

Aftermath of Suicide

Working through the suicide of someone you knew or loved can be an incredibly painful ordeal. Not only are you dealing with the death itself, but the process is exaggerated by intense self-examination and questions –Why didn't I see it coming? What did I miss? Why couldn't I have prevented this from happening? Will it happen again to someone I care about? What do I do about my own feelings of helplessness, despair and anger?

It's helpful to look at some **history** and **myths/facts** about suicide.

- ♦ People have been committing suicide for centuries; it is not a new phenomenon.
- ♦ While people of all ages and backgrounds can and do commit suicide, it is the second leading cause of death among teens and young adults.
- ♦ Almost always, suicide is attempted or completed by persons who feel totally trapped by life circumstances and can see no other way out.
- ♦ If a suicide follows an argument – a failed exam – a break-up of a relationship, that is not the cause of the suicide.
- ♦ The causes of suicide are rooted in weeks, months and even years of personal struggle. The person sees no other way to escape his or her personal pain.

We talk a lot about **suicidal gestures** being a 'cry for help' and clearly that is true and we need to respond to those cries. However, the following must also be considered:

- ♦ One in five students do not give clear warnings.
- ♦ There are situations where those cries for help are so subtle that they are missed.
- ♦ In many cases of completed suicide, the person cannot hear or chooses to ignore offers of help.
- ♦ Sometimes the internal struggles are so overwhelming that the person cannot even ask for help or let others know that suicide is being considered.
- ♦ There is also truth to the idea that if a person is truly intent on committing suicide, she or he will let nothing stand in the way of completing that action.

If you are impacted by the suicide of someone you know, there are predictable human responses. In general, you need to know that these responses are normal – that everyone will put their own individual twist on them and that everyone's timing is different– that it is not a steady progression through the stages – just when you think you're over the pain, it will sneak back up on you - that it will take a lot longer than you want to truly heal – that you need to be willing to **reach out and ask for help** from parents, friends, ministers, trusted adults, teachers, Housing staff, professional counselors.

Stages

Shock/Denial – Any loss will produce a reaction of shock – in the case of suicide, this reaction is frequently stronger than in losses you could anticipate. You are likely experiencing numbness, avoidance, cold, some loss of touch with reality, alienation. While you may be able to intellectually 'know' that the person is gone, you may also be telling yourself it's not really a big deal. You may try to shrug off the impact. You need to understand that this is your psyche's way of anesthetizing yourself against the pain that will follow.

During this time, you may find yourself avoiding all mention or reminders of your friend. You may stop doing things associated with him or her. You may get angry with others who talk about the person or who remind you of your loss. You may also find that thoughts, feelings, reminders, "leak" through your denial and you may become angry with yourself for allowing that to happen. You may forget that your friend is gone.

Depression/Sadness/Anger – This stage comes about when your denial begins to break down. You may feel a need to isolate yourself and you will likely feel a loss of energy or commitment to do things like study. You may have difficulty sleeping or concentrating.

While you may be able to accept the feelings of sadness, it is often difficult to allow yourself to feel angry. That may feel like a betrayal of the person who committed suicide – or of God – or of the family. As hard as it may seem, you need to understand that this is a normal and necessary part of grieving.

Bargaining/Questioning/The “What if?” Stage - While always a difficult part of grief, this stage is particularly hard when the death is due to suicide. It’s a time of attempting to regain control over your sense of the world or reality and if you could just get the ‘right’ answers, then everything would be fine.

There may be waves of guilt and thousands of different questions:

‘I didn’t (or did) see it coming’ – ‘If only I hadn’t said or done what I did’ – ‘How could she have done this?’ – ‘How could he do this to me?’ – ‘She had so much to live for’ – ‘Will God accept my friend?’ – ‘Who is to blame?’ – ‘Why didn’t someone else stop him?’ – ‘Why is this happening to me?’ – ‘If she couldn’t stand her pain, how can I?’ – ‘I thought there were always warning signs’ – ‘How could God let this happen?’ – ‘Why can’t I stop thinking about this?’ – ‘Why isn’t my boyfriend more (or less) upset about this?’ – ‘What can I do to bring my friend back?’

