

A Handbook for the Survivors of Suicide

Grieving is as natural as
Crying when you are hurt,
Sleeping when you are tired,
Eating when you are hungry, or
Sneezing when your nose itches.

It is nature's way of healing

A broken heart. -Unknown

This survivor to survivor publication was compiled by the HOPES organization (Helping Others Prevent and Educate about Suicide), which spearheaded suicide prevention efforts in Wisconsin from 1998-2015. HOPES was started around a kitchen table by five survivors of suicide that wanted to make a difference for people in Wisconsin.

Each spring they hosted a Walk for Awareness in Madison and sponsored a quilt project called, "the Many Faces of Suicide." Their website offered resources for survivors of suicide, including this handbook, an online memorial, and a directory of support groups across Wisconsin.

Those of us at HOPES are very sorry to hear about your loss. We hope this information will help you on your journey of grief. We believe that grief shared is grief diminished.

People that have lost someone to suicide are referred to as survivors of suicide. As survivors of a family member or friend's suicide we have faced some of the same challenges and some of the questions you are now facing. We want to share with you some thoughts and ideas that have been helpful for us.

It is important to remember that you must do what is right for you and your family. This just gives you a different perspective.

Especially helpful is an article written by the SA/VE organization giving you ideas about how to talk to children about suicide.

The rest of this booklet is writings and information that we have found to be helpful. They are not ours alone but have come from a variety of places that may be helpful to you in the future. We have left all the sources on to give them the credit they deserve, but also as resources as you work through your grief. This is probably more information than you need or want right now.

Take things one day at a time, one hour at a time or even one minute at a time. Grieving takes a lot of energy. Be kind to yourself and let others help you.

Your fellow survivors at HOPES

Explaining Suicide to Children

"What should I tell the children?" A question often asked after the suicide of a loved one.

The answer - the truth.

Many people still believe it is best to shield children from the truth, that somehow this will protect them. More often than not, the opposite is true. Misleading children, evading the truth, or telling falsehoods to them about how someone died can do much more harm than good; if they happen to hear the truth from someone else, their trust in you can be difficult to regain. Not knowing can be terrifying and hurtful. We've always been told that "honesty is the best policy" and just because the subject is suicide, that doesn't mean this time is any different.

What children might be feeling after losing someone they love to suicide:

1. Abandoned - that the person who died didn't love them.
2. Feel the death is their fault - if they would have loved the person more or behaved differently.
3. Afraid that they will die too.
4. Worried that someone else they love will die or worry about who will take care of them.
5. Guilt - because they wished or thought of the person's death.
6. Sad.
7. Embarrassed - to see other people or to go back to school.
8. Confused.
9. Angry - with the person who died, at God, at everyone.
10. Lonely.
11. Denial - pretend like nothing happened.
12. Numb - can't feel anything.
13. Wish it would all just go away.

Children and adolescents may have a multitude of feelings happening at the same time or simply may not feel anything at all. Whatever they are feeling, the important thing to remember is that they understand it is okay; that whatever those feel-

ings are, they have permission to let them out. If they want to keep them to themselves for a while, that's okay too.

How do we explain suicide to children or young people? It may seem impossible and too complex to even try, but that's exactly what we must do - try! Their age will be a factor in how much they can understand and how much information you give them. Some children will be content with an answer consisting of one or two sentences; others might have continuous questions, which they should be allowed to ask and to have answered.

After children learn that the death was by suicide, one of their first questions might be, "What is suicide?" Explain that people die in different ways - some die from cancer, from heart attacks, some from car accidents, and that suicide means that a person did it to him or herself. If they ask how, once again it will be difficult, but be honest.

Some examples of explaining why suicide happens might be:

"He had an illness in his brain (or mind) and he died."

"His brain got very sick and he died."

"The brain is an organ of the body just like the heart, liver and kidneys. Sometimes it can get sick, just like other organs."

"She had an illness called depression and it caused her to die."

(If someone the child knows, or the child herself, is being treated for depression, it's critical to stress that only some people die from depression, not everyone that has depression. And that there are many options for getting help, e.g. medication, psychotherapy or a combination of both.)

A more detailed explanation might be:

"Our thoughts and feelings come from our brain, and sometimes a person's brain can get very sick - the sickness can cause a person to feel very badly inside. It also makes a person's thoughts get all jumbled and mixed up, so he can't think clearly. Some people can't think of any other way of stopping the hurt they feel inside. They don't understand that they don't have to feel that way, that they can get help."

