

## GRIEF &amp; LOSS

# Suicide Grief: Coping with a Loved One's Suicide

The loss of someone you love from suicide can be devastating. But there are ways to navigate the shock, confusion, and despair and begin the healing process.

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## Dealing with suicide loss

Facing the loss of a loved one is always difficult, but losing someone to suicide can add another level of pain to your grief. The shock and anguish following a suicide can seem overwhelming. As well as mourning your loved one's passing, you're likely also wrestling with a host of conflicting emotions and struggling to come to terms with the nature of their death.

You may feel guilty, wishing you'd done more to prevent their suicide, upset at yourself or others for having missed any clues to their intentions, or even angry at your loved one for abandoning you. Many people grieving a suicide start to question the relationship they shared with the person, wondering why it wasn't enough to keep them alive. Some even experience suicidal thoughts of their own. Compounding all this is the nagging question "Why?", the replaying of your loved one's final act over and over in your head, and the constant second guessing of what you could've done differently.

At such a devastating time, you may also find yourself having to deal with police questions, media intrusion, and the stigma that suicide can still carry. Suicide may conflict with your culture or religious views, some friends and family may feel too uncomfortable to reach out to you, while others may feel less sympathy for a death that was "self-inflicted". Denied your usual sources of comfort, you can be left feeling isolated and alone in your grief.

It's likely you'll always be left with some unanswered questions about your loved one's suicide—and the sadness at losing them in such a tragic way will never completely disappear—but there are ways to deal with the pain. As difficult as it may seem at the moment, in time you can learn to come to terms with your loss, resolve your grief, and even gain some level of acceptance in order to move forward with your life.

## Suicide loss and complicated grief

The suicide of a loved one is often so sudden, shocking, and deeply disturbing it can trigger a condition known as complicated grief—where the sorrow and pain of your loss remain unresolved and don't ease up over time, preventing you from resuming your own life and relationships.

You may struggle to focus on anything else, feel numb, detached, and empty, or be unable to accept your loved one's death, looking for them in familiar places or imagining they're still alive. You may even feel that life isn't worth living.

Complicated grief can also lead to [major depression](#), [psychological trauma](#), or [post-traumatic stress disorder \(PTSD\)](#) where you're plagued by intrusive thoughts, upsetting emotions, and a persistent anxiety that prevents you from functioning in your daily routine. If you're [depressed](#) or traumatized, it's important to seek help and make the healing changes that will allow you to find some peace and acceptance.

## If you have suicidal thoughts...

While your grief can seem overwhelming at the moment, with time you will feel better, especially if you get help. There are many people who want to support you during this difficult time, so please reach out.

Read [Suicide Help](#) or visit [IASP](#) or [Suicide.org](#) to find a helpline in your country.

## Grieve in your own way

Suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the United States and almost 800,000 people around the world die by suicide every year. Each one leaves behind a host of "suicide survivors," people who've lost someone close to them in this tragic way. But while many other people have suffered a similar loss, it's important to remember that your grief is highly personal to you. Everyone's situation is different and there's no right or wrong way for you to grieve. So, don't judge yourself by how others are coping or believe that you should be thinking or feeling a certain way.

With any loss, [grief often comes in waves](#), ebbing and flowing, rather than in a set of predictable stages. Any grieving process can take a long time and throw up many difficult and unexpected emotions, but following a suicide, the normal responses to bereavement are often intensified.

[\[Read: Bereavement: Grieving the Loss of a Loved One\]](#)

While your life will forever be changed by the loss of a loved one to suicide—and there's no way to avoid the emotional barrage of guilt, sorrow, and heartache that comes with that—there are healthier ways for you to cope with the pain.

**Allow yourself to feel and express your emotions.** You may think it's better to try to hold yourself together and avoid experiencing all the difficult emotions you're feeling at the moment. But they exist whether you try to ignore them or not. Attempting to avoid them will only delay and deepen your pain. If you allow yourself to feel even the darkest, most disturbing emotions, you'll find they'll start to diminish and the pain you're experiencing will gradually ease.

For more on learning to connect with your emotions, use HelpGuide's free [Emotional Intelligence Toolkit](#).