You may feel preoccupied with similar thoughts and questions. However, you should know that there may not be answers to your questions. You might also be concerned that if you do find the answers, you will have to accept the death and you might not be ready to do that.

Grief/Sadness – This stage seems more like what grief is “supposed” to feel like. You are beginning to accept or integrate the reality of the suicide and it hurts. While you may still experience ‘flashbacks’ of anger and guilt, the predominant feeling is one of intense sadness and loss. You may have difficulty focusing, sleeping, eating. Reminders of your friend will trigger a resurgence of emotion. Crying, confusion, fatigue, dreams about your friend are also common during this time.

Acceptance - It may take a full year or longer to get to this point. Other losses during this time may set you back in the process of grief or possibly even minor losses may be experienced very deeply. Basically, while you come to accept your loss and the suicide, you will never be quite the same – nor will you totally forget the person. It just won’t hurt as much. Anniversaries, such as birthdays, will be important dates where you may feel a rekindling of sadness or discomfort.

Keep in mind that movement through the above stages is not linear and is variable from person to person, and some stages may last longer than others. Progression through grief is painful and sometimes scary, but the reactions described are normal. If you feel stuck or overwhelmed, please seek professional assistance.

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Some things to keep in mind while you are recovering from someone's suicide

1. You are not responsible.
2. You will get through your pain.
3. It is okay to feel and think things that appear irrational or illogical.
4. You may feel you are going 'crazy.'
5. It is not unusual to sense the person's presence – that he/she may 'talk' to you – that you are convinced you saw him/her on the way to class.
6. Sharing stories (even funny or angry ones) about your friend is not disrespectful and even helps with the healing process.
7. You will experience grief in fits and starts – the intensity will come and go.
8. It is highly unlikely that anyone around you will be progressing through grief at the same pace as you – or expressing it the same way. This may stress relationships; respect each other's pace and consider seeking support elsewhere.
9. If you feel stuck, despair, hopelessness – **reach out for help!**

Some things that may help

1. Talk with people
2. Journal
3. Physical exercise
4. If you're trying to study or write a paper, allow yourself extra time
5. Write letters to your friend
6. Cry, yell, question, pray – whatever helps to relieve the tension
7. Silent company is often more healing than words of advice
8. Talk with people!

Other Resources

[Ulifeline](http://www.ulifeline.org) – <http://www.ulifeline.org>

[The Jed Foundation](http://www.jedfoundation.org) – <http://www.jedfoundation.org>

[The American Association of Suicidology](http://www.suicidology.org) – <http://www.suicidology.org>

[National Mental Health Association](http://www.nmha.org) – <http://www.nmha.org>

[American Foundation for Suicide Prevention](http://www.afsp.org) – <http://www.afsp.org>

[University of Illinois – Counseling Center](http://www.couns.uiuc.edu/brochures/suiprev.htm) - <http://www.couns.uiuc.edu/brochures/suiprev.htm>

[San Diego State University Counseling & Psychological Services](http://www.sa.sdsu.edu/cps/suicide.html) - <http://www.sa.sdsu.edu/cps/suicide.html>

[Massey University Counseling Service](http://counselling.massey.ac.nz/articles/suicide.htm) - <http://counselling.massey.ac.nz/articles/suicide.htm>

[Mary Washington College Psychological Services Center](http://www.mwc.edu/psc/links/crisisweb.htm) - <http://www.mwc.edu/psc/links/crisisweb.htm>

The National Hopeline Network 1-800-SUICIDE (800-784-2433)

St. Francis Mental Health Crisis Line 660-562-2227 or 800-841-3866

Northwest Missouri State University Counseling Center 660-562-1220