





Grieving After a Suicide

**You're not alone.
We're here to support.**

There is no timeline for grief. Knowing there are supports and resources available can give hope as you move through your grief.

Grieving after a loved one has died by suicide can feel isolating and often bring about many unanswerable questions. Your response to grief depends on your individual coping skills and can be impacted by multiple individual and external factors.





Internal Factors Include:

-  **Age and Gender:** Inevitably, you will have more experiences with death as you age. Developmental growth occurs naturally and will impact your understanding of death and grieving practices throughout your lifetime. You may experience gender stereotyped responses from others within your community (cultural, religious, or geographical area you live in). These stereotypes can present as outdated expectations for "how you should" grieve. As you begin your grief journey, it is important that you allow yourself to grieve in ways that support your emotional and overall well-being.
-  **Your Cultural Background:** Your ethnicity can play a large role in how you view mental health and suicide (some cultures/groups being more accepting than others). Depending on the acceptance level, this can either encourage or negatively impact your comfort in talking about suicide. By allowing yourself to express what you are feeling and talking openly about your loved one's death, you are engaging in healthy grieving.
-  **Your Religious, Spiritual, or Family Beliefs and Values:** How you were raised and the belief system you have developed throughout the years can impact your view of suicide as well as your comfort to express your grief publicly.
-  **Your Coping Style Prior to the Loss:** The development of coping styles begins in early childhood and develops through your own experiences with stress.

Coping Styles Can Either Be:

- Active (effective) - problem solving, emotion recognition, and processing (accessing support).
- Avoidant (ineffective) - short-term relief that may have negative long-term consequences (substance use, denial, self-blame).

External Factors Include:

-  **Type of Relationship With the Deceased:** Family member, parent, spouse, friend, coworker, neighbour, or acquaintance.
-  **Age of the Deceased:** Youth, young adult, adult, middle aged, or older adult.
-  **Nature of the Relationship You Had:** Close or connected vs. acquaintance; strained or conflictual.
-  **Number of Losses You Have Already Experienced.**





Social

After a loved one dies by suicide, you may find that you and/or your loved one are being judged by others. Often, this judgment comes from a lack of understanding about mental health concerns and historic stigma surrounding death by suicide. As a survivor of suicide loss, you may feel that your grief is not understood by others and that you cannot relate to others like you once did.

Coping Strategies:

Talk with trusted individuals. Allow friends and family to support you, accept invitations to spend time together, but ensure to maintain a healthy balance and be OK with saying “no” when you need to. If you feel you are unable to connect with your natural supports, reach out to professionals for help.



Emotions

You will feel a range of emotions at different levels of intensity and your emotions may differ from what other grievers are experiencing — this is OK. Strong emotions may seem to come from nowhere and may feel uncontrollable or overwhelming at first. Allowing yourself to acknowledge and express your emotions (in a safe way) is how you begin to heal. This process cannot be rushed and for suicide survivors, may take longer. Remember this is your personal process, this is your healing.

Coping Strategies:

Shock, Numbness, Denial

- Give yourself time; these feelings are protecting you in your early days of grief and often go away over time.
- Be honest with yourself and others about your loss.

Sadness

- Give yourself permission to cry.
- Take time to care for yourself.
- Reach out to others: To just be in the same physical space with and/or to talk about your loved one and your sadness.

Anger, Frustration, Irritability

- Be aware of what your emotions are telling you: Take time, step away for a moment.
- Physical exercise: Tense and release large muscle groups.
- Be aware of how you're breathing: Practice deep controlled breathing.

- Release with sound: Scream outdoors or sing loudly (not directly at someone).
- Rip a piece of paper to shreds.

Isolation, Loneliness

- Talk to others (in person).
- Set a plan to connect. If support cannot be found within your personal network of family or friends, you might find that you can relate better to others who share similar experiences.
- Make time to leave your home daily. Accept invitations from friends or family; walk in your community (in areas that others frequent); allow yourself to be around other people, even if you are not interacting directly with them.

