



## Healing For Those Left Behind

### **Healing ... In The Aftermath of a Suicide**

Nothing is as difficult to understand as when someone makes the decision to end their life. While the pain and suffering of the person who commits suicide has ended, it has increased many times over for those who grieve the death. Whether you are grieving the death by suicide of a relative or friend, or know someone who is, the following can help.

Upon hearing of the suicide of a relative or friend, many report feeling numb and confused, almost like everything has just been turned upside down and inside out. Over the next few hours, days, weeks and months they experience other feelings such as intense anger, disorientation, rage, fear, guilt and anxiety. Loss of appetite, sleep disturbances and periods of "unreality" are common. There can be periods when those bereaved blame themselves or others for the suicide. For the most part, these experiences are normal reactions to an abnormal event. While it is normal to blame oneself or others, it is important to recognize that neither you nor others are at fault. The person who died by suicide made the decision to do so.

### **The following can help those who are grieving the loss of a loved one by suicide:**

- 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 the feelings, but all your feelings will be normal.
- Anger, guilt, confusion, forgetfulness are common responses. You are not crazy, you are mourning.
- Be aware you may feel appropriate anger at the person, at the world, at God and at yourself.
- You may feel guilty for what you think you did or did not do.

- Having suicidal thoughts is common. It does not mean 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.
- Do not be afraid to cry. Tears are healing.
- Give yourself time to heal.
- Remember the choice was not yours. No one is the sole influence in another's life.
- Expect setbacks. Do not panic if emotions return like a tidal wave. You may only be experiencing a remnant of grief.
- 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.
- Set your own limits and learn to say no.
- Steer clear of people who want to tell you what or how to feel.
- Know that there are support groups that can be helpful, such as 'Compassionate Friends' or 'Suicide Bereavement Groups'. If not, ask a professional to start one.
- Call on your personal faith to help you through.
- It is common to experience physical reactions to your grief, headaches, loss of appetite, inability to sleep, etc.
- The willingness to laugh with others and at yourself is healing.
- Wear out your questions, anger, guilt or other feelings until you can let go of them.
- Know that you will never be the same again, but you can survive and go beyond just surviving.

**The following can help if you know someone who is grieving:**

- Give support to those grieving a suicide as you would with any other death.
- Be available to listen. Those who are bereaved need to discuss the death. Recognize that they will struggle with the question of "WHY" for a long time. Do not offer ready made or pat answers in order to alleviate their feelings. They do not help in the short or long term.
- Recognize that the bereaved may display a range of emotions that can become intense at times. You cannot, and should not, make these feelings go away. Think of it as a storm, it will become turbulent at times, but with lots of support people

ride out their feelings. Attempting to block or avoid these feelings keeps people from moving out of the storm as soon as they might otherwise.

- Do not offer alcohol or drugs as a means of reducing grief. They numb feelings which need to be expressed and complicate the grieving process.
- Recognize your own feelings. In supporting others you will also need support and someone to talk to.
- The bereaved need support after any type of death. Many bereaved by suicide report that friends and relatives were great during the time surrounding the funeral. However they stopped or reduced contact after a few months. Sometimes this can be taken as evidence that you do in fact blame them for the suicide. Apart from the funeral, there can be periods which are particularly difficult over the next few years (i.e. birthdays, anniversary of death, holidays).
- Remember that the grieving process takes time.