(It's important to note that there are people who were getting help for their depression and died anyway. Just as in other illnesses, a person can receive the best medical treatment and still not survive. This can also be the case with depression. If this is what occurred in your family, children and adolescents can usually understand the analogy above when it is explained to them.)

Children need to know that the person who died loved them, but that because of the illness, the person may have been unable to convey that to them or think about how the children would feel after the loved one's death. They need to know that the suicide was not their fault, and that nothing they said or did or didn't say or do, caused the death.

Some children might ask questions related to the morals of suicide - good/bad, right/wrong. It is best to steer clear of this, if possible. Suicide is none of these - it is something that happens when pain exceeds resources for coping with that pain.

Whatever approach is taken when explaining suicide to children, they need to know they can talk about it and ask questions whenever they feel the need, to know that there are people there who will listen. They need to know that they won't always feel the way they do now, that things will get better, and that they will be loved and taken care of no matter what.

Suggested Reading:

Bart Speaks Out: Breaking the Silence on Suicide by Linda Goldman, M.S.

Child Survivors of Suicide: A Guidebook for Those Who Care For Them by Rebecca Parkin with Karen Dunne-Maxim

When Dinosaurs Die - A Guide to Understanding Death by Laurie Krasny Brown & Marc Brown

The Grieving Child: A Parent's Guide by Helen Fitzgerald

Talking About Death: A Dialogue between Parent & Child by Earl A. Grollman

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SAVE - Suicide Awareness Voices of Education

Guidelines for Immediate Help From Close Friends in the Aftermath of a Suicide

Everyone handles grief in his own way. It is a very personal thing. A mother, a father, a brother or sister, grandparents, aunts, uncles, friends and neighbors. Each will grieve individually. It is helpful to keep this in mind.

When there is a death of a loved one by suicide, be aware that there will be a depth and range of feelings. It is important to honor and respect the needs of the survivors in the days, weeks and months following the suicide. Often you may feel helpless in this situation.

This list may prove to be helpful to you in understanding those things which may be comforting and those things which may not be helpful to the family. Some of these suggestions pertain to immediate needs—others are suggestions for the following weeks and months.

DO:

- Respond honestly to questions asked by the family. You don't need to answer more than asked. If they want to know more, they will ask later. Too much information too soon can feel hurtful.
- Surround them with as much love and understanding as you can.
- Give them some private time. Be there, but don't smother them.
- Show love, not control. If you make a person dependent upon you, you might both end up in a painful position.
- Let them talk. Most of the time they just need to hear out loud what is going on inside their heads. They usually aren't seeking advice.
- Encourage that any and all decisions be made by the family together.
- Expect that they will become tired very easily. Grieving is hard work.
- Let them decide what they are ready for. Offer, but let them decide themselves.
- Get the names and phone numbers of anyone on the scene: police, medical examiners, etc. (anyone who has been involved). The family may want to ask questions later.
- Keep a list of phone calls, visitors and people who bring food.
- Offer to make calls to people they wish to be notified. *Keep the mail straight. Help with errands.
- Keep track of bills, cards, newspaper notices, etc.
- Keep a list of medication administered (i.e., Sandy - aspirin 2x,1 PM)
- Offer to help with documentation needed by the insurance company. (They generally require a photocopy of the death certificate, etc.)
- Give special attention to the other members of the family - at the funeral and in the months to come.
- Allow them to express as much grief as they are feeling at the moment and are willing to share.
- Allow them to talk about the special endearing qualities of the loved one they have lost.

DON'T:

- Assume you know best.
- Tell the person you "know how they feel", if you don't. *Make comparisons, i.e., "I know how you feel because my Mother, Father, etc. died").
- Tell them what to feel. Allow them to feel what they are feeling, when they are feeling it.
- Try to explain or change those feelings so that you are more comfortable, (i.e., pain, anger).
- Treat them as though they don't have sense enough to make decisions or understand what they are being told.
- Preach to them. If religion plays an important part in their lives, they will draw strength from it when they need it.
- Tell them it is God's will.
- Tell the person to call you if they need anything, anytime - unless you are prepared for a 3:00 AM phone call.
- Try pushing anything at them that will help to quiet them, such as drinks, medications, etc. If medication is necessary, let a trained person do it.
- Ask about things such as running errands, laundry, etc. JUST DO IT.
- Try to stop them from talking about their loved one. *Remove tasks, responsibilities or activities from them without their permission. They may wish to remain involved in those things which they feel they can handle.
- Stop seeing them.
- Tell them what you would do or how you would feel if you were them. YOU'RE NOT.
- Make the loved one's name taboo. If no one speaks his/her name, it feels as though everyone wants to forget the person existed.
- Alter his/her room in any way. Do not pick up clothes or clean the room. When the family is ready, they will take care of this in their own way or ask for help, if needed.
- Let your own sense of helplessness keep you from reaching out to a bereaved family.
- Try to find something positive (i.e., a moral lesson, closer family ties, etc.) about the person's death.
- Make any comments which in any way suggest that the care at home, or in the hospital emergency room, or wherever, was inadequate. (Families are plagued by feelings of doubt and guilt without any help from others).

Permit Me

Permit me if you will, if I don't join the fun
And don't play just now
While you drive your drive
And live your life
Take your vacation
Marry your love
Birth your babe
I don't want to play just now
I've something in my eye
It's a tear
I've just lost my big brother
He was just here
Let me tell you about him if you will
He had just come back
He was gone awhile
He had just come back and so had I
He told me that he loved me
And you know? I know he did
After so many years
He came back to see me one more time
Go and do your work
Write your report
And play your play
I don't want to play just now
I will again, but you go on without me for now
For now just do without me a moment, won't you?
While I take my break
But you, you go and construct your bridge
And put in your bid
And feed your dog and bake your cake

I need to pause and think and cry
Permit me a moment
I don't want to play just now
I need to find out and manage and remember
To understand something I cannot just yet
And find my way with my family
We don't want to play just now
My big brother is gone in too quick a time
So permit me if you will to take a moment and breathe and
sigh and cry
I don't want you to see me like this right now
I want to pound my fist like a little boy
Because I can't have my way just now
And stamp my feet and shake my hand
And demand
I want my big brother back, now!
He was always my big brother, my hero
And he still is as he always will be
But I don't want to play just now
Because I miss his laugh, his love, his eye, his big heart
Big and tough on the outside; soft and warm on the inside
I've been here and there and met a lot of folk
In places far, far from here, both hot and cold
And I have never met another quite like him
No not quite like him, no not even close to come to think of it
as I sit here and gaze
No, go on, it's ok, I'm alright
I don't want to play just now if you don't mind
I'm thinking of his call, his joke, his hug, his voice
I don't want to play just now
This inside ache starting from my heart and going right down
into my gut right here
Is making me pause and stop and rest and see that

I miss my big brother
I'm too busy to play just now
I'm listening to his voice
I'm hearing his laughter covering up his tears
I'm too sad to play just now
I reached out my hand just now when he got back
But it wasn't far enough
I wanted to stretch my fingers out just a little bit more and
hold onto him
And pull him onto my side to stay forever right here
For another big brother hug, another joke, to feel his big
brother arm around me,
To rub my head and teach me more than he already had over
the years
You know something I've learned? Do you wanna know?
Come closer, I'll tell you something I've discovered, it's a
secret so don't tell anyone
Shhhhh, be quiet for just a moment and I'll tell you how it is
When I close my eyes I can snap my fingers and he's back
here alive again
Don't you wish you could do that?
Bring him here again
Standing and joking and loving right before me
But I open my eyes and see that it doesn't work that way
So excuse me if you will, you do your thing, go on, and go
ahead, I'll be right there
But for now, just permit me a moment if you will
This will take not too long, but for now, just now
I don't want to play just now

Greg Converse
April 26, 2002

People Say the Darndest Things

For some reason, reacting to a suicide and making comments on it brings out the worst in some people. While only those who are either practiced or lucky seem to make comments that are helpful, the rest of us may blunder through with words spilling from our lips before our brain has thought them through. I know that I fell into the second category before I had a suicide loss and still find myself there occasionally.

There can be a period of numbness immediately following the death when the mind remembers nothing. Perhaps that is a blessing. Later, survivors are often able to remember, with clarity, things that either helped or hurt them. They may latch on to these words and keep them forever. That means they can be forever thankful or forever non forgiving. When asked to recall helpful or non- helpful comments, most survivors can come up with a few that are stuck in their minds.

It is useful for a survivor to be aware that their loss brings vulnerability and to learn the skill of anticipation and practiced answers. This is an area where we help each other and there is true value in a support group.