Guilt

- *The more you try to internalize guilt the more intense it feels.* Express your guilt through talking, writing or other creative outlets (art, knitting, etc.).

Remind yourself as often as you need:

- You do not have the power to control every situation.
- You would not have chosen this for your loved one.
- All you have done for your loved one.

Longing

- Talk about your loved one to others.
- Mourn: Use music or other memory-linking activities to encourage mourning.
- Connect: Write letters to your loved one who died, talk out loud to them.



Thoughts

Since your loved one's death, you may find that you are getting lost in your thoughts. You may be replaying events in your mind, searching for answers (Why? What if?), in hopes of making sense of what occurred. You may notice at times that you are in disbelief about this new reality and find yourself searching for other reasons for their absence. It is also common that you may forget momentarily that your loved one has died (i.e. when the phone rings, driving, picking up groceries, etc.). This happens because your mind and emotions are still working to process this sudden loss.

Coping Strategies:

- Be gentle with yourself: Don't fault yourself for feeling confused, having trouble with concentration or memory. *Give yourself the time you need.*
- Information seeking: When you are ready, speak to those who have accurate information about your loved one's death (i.e. emergency responders, coroner or medical professionals that may have been involved).



Spiritual

Questioning the value and meaning in life and searching to understand why this death occurred, often happens to survivors of suicide. Depending on the type of relationship you and your loved one shared, you may begin to question your personal identity, “who am I now?”. Thinking about the future may be unsettling and cause feelings of anxiety. Although it may not feel like it right now, trust that you will navigate through your grief journey, renewing your sense of self at a pace that is comfortable for you.

Coping Strategies:

- Explore your belief system through self-reflection and raising questions to others.
- Allow yourself to re-evaluate your worldview and how you see yourself in it.
- Connect to your loved one through grief rituals: planting a tree/flowers, lighting a candle, visiting your loved one's burial site, listening to music or watching a movie that has significant meaning.
- Give yourself the opportunity to think about your future (a day, week, month or year; whichever feels most comfortable for you).



Changes in Your Behaviour

Grief after the death of a loved one by suicide does not only impact your emotions and mind health, it impacts your physical body. Physical responses are the body's warning signs that there is emotional distress. These responses can be used as a map, helping you to better understand what your body is needing at the moment to cope with the strong emotions that come with grief.

Changes in behaviour may also be present; these changes are often recognized by others first. Out of concern, you may find that trusted friends and family talk to you about the changes they are seeing. If you notice this happening, speak openly about how you are feeling (where you are in your grief in that moment) and ask for help. You don't have to grieve on your own.

Coping Strategies:

- Remove access to alcohol or substances from your home to reduce chances of overuse.
- Ask for help with meal planning and cooking; this can support healthy eating practices during your grief.
- Reduce caffeine intake in the evenings and make attempts to rest during your typical sleeping hours.
- Do not try to hold in your tears. Allow yourself to cry and express your sadness when you need to.
- Accept invitations from trusted family and friends. You don't have to interact for long periods of time if you do not want to, but give yourself the opportunity to challenge the desire to withdraw from others.
- Allow yourself time to complete some form of physical activity (this does not have to be intense). This will support you in maintaining your muscle health during your grief and assist in elevating mood.
- Rest when you need to. You are beginning your healing process and this takes a lot of physical and emotional energy.
- Take time in your day to remember to breathe deeply. During grief, our breathing can be impacted. Taking moments in the day to focus on your breath will help you reconnect with yourself and feel grounded in the moment.
- Be aware of your overall medical health. If you are feeling ill, follow up with your primary care provider.

If you are experiencing thoughts of suicide: Call your local 24-hour crisis line, reach out to your trusted supports, mental health professionals in your community, or your primary physician.

We're a part of your story. Because everyone needs support.



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