

Coping with Death by Suicide

Death by suicide not only affects the person who died, but also others “suicide survivors” who cared deeply about the person. This experience may be one of the most challenging experiences that you’ve ever faced. While there is no easy way to grieve, it is often helpful to understand what you might experience as well as have access to resource information.

Understanding Grief

The shock and grief that consumes you after you lose someone to suicide can be overwhelming. It can feel like you have fallen into a deep hole and will never be able to get out. These are natural feelings which will likely change as you move through the grieving process. No two people experience loss in the same way. Some may experience physical symptoms such as headaches or changes in appetite and/or sleeping patterns. A person in grief may also experience some or all of the following feelings:

SHOCK

“I feel numb.” Feelings of being dazed or detached are a common response to trauma.



Shock can protect the mind from becoming completely overwhelmed, allowing the person to function.

DENIAL

“I feel fine.” Sometimes people can consciously or unconsciously refuse to accept the facts and information about another’s death. This process can be even more challenging when there is little information or explanation about a loved one’s suicide. Eventually, as you gather information and accept that you may not be able to know everything, you can begin to process the reality of this tragic event and all the emotions that come with it. In time, however, our minds become more able to analyze the tragic event, and this allows the denial to give way to less troubling emotions.



GUILT

“I think it was my fault.” Feelings of guilt following a suicide are very common. Guilt comes

from the mistaken belief that we should have, or could have, prevented the death from happening. Guilt can also arise if there are unreconciled issues with the deceased or regret about things said or not said. In truth, no person can predict the future, nor can they know all the reasons for another person’s actions. It is human nature to blame oneself when experiencing a loss, rather than accepting the truth that some things were out of our control.



SADNESS

“Why bother with anything?” Once the initial reactions to the death by suicide have lessened in intensity, feelings of sadness and depression can move to the forefront. These feelings can be present for some time and can, at times, be triggered by memories and reminders of the loved one who was lost. Feelings of hopelessness, frustration, bitterness, and self pity are all common when dealing with a loss of a loved one. Typically, you gradually learn to accept the loss



and embrace both your happy and sad memories.

ANGER

“How could they do this to me?” Feelings of anger towards the person you have lost can arise. Many who mourn feel a sense of abandonment. Others feel anger towards a real or perceived culprit. These feelings can be complex and distressing when they are directed at the person who died. It is important to know that it is possible to both be angry with someone, and to still hold them dear in your heart. Sometimes anger is needed before you can accept the reality of the loss.



ACCEPTANCE

“I can miss them and still continue living.” The ultimate goal of healing is to accept the tragic event as something that could not have been prevented and cannot be changed. Acceptance is not the same as forgetting. Instead, acceptance is learning to live again and to be able to reopen your heart, while still remembering the person who has passed away.



What Makes Suicide Different

Losing a friend or loved one is never easy. However, when you lose someone to suicide, it can feel different from other types of loss. Several circumstances can make death by suicide different, making the healing process more challenging.



STIGMA AND ISOLATION

Talking about suicide can be difficult for those who have experienced the loss. Different cultures view suicide in different ways, and sometimes discussing it can be a challenge. This can also be made more difficult when the act of suicide conflicts with religious views. Suicide can be isolating as communities of friends each struggle differently to make sense of the loss they all experienced. Finding the right people in your support network who are able to help you experience your loss is important. Sometimes, this may mean seeking professional help in order to help you cope with your loss. In those situations it is recommended that you contact a counselor at UAB Employee Assistance and Counseling Center, or find a trusted therapist in the community.



NEEDING TO UNDERSTAND WHY

Understanding the circumstances of a death by suicide can sometimes lead us to asking “Why?” You may second guess actions, wish that you had noticed signs earlier, or wonder how you could have acted differently. This need to understand “may be a difficult path, as the circumstances surrounding the loved one’s death could be unclear or not easily known. Some questions may never be answered, while you may find other answers that make sense. Sometimes you will find answers to your questions, while other times, you must learn to accept the fact that there are some things no one can know.



MIXED EMOTIONS

After a death by illness or natural causes, the bereaved’s feelings may be less complicated than when the death is by suicide. When a death is by suicide, you might both mourn the person’s passing while also hold intense feelings about the circumstances of their death. Feelings such as anger, abandonment and rejection can all occur after a suicide as well as positive feelings about the deceased. Sorting through all of these diverse feelings can make the healing process more challenging.



RISK FOR SURVIVORS

People who have recently experienced a loss by suicide are at increased risk for having suicidal thoughts themselves. After experiencing the loss of a loved one, it’s not uncommon to wish you were dead or to feel like the pain is unbearable. Remember that having suicidal thoughts does not mean that you will act on them. These feelings and thoughts will likely decrease over time, but if you find them too intense, or if you’re considering putting your thoughts into action, seek support from a mental health professional.

Explore suicide awareness and prevention resources for employees and students at uab.edu/bethe1to and uab.edu/uabcare.