From the first time that someone asks, "Why?" or "What Happened?" survivors are called upon to answer what may be unanswerable. Our answer may be one of defensiveness or despair. The question can come at us so often that we may become sarcastic or complacent. The need that others have to know doesn't always match our ability to tell. We do get to choose how brief or detailed we are in our replies. With even the most intrusive questioning it may not occur to us that the most honest answer might be, "I don't know" or "I don't care to talk about it now".

My first awareness of insensitivity came almost immediately after Bill's death. The coroner wisely advised me that I should get my children home from grade school so I could take charge of telling them of their father's death. It was a difficult assignment but I agreed I should be the one to make the call. When I called the school, the principal answered. Calmly, I stated that I needed to have the children home from school, recited their room numbers, and said I was sending someone to pick them up. "May I ask why?" was the first question. "There has been a death in the family" I replied. "May I ask who?" was the next question. The tough answer came out for the first time, "It was their father". The next question left me stunned and unprepared. "May I ask how?"

Without an answer, I hung up the phone. In looking back, I suppose the woman was not just curious but needed to fill out some kind of form to explain a student's partial absence. The part of the encounter that made it more difficult was not that I was caught off guard, it was the fact that for the remaining eight years that the children attended the school, the woman never spoke to me nor did I ever feel comfortable approaching her. My own sensitivity led me to believe that it would have gone differently if it had not been a suicide death.

Words of shock, dismay, despair and comfort were all intermingled in the first few hours, days, weeks. Some words reverberated as though they were shouted in an echo chamber. There were other times I felt that I saw people's mouths moving but had no idea what they were actually saying. There were those who had nothing to say. They simply stood there as their mere presence spoke volumes. Their hugs or tears were easily understood.

I made a decision not to have a formal visitation thinking it would be awkward and difficult. No one suggested any other plan at the time. In looking back my thoughts about that decision have changed. Therefore, following the funeral service friends and relatives lined up to speak to me. I remember looking down that row and seeing the people in our life waiting to comfort me. As folks passed by one by one I got stuck on the phrase that was used over and over again. With affirmation it was repeated, "Hang in There". I could not imagine people being so insensitive as to offer up those words when only two days before I had found my husband hanging. It was a common statement that had now taken on new meaning for me. My sensitivity was surfacing again.

As cards and letters arrived, I sorted through, looking for words of comfort. I dismissed words that didn't make sense or seemed inappropriate. I know I could reread those messages today and feel very differently about them.

About six weeks after Bill's death an evening seminar was advertised in the newspaper. The subject was Grief. Mustering the courage to check it out, I arrived to find that I was the only one in attendance. It made me think that I might be the only one grieving. The two gentlemen who were presenting were quite cordial as they shared their material and then sat with me to listen to my story. It was healing to be able to find a new audience who would listen to my rambling version of what had happened. I was able to share my feelings, reactions and questions. When I finished, I heard some of the first words that made sense to me and seemed well thought

out at the time. "I am so sorry you have lost your husband. There are many ways to die. Some people die when their kidneys fail, some when their hearts fail, some when their lungs fail, some in tragic accidents. It is sad that Bill died when his emotional system failed." At that moment I found those words making sense. There was something about the statement that normalized Bill's death for me. I didn't feel vulnerable, I felt comforted. It was all part of a process of putting pieces together. Making sense of the senseless.

As time passed many statements and questions would make me shudder and retest my vulnerability. "How do you feel about Bill committing murder on himself?" "I think that Bill just thought he had a good idea. He was always an idea man." "Are your kids OK or are they a little nuts?" "Bill selecting Thanksgiving time to kill himself really ruined our holiday." "How do you live with the guilt?" Every survivor can recite a number of these types of comments in their own personal experience.

It may not seem right that a suicide has to bring with it a heightened sense of rawness and sensitivity. It may not seem fair that even our method of communication is shaken. It may make us angry that everyone cannot be aware of our plight and comfort us with the right words. The reality is that we are plunged into the task of being a survivor in an imperfect world. Every phrase is not always composed with our loss in mind. People's lives go on without always waiting for us to catch up.

However, we do get to sort and sift things that are said. Taking what is helpful and dismissing what hurts. We do get to try to read, discuss and learn from other survivors. We do get to move away from rawness and develop skills in talking about a suicide loss.

