and your family in the present.
Do not continue old traditions if they do no work for you. Redefine your holiday expectations and scale back if you feel like it. Especially the first year, it is often good to do something different. For example, one family decided to take a trip to celebrate the holidays in a different country. The following year they had a more traditional Christmas at home. Another person went to Florida and swam with dolphins. She reported that the experience changed her life.

Incorporate memories of the person into your holiday traditions.
Have someone read a poem or prayer in honor of the person you’ve lost. Light a candle in your loved one’s favorite color and scent. Place it in a special area of your home and light it at significant times throughout the holidays. Involve others in creating a memory quilt.

If you believe or participate in a religious or spiritual tradition, explore its rituals and practices concerning mourning and remembering.
Some of them may prove meaningful for you as a way of honoring your loved one and getting through the holidays in one piece.

Notice what elements of the holidays tend to “trigger” or intensity your grief—and avoid them!
These “triggers” tend to be different for everyone. It might be a particular Christmas carol, a holiday dish that your loved one especially enjoyed, an advertisement for something that the person you lost would have loved to receive.

Do not feel guilty for how you feel.
If you find that you are actually happy or enjoying some aspect of the holiday, that’s fine! If you are not feeling happy, it’s still ok. Don’t try to live up to others expectations of how you should feel. Sometimes family and friends may disapprove of the grieving person’s behavior if he or she does not seem to have the emotions the family expects. Sometimes we harbor our own unrealistic expectations for how we should be instead of accepting how we truly do feel.

Don’t be afraid to ask for professional help if you are feeling overwhelmed by negative emotions, are finding yourself immobilized by your grief, or are having other adverse experiences or behaviors.
The holidays present unique challenges for those who are grieving. By taking special care in planning for them and by being aware of your emotions, you’ll be able to survive them, and maybe find a new meaning in them for yourself and your family.
Helpful Websites

Useful Websites for People Who Have Lost Someone to Suicide

Educational Sites:

www.crisislink.org
CrisisLink—serving the Washington metropolitan region with crisis and suicide hotlines, community educations, crisis response and a suicide postvention program.

www.suicidology.org
American Association of Suicidology—comprehensive site with special section for survivors

www.afsp.org
American Foundation for Suicide Prevention—comprehensive site with special section for survivors

www.sprc.org
The Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC) provides prevention support, training, and resources to assist organizations and individuals to develop suicide prevention programs, interventions and policies, and to advance the National Strategy for Suicide Prevention.

www.fiercgoodbye.com
“Fierce Goodbye” - a faith-based perspective of suicide. Connected to the DVD (order online)

www.compassionatefriends.org
The Compassionate Friends—for parents who have lost a child (not necessarily by suicide)

www.familyware.org
Families for Depression Awareness—helps families recognize and cope with depression and loss from suicide

www.survivorsofsuicide.com
Comprehensive website for suicide survivors. Opportunity to post memorials.

www.siblingsurvivors.com
Created by a survivor after she lost her sister to suicide.

www.griefshare.org
A website for an organization that provides resources for people who are grieving from a difficult loss. The site includes links to Christian-based seminars and support groups nationwide, and also includes a web-based course of “study”.

www.save.org
SAVE was one of the nation’s first organizations dedicated to the prevention of suicide and was a co-founding member of the National Council for Suicide Prevention. Their history and growth from an all-volunteer, small grassroots group of passionate survivors led them to what is one of today’s leading national not-for-profit organizations with staff dedicated to prevent suicide. This site, along with their work, is based on the foundation and belief that suicide should no longer be considered a hidden or taboo topic and that through raising awareness and educating the public.

www.suicidefindinghope.com
Michelle Linn-Gust, the content creator of the Suicide: Finding Hope web site, offers her perspective on a myriad of topics related to suicide and suicide loss as the survivor of her younger sister’s suicide, the President of the American Association of Suicidology, author, and international speaker.
Online Support Groups & Discussion Boards

www.suicidereferencelibrary.com
A resource list created and maintained by volunteers from several on-line survivor communities. Offers online support forum.

www.thegiftofkeith.org
Created by a survivor family that contains information and resources about surviving suicide loss and an online community.

www.suicidegrief.com
Survivor grief support forum/online discussion board.

www.pos-ffos.com
Website and online community for friends and families who have lost loved ones to suicide.

www.GROWW.org
Online grief recovery support through chat. Regularly scheduled chat for SOS each week.

Other Memorial Site

www.suicidememorialwall.com
Created to remember some of the names of those who died by suicide and to encourage survivors to better understand the causes of suicide.

Other

www.beforetheirtime.org
Before Their Time is a three-volume, six-CD compilation of memorial songs for survivors. From Joan Baez to Cheryl Wheeler, 80 artists contributed songs they wrote after the death of someone they love. A perfect condolence gift that provides comfort through all the stages of grief that survivors encounter. All sales benefit AFSP.