**Keep a journal.** Even if you're not yet ready to talk about the difficult thoughts and feelings you're experiencing, writing them down can provide an important release for your emotions. It may also help to write a letter to your loved one, saying the things you never got to say to them.

**Remember your loved one's life was about more than their suicide.** Their final act doesn't need to define their life. Try to remember and celebrate the important, joyous aspects of their life and of your relationship together. Mark their achievements and share memories, photos, and stories with others who loved them.

**Expect ups and downs.** The healing process rarely moves in a straight line. Some days your grief may seem more manageable than others. Then a painful reminder such as a birthday, holiday, or a favorite song playing on the radio will cause the waves of pain and sadness to return—even years after your loved one's suicide.

**Take care of yourself.** It's difficult to think about your own health at a time like this. But the stress and trauma you're experiencing right now can take a serious toll on your mental and physical health. Try to [eat healthy food](#), [exercise regularly](#), [get enough sleep](#), and spend time outdoors, ideally connecting with nature. While it's tempting to turn to drugs and alcohol to help numb your grief, [self-medicating](#) won't ease the pain and will only create more problems in the long-term.

**Be patient.** Don't try to rush the healing process. Other people may move on or want to stop talking about your loss long before you do. If possible, avoid making major life decisions while you still feel overwhelmed by grief.

## Reach out for support

Don't try to tough this out on your own. People who've lost someone to suicide often withdraw from others because they're worried about being a burden on others or having their loved one judged. But leaning on others for support can help ease the burden of grief and, when you feel ready, talking about what you're going through can be an important first step in the healing process. Until that point, you can still draw comfort just from being around understanding friends and family members who care about you.

[\[Read: Coping with Grief and Loss\]](#)

In our society, there remains a stigma attached to both suicide and the mental health problems that are often a contributing factor. Some religions view suicide as a sin, some people will be less sympathetic or want to avoid the subject altogether, while others will seemingly go out of their way to make insensitive or hurtful comments. Even if you can't rely on a religious leader or certain friends for support, though, there are still many people out

there who want to help.

**Seek out supportive friends and family.** Confide in people you trust to be understanding, who are willing to listen when you want to talk, and won't judge or tell you how you should be feeling.

**Join a bereavement support group**, ideally one for those who've lost someone to suicide. Being with others who've experienced a similar loss can offer invaluable support. You can be free to open up about your feelings without fear of being judged or made to feel awkward. Even if you'd rather just listen, hearing from others in a similar situation can provide hope and make you feel less isolated in your grief.

**Talk to a therapist or grief counselor.** If you're struggling to find adequate support, turning to a [mental health professional](#) with experience in grief counseling can help. If you don't have access to therapy, some organizations offer survivor outreach programs where you can talk one-to-one with a volunteer who's also experienced suicide loss. See the "Get more help" section below for links.

**Use social media carefully.** [Social media](#) can be a useful tool for letting others know about your loved one's death, allowing people to share their condolences and tributes, and for reaching out to others for support. However, it can also attract a toxic element, people who post insensitive, cruel, or even abusive messages. You may want to limit your social media use to closed groups on platforms such as Facebook or WhatsApp, rather than making public postings that can be read and commented on by anyone.

## Talking to others about your loss

Many people find it difficult to talk about their loss, often for fear of how others will react. After the suicide of a loved one, who you choose to confide in and the amount of information you decide to share are always very personal decisions.

You may want to be honest with your closest friends about what happened but simply tell acquaintances that your loved one died and you don't want to go into details at the moment. You certainly shouldn't feel obligated to answer any intrusive questions.

## Explaining suicide to children

It's never easy to explain suicide to a child or teen, but lying or trying to shield them from the truth can often cause more hurt, fear, and anxiety in the long-run.

- Try to be as honest as you can while tailoring your explanation to an age-appropriate level. For young children, for example, you could explain that their loved one had an illness that made them so sad they didn't want to live any longer.
- Make it clear that the child or teen in no way caused or contributed to the person's death.
- Point out that not everyone who feels sad or depressed dies. If they ever feel that way, they can reach out to you, a crisis line, or other family and friends for help.
- Consider finding a grief counsellor or child bereavement support group to help your child deal with their loss.