This loss requires of us an extra measure of patience. Patience with the insensitivity of others who may say the darnedest things. Patience with our own sensitivity. Patience with the process of surviving. It is a comfort to look back and know that the process works!

Jeanne Adams

April 2, 2002

Volunteer - Survivors of Suicide

Mental Health Center of Dane County Madison, WI

I Don't Know Why...

I don't know why.

I'll never know why.

I don't have to know why. I don't like it.

I don't have to like it. What I do have to do is make a choice about living.

What I want to do is accept it and go on living. The choice is mine.

I can go on living, valuing every moment in a way I never did before, or I can be destroyed by it and, in turn, destroy others. I thought I was immortal.

That my family and my children were immortal too. That tragedy happened only to others.

But I know now that life is tenuous.

So I am choosing to go on living, making the most of the time I have, valuing my family and friends in a way never possible before.

Iris M. Bolton

From *My Son ...My Son...*

A Guide to After Death, Loss or Suicide

Beyond Surviving

Here are some suggestions from those who have lived through and beyond the death of a loved one.

1. Know you can survive. You may not think so, but you can.
2. Struggle with "why" it happened until you no longer need to know "why" or until you are satisfied with partial answers.
3. Know you may feel overwhelmed by the intensity of your feelings, but all your feelings are normal.
4. Anger, guilt, confusion, forgetfulness are common responses. You are not crazy - you are in mourning.
5. Be aware you may feel appropriate anger at the person, at the world, at God, at yourself. It's okay to express it.
6. You may feel guilty for what you think you did or did not do. Guilt can turn into regret through forgiveness.
7. Having suicidal thoughts is common. It does not mean that you will act on those thoughts.
8. Remember to take one moment or one day at a time.
9. Find a good listener with whom to share. Call someone if you need to talk.
10. Don't be afraid to cry. Tears are healing.
11. Give yourself time to heal.
12. Remember, the choice was not yours. No one is the sole influence in another's life.
13. Expect setbacks. If emotions return like a tidal wave, you may only be experiencing a remnant of grief, an unfinished piece.
14. Try to put off major decisions.
15. Give yourself permission to get professional help.
16. Be aware of the pain of your family and friends.
17. Be patient with yourself and with others who may not understand.
18. Set your own limits and learn to say no.
19. Steer clear of people who want to tell you what or how to feel.
20. Know that there are support groups that can be helpful, such as Compassionate Friends. If not, ask a professional to help start one.
21. Call on your personal faith to help you through.
22. It is common to experience physical reactions to your grief, such as headaches, loss of appetite, inability to sleep.
23. The willingness to laugh with others and at yourself is healing.
24. Wear out your questions, anger, guilt or other feelings until you can let them go. Letting go doesn't mean forgetting.
25. Know that you will never be the same again, but you can survive and even go beyond just surviving.

Iris M. Bolton

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Grief and the Mourning Process

THE PHASES OF GRIEF

Many people refer to the "stages" or "phases" of grief. It may be helpful to be aware of these identified phases or common aspects of grief. It is also important to know there is no right or wrong way to grieve. You may go back and forth between phases, experience more than one at a time, or even skip one all together. All feelings are normal, even if they seem "crazy".

- Shock is the first stage of numbness, disbelief and unreality.
- Denial is thoughts or words such as, "I don't believe it -- It can't be!"
- Bargaining involves making promises such as, "I'll be so good if only I can awaken to find this hasn't happened" or "I'll do all the right things if only..."
- Guilt is a hard stage and difficult to deal with alone. This is a normal feeling characterized by statements such as, "If only I had ... If only I had not..." done or said or thought something. Guilt may ultimately be resolved by understanding that all of us are human beings who give the best and worst of ourselves to others. What they do with what we give is their responsibility.
- Anger is another very difficult phase, but it may seem necessary in order to face reality and get beyond the loss. We all must heal in our own way and anger is a normal stage along the way. However, you may feel guilty because you are angry at the person who died or because your life is continuing while his or hers is not. If you don't feel anger, don't manufacture it!
- Depression may come and go and be different each time in length and/or intensity. Give yourself time to heal.
- Resignation means you finally believe the reality of the death.
- Acceptance and Hope come when you finally understand that you will never be the same, but you can go on to have meaning and purpose in your life.

