



*Optimal Treatment
for Anxiety
& Mental Health*

**Grieving and Coping with Suicide:
What to Do When Losing Someone
Close to You**

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Made in Partnership with Northern Kentucky Health Department



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Outline

Prevalence of suicide and identifying risk factors for suicide

Protective factors against suicide

Common experiences for suicide survivors

How to cope after losing someone to suicide

Suicide Statistics (CDC, 2021)

- Suicide is one of the top 9 leading causes of death for individuals ages 10-64
- It was the second leading cause of death for people ages 10-14 and 20-34 in 2021
- Suicide was responsible for over 48,000 deaths in 2021

Certain groups are more at risk for suicide including:

- Veterans
- Tribal Populations
- LGBTQIA+ Teens
- Men working in certain industries and occupations (e.g. construction and extraction)
- Males of certain ethnicities, namely Non-Hispanic American Indian/Alaska Native, Non-Hispanic White, Non-Hispanic Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- People living in rural areas

Warning Signs for Suicide

- Talking about feeling hopeless, having no reason to live, feeling trapped or in unbearable pain
- Preparations for death and preoccupation with death (e.g. making a will, frequent comments about death)
- Talking about being a burden to others
- Showing rage or talking about seeking revenge
- Seeming anxious or agitated, behaving recklessly
- Increasing use of alcohol or other drugs
- Withdrawing or feeling isolated

Factors That Increase Risk for Suicide

- ❖ Family history of suicide or child maltreatment
- ❖ Previous attempts
- ❖ Mental illness (e.g. major depressive disorder, bipolar disorder)
- ❖ Alcohol or other drug misuse
- ❖ Physical illness and chronic pain
- ❖ Hopelessness
- ❖ Impulsivity

Protective Factors that Reduce the Risk of Suicide

- Connection to care for mental, physical, and substance use disorders
- Access to interventions for seeking help
- Social connection and feeling of belonging
- Support from health care providers
- Problem solving skills and nonviolent ways of handling disputes and emotions
- Cultural and religious beliefs that are against suicide

Suicide Survivors

- A suicide survivor is any individual who has lost a loved one to suicide
- All loss is devastating. Suicide survivors tend to experience even more complicated and overwhelming grief
- More likely to experience subsequent suicidal thoughts themselves due to unbearable pain
- Stigma around suicide can lead to increased isolation for suicide survivors

Powerful Mixed Emotions as a Suicide Survivor

- Shock, disbelief, and numbness
- Anger toward the loved one or toward self
- Guilt; “what if” and self-blame or blame of others
- Despair and sadness
- Confusion and searching for unanswerable questions
- Feelings of rejection
- Denial
- Disconnection

Checking-In

Understanding Suicide

- Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem
- Goal of suicide is often not to end life, but to end pain
- Be aware of common myths and mistaken assumptions about victims of suicide

How to Cope as a Suicide Survivor

- Let go of how you think you SHOULD feel and instead, allow yourself to feel what you ARE feeling
- Focus on caring for yourself—trying to eat, sleep, and maintain a routine when possible
- Seek support- groups, friends & family, spiritual advisor, mental health professional
- Be patient and remember that grief is not a linear process

How to Cope as a Suicide Survivor

- Expect unexpected painful reminders (e.g. song on the radio, photographs, favorite dish or reference)
- Use social media carefully
- Remember that your loved one's life was more than just their suicide
- Plan for how you'll spend holidays, birthdays, suicide anniversaries etc.—anticipate their difficulty and be kind to yourself

How to Cope as a Suicide Survivor

Remember that you can never truly know all that was happening in their mind that brought your loved one to choose suicide. You can be reasonably certain of a few things:

- If they were here, even they could not fully explain why and answer all the questions you have as the survivor
- In their state of mind at the time of death, they could not have fully comprehended the reality of what it meant to take their own life
- They could not have fully appreciated or known the devastating impact their suicide would have on the people in their life.

Moving Toward Radical Acceptance

- ✓ Remember that acceptance does not mean that you like or approve of an outcome. It means you are acknowledging the reality of what is.
- ✓ Turning toward acceptance, acknowledging that we don't like an outcome or a situation and that we cannot change it can bring about a sense of peace.
- ✓ Often acceptance is required over and over again and comes after processing through emotions of sadness, anger, guilt, despair, and confusion.

Some Phrases to Encourage Acceptance

- It's my fault/it's their doctor/spouse/parent's fault → The only person who truly bears responsibility is the victim
- If I had managed to stop this suicide attempt, they would have been okay → I have no way of knowing what would've happened if events had played out differently.
- The person I lost is a horrible person for having done this → The person I lost was probably suffering and that judgment isn't helpful.

Some Phrases to Encourage Acceptance

- The person I lost was a saint who could never do any wrong → The person I lost made a tragic regrettable choice to end their life
- I should have seen this coming → I cannot predict the future, and I did the best I could with the knowledge I had.
- I should have been able to save them → I am only human and can't control the people and events around me
- I can never be happy again → My life is forever changed by loss, but my life will go on.

How to Handle a Student Suicide (APA, 2019)

- Deal with your own feelings first
- Handle the announcement with care: follow the lead of the family in information you share at school; have a standard announcement that is read by teachers in the classroom if you plan to do so
- Discourage gossip and rumors about the reason for suicide.
- Reach out to students who need more support—friends of the student, those in clubs or on teams with the student, those dealing with similar life stressors, those who were teased by the deceased student or teased the deceased student
- **Prevent imitation:** Avoid using graphic language, sensationalizing the death, or explicitly describing how the student killed themselves. Focus on hope, healing, and the value of the person when they were alive.

How to Handle a Student Suicide (APA, 2019)

- Minimize individualized positive attention. Having special events or memorials for students who die by suicide can make them appear as a celebrity. Children and adolescents who are more vulnerable might see this as a way to get noticed. Instead, consider acknowledging the death of the student through suicide awareness events and campaigns.
- Choose words carefully. Avoid the term “committed suicide” and instead use “died by suicide.” Avoid phrases such as “they’re no longer suffering” or “they’re in a better place.”
- Keep the lines of communication open. Make sure the students know where they can turn to for help; consider having ongoing open office hours for student support, even for the remainder of the year and beyond after a student death

References

- https://www.cdc.gov/suicide/pdf/2023_CDC_SuicidePrevention_Infographic.pdf
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- <https://sprc.org/warning-signs-for-suicide/>
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