## Move beyond the question “Why?”

When you lose someone to suicide, one question can run over and over in your mind more than any other: “Why did they do it?” Unless the person had been battling a terminal illness and chose suicide as a way of hastening the end, for example, most answers you come up with may feel inadequate. Suicide is very complex. There tend to be many different contributing factors, and rarely any neat, simplistic explanations. Even those who’ve [attempted suicide and survived](#) often struggle to provide a clear answer to the question “Why?”

Most people who die by suicide have a mental or emotional health problem such as depression, [bipolar disorder](#), or PTSD, even though less than half have previously been diagnosed. [Relationship problems](#), [substance abuse](#), physical health issues, [bullying](#), legal difficulties, and [financial stress](#) can also be major contributors.

Even if your loved one left a suicide note, that may not provide the answers you’re looking for. Someone who is suicidal has a skewed view of what’s happening to them. They are in so much pain the only way they can see to escape that pain is by taking their own life. They’re not thinking of the devastating effects their actions will have on you, they’re just trying to escape the unbearable pain they’re experiencing. Most wish for an alternative way to end their suffering, but are so blinded by negative emotions they can see no other solution.

While trying to understand everything you can about your loved one’s suicide is a normal part of the grieving process, it’s likely that you’ll be left with questions that can never be answered. Even if you do uncover all the answers, it won’t change the past or ease the grief and loss you’re experiencing. In time, however, it is possible to move beyond the question “Why?”, accept the unknowable, and start to heal.

## Let go of guilt, anger, and blame

Enduring the loss of a loved one to suicide can leave you riding a roller coaster of powerful, often negative emotions. In many cases, whether you’re a friend, parent, spouse, sibling, or other relative of the person who died, you’ll likely feel a strong sense of guilt, anger, and blame.

Your anger may be directed at others—someone who should’ve taken better care of the person, someone who let them down, or even your loved one for leaving you to deal with all the pain and fallout. Alternately, your anger may be turned inwards and you blame yourself for your loved one’s suicide. You may feel that you should have done more to spot the signs, get them help, or not make the situation worse, for example.

As a parent, guilt may stem from feeling that you somehow failed your child in their upbringing or as their protector. As a spouse, sibling, or close friend, you may feel guilty that you said or did something wrong or that you weren’t there for the person when they needed you the most.

If your loved one endured a long battle with mental illness, you may even experience guilt about feeling pangs of relief that their suffering is finally over. And as your grief begins to ease in the months or years following the suicide, you may experience new feelings of guilt as you start to gradually move on with your life. But healing doesn’t mean forgetting; it just means looking at feelings of blame and guilt in a more realistic way.

**Accept that some things are beyond your control.** While we have control over many things in life, we can’t control everything—including the actions of other people, even those we love. Is the blame you’re assuming for your loved one’s death justified? Could you really have prevented them from taking their own life? The truth is

we have far less power over others than we like to believe.

[\[Read: Dealing with Uncertainty\]](#)

**Separate responsibility from blame.** Trying to find someone to blame is a common response to such a painful loss—whether the blame is directed at yourself, your loved one, another person, or even God. While your loved one is the only person “responsible” for their suicide, that doesn’t mean they—or you—deserve blame. The blame lies only with the pain/grief/depression/addiction/other mental health issue your loved one was experiencing that drove them to end their life.

**Understand that anyone can miss the warning signs.** Even mental health professionals can miss suicidal intentions in someone. People who are suicidal don’t always appear desolate or hopeless. In fact, many display a sudden calmness once they’ve settled on a plan to end their life. We can never truly know what’s going on in someone else’s head, any more than we can predict the future and see what’s coming.

## Look forward

When you lose a loved one to suicide, life is never the same. But it can be happy, fulfilling, and meaningful again. As you cope with the pain of grief, it can help to reflect back on your loved one’s life and the good times you shared together. It’s also okay to allow yourself moments of joy and to look forward again.

Instead of feeling guilty about leaving the person behind as you start to heal, find ways to celebrate your loved one’s life as you gradually move on with yours.

**Create a memorial or tribute to your loved one.** You could create a memorial site online, write a blog, make a scrapbook of your loved one’s life, start a campaign for suicide awareness, or donate to a charity in their name, for example. Even simply lighting a candle or visiting a special place to mark important dates can help to promote healing.