FOUR "TASKS" OF GRIEF

Here are four steps toward surviving tragedy and loss:

- Tell the story: Talk about what has happened until it becomes real. Talk to caring family and friends, attend a support group, begin individual work with a mental health

professional, but find a way to speak about the person who died and how the death has impacted your life and family. Tell the story until you don't need to tell it anymore. Chances are, you will be close to acceptance at that point.

- Express the Emotions: Grief is filled with conflicting tidal waves of emotion. Just when you think you've accepted the death, disbelief may sweep over you again. You may feel intense anger along with equally intense feelings of love and loss. Or, in the midst of crying about the person's death, a sense of unreality may surface again. No matter what the range of emotions, all are to be expected during grief. It is crucial to get the emotions outside of yourself. "Stuffed" feelings can build and build and become overwhelming. Scream, cry, write, draw, punch a punching bag, tell an empathetic someone, take a walk, do SOMETHING to express what you feel.
- Make Meaning, from the Loss: Nothing can make what has happened "okay". Life is turned upside down and changed forever. However, you can determine that something good and reasonable will come out of the unreasonable tragedy that you are experiencing. At some point, you may be able to accept the reality that your loved one's entire life was not defined by his or her last decision - to die. Nothing can take away the good things the person accomplished. When you are ready, you may reach out to others with similar experiences... or set up a scholarship or other appropriate memorial in the person's name ... or work in some capacity to better the lives of others. There are many, many ways to make meaning from tragedy.
- Transition from the Physical Presence of the Person to the New Relationship: while missing the physical presence of a loved one in our lives may continue well into the future, it is possible to transition into acceptance of the person's non-physical presence. What can that relationship be? For some, it is memories and love carried in our hearts. No one can take away our memories and, as long as we treasure love for the person who has died, they are not forgotten. The new relationship may be spiritual or in some other way in keeping with religious beliefs.

SUICIDE IS A PERMANENT SOLUTION TO A TEMPORARY PROBLEM!

Distributed by The Link Counseling Center's National Resource Center for Suicide Prevention and Aftercare 348 Mt. Vernon Highway, N.E., Atlanta, GA 30328 404-256-9797

Dear Friends,

We have experienced a loss that is devastating to us. It will take time, perhaps years, for us to work through the grief that we are having because of this loss.

We will cry more than usual for some time. Our tears are not a sign of weakness or a lack of hope or faith. They are the symbols of the depth of our loss and the sign that we are recovering

We may become angry without there seeming to be a reason for it. Our emotions are all heightened by the stress of grief. Please be forgiving if we seem irrational at times.

We need your understanding and your presence more than anything else. If you don't know what to say, just touch us or give us a hug to let us know you care. Please don't wait for us to call you. We are often too tired to even think of reaching out for the help we need.

Don't allow us to withdraw from you. We need you more than ever during the next year or two.

Pray for us only if your prayer is not an order for us to make you feel better. Our faith is not an excuse from the process of grief.

If you, by chance, have had an experience of loss that seems anything like ours, please share it with us. You will not make us feel worse.

This loss is the worst thing that could happen to us. But we will get through it and we will live again. We will not always feel as we do now. We will laugh again.

Thank you for caring about us. Your concern is a gift we will always treasure.

Sincerely,

This letter was taken from the book, "Life after Loss" by Bob Deits

You may want to send it out to your friends and family.

It's Okay

IT'S OKAY TO GRIEVE: The death of a loved one is a reluctant and drastic amputation, without any anesthesia. The pain cannot be described, and no scale can measure the loss. We despise the truth that the death cannot be reversed, and that somehow our dear one returned. Such hurt!! It's okay to grieve.

IT'S OKAY TO CRY: Tears release the flood of sorrow, of missing and of love. Tears relieve the brute force of hurting, enabling us to "level off" and continue our cruise along the stream of life. It's okay to cry.

IT'S OKAY TO HEAL: We do not need to "prove" we loved him or her. As the months pass, we are slowly able to move around with less outward grieving each day. We need not feel "guilty", for this is not an indication that we love less. It means that, although we don't like it, we are learning to accept death. It's a healthy sign of healing. It's okay to heal.

IT'S OKAY TO LAUGH: Laughter is not a sign of "less" grief. Laughter is not a sign of "less" love. It's a sign that many of our thoughts and memories are happy ones. It's a sign that we know our memories are happy ones. It's a sign that we know our dear one would have us laugh again. It's okay to laugh.

Grief—If We Avoid It, Will It Go Away?