**Use your loss to help others.** Use your experience to volunteer at a bereavement, suicide prevention, or mental health organization, for example. Or reach out to others in your community who are in need of help. This website is an example of something positive that emerged from the pain of suicide loss. Following the death of their daughter, our co-founders created HelpGuide to honor her memory and help others in similar trouble.

[\[Read: HelpGuide’s Story\]](#)

**Pursue activities that bring meaning to your life.** Whether it’s a favorite hobby, interest, or sport, there’s comfort in resuming activities that are important to you. It can also help you connect with others and come to terms with your loss. Acquiring new skills or staying physically active by enrolling in an adult education or fitness class, for example, can also help to ease stress at this disturbing time.

## How to help someone grieve a suicide

While it’s normal to feel awkward about consoling someone who’s grieving a suicide, don’t let that prevent you from giving your support. People who lose someone to suicide often feel stigmatized and isolated. They may fear others criticizing, blaming, or judging them or their loved one, so it’s important to reach out early.

[\[Read: Helping Someone Who's Grieving\]](#)

Don't feel that you have to provide answers, give advice, or say all the right things. Rather, it's your love, compassion, and caring presence that counts. It's also important to be there for the long haul. While everyone grieves for different lengths of time, someone mourning a suicide will need your support long after the funeral is over.

While the pain of suicide loss may lessen over time, it will probably never fully pass. Be mindful of birthdays, anniversaries, and other times that may be especially hard for the bereaved person. Let them know that you're there to help them cope with each new wave of pain and grief.

## Do's and Don'ts of Supporting Someone Grieving a Suicide

### Do:

Accept that you may feel awkward or uncomfortable talking about suicide. You can even admit that you don't know what to say or do. Just don't let your discomfort prevent you from reaching out.

Invite the person to talk about the loved one they've lost or to share memories—if that's what they want to do. The important thing is to be there, whether the person needs a shoulder to cry on or a listening ear.

Understand that they may have many strong and conflicting emotions at this time. There's no right or wrong way to feel or behave after a loss to suicide—so allow the person to express their pain and loss without judgement.

Offer to help with practical tasks, such as grocery shopping, preparing meals, notifying others of the death, or helping with funeral arrangements, for example.

When talking about the person's death, use terms such as "died by suicide," "took their life," or "chose to end their life."

### Don't:

Use the term "committed suicide". This implies that suicide is a criminal act and will only reinforce the stigma and make the grieving person feel more isolated.

Make judgements about the person who died or label them as selfish, weak, or crazy, for example. Suicide is the result of extreme emotional distress, not a character defect.

Demand an explanation or speculate on the reasons why the person took their own life. Your role is to be supportive, not interrogate the person grieving. Listen, and allow them to direct the conversation.

Issue platitudes such as "they're at peace now" or "they're in a better place." Such hollow reassurances rarely provide comfort and can even alienate the grieving person, making them feel more alone.

Lose patience. Someone grieving a suicide may need to talk about their loss over and over again without fear of interruption or judgement. Talking over the same points can help them come to terms with what happened.

## Helplines and support

In the U.S.	Find a <a href="#">suicide loss support group</a> or get <a href="#">personal support</a> from a volunteer. (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention)
UK	Find a <a href="#">support group</a> or call the <a href="#">national helpline</a> at 0300 111 5065 (Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide)
Canada	Find a survivors of suicide loss <a href="#">support group</a> or call a <a href="#">crisis line</a> . (Lifeline Canada Foundation)
Australia	<a href="#">Find support</a> in your region and other resources. (StandBy Support After Suicide)
India	<a href="#">Find support groups</a> for families affected by suicide or call the helpline at 91-9820466726. (Aasra)

## More Information

### Helpful links

01. [Suicide rising across the US](#) - Factors contributing to suicide. (CDC)
02. [Children, Teens, and Suicide Loss](#) - Helping children grieve a suicide. (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention)
03. [Suicide and grief](#) - Including activities to help with grief. (Beyond Blue)
04. [How suicide bereavement is different](#) - Supporting people who have been bereaved by suicide. (Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide)

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