Grief is as old as mankind but is one of the most neglected of human problems. As we become aware of this neglect, we come to realize the enormous cost that it has been to the individual, to the families and to society, in terms of pain and suffering because we have neglected the healing of grief.

Essential to a grieving person is to have at least one person who will allow them, give them permission to grieve. Some people can turn to a friend or to a family member. Some find a support group that will allow one to be the way one needs to be at the present as they work through their grief.

Dealing appropriately with grief is important in helping to preserve healthy individuals and nurturing families, to avoid destroying bodies and their psyche, their marriages and their relationships.

You can postpone grief but you cannot avoid it. As other stresses come along, one becomes less able to cope if one has other unresolved grief.

It requires a great deal of energy to avoid grief and robs one of energy for creative expression in relating to other people and in living a fulfilling life. It limits one's life potential.

Suppressing grief keeps one in a continual state of stress and shock, unable to move from it. Our body feels the effects of it in ailments. Our emotional life suffers. Our spiritual life suffers. We say that the person is "stuck in grief".

When a person faces his grief, allows his feeling to come, speaks of his grief, allows its expression, it is then that the focus is to move from death and dying and to promote life and living.

World Wide Web Site: <http://www.save.org>

Why We Grieve Differently

by Jinny Tesik, M.A.

We accept without question uniqueness in the physical world.....fingerprints, snowflakes, etc. But we often refuse that same reality in our emotional world. This understanding is needed, especially in the grieving process.

No two people will ever grieve the same way, with the same intensity or for the same duration.

It is important to understand this basic truth. Only then can we accept our own manner of grieving and be sensitive to another's response to loss. Only then are we able to seek out the nature of support we need for our own personalized journey back to wholeness and be able to help others on their own journey.

Not understanding the individuality of grief could complicate and delay whatever grief we might experience from our own loss. It could also influence us, should we attempt to judge the grieving of others - even those we might most want to help.

Each of us is a unique combination of diverse past experiences. We each have a different personality, style, various way of coping with stress situations, and our own attitudes influence how we accept the circumstances around us. We are also affected by the role and relationship that each person in a family system had with the departed, by circumstances surrounding the death and by influences in the present.

PAST EXPERIENCE...Past experiences from childhood on, have a great impact on how we are able to handle loss in the present.

What other losses have we faced in our childhood, adolescence, adulthood? How frightening were these experiences? Was there good support? Were feelings allowed to be expressed in a secure environment? Has there been a chance to recover and heal from these earlier losses?

What other life stresses have been going on prior to this recent loss? Has there been a move to a new area? Were there financial difficulties, problems or illness with another member of the family or with ourselves?

What has our previous mental health history been like? Have we had bouts with depression? Have we harbored suicidal thoughts? Have we experienced a nervous breakdown? Have we been treated with medication or been hospitalized?

How has our family cultural influences conditioned us to respond to loss and the emotions of grief (stoic father, emotional mother, etc.)?

RELATIONSHIP WITH THE DECEASED...No outsider is able to determine the special bond that connects two people, regardless of the relationship, role or length of time the relationship has been in existence.

Our relationship with the deceased has a great deal to do with the intensity and duration of our grief.

What was that relationship? Was the deceased a spouse? A child? A parent? A friend? A sibling?

How strong was the attachment to the deceased? Was it a close, dependent relationship, or intermittent and independent? What was the degree of ambivalence (the love/hate balance) in that relationship?

It is not only the person, but also the role that person played in our life which is lost.

How major was that role? Was that person the sole breadwinner, the driver, the handler of financial matters? The only one who could fix a decent dinner? Was that person a main emotional support, an only friend? How dependent were we on the role that person filled?

CIRCUMSTANCES SURROUNDING THE DEATH...The circumstances surrounding the death; i.e., how the death occurred, are extremely important in determining how we are going to come to an acceptance of the loss.

Was the loss in keeping with the laws of Nature as when a person succumbs to old age? Or was order thrown into chaos, as when a parent lives to see a child die?

What warnings were there that there would be a loss? Was there time to prepare, time to gradually come to terms with the inevitable? Or did death come so suddenly that there was no anticipation of its arrival?

Do we feel that this death could have been prevented or forestalled? How much responsibility am I taking for this death?

Do we feel that the deceased accomplished what he or she was meant to fulfill in this lifetime? Was their life full and rewarding? How much was left unsaid or undone between ourselves and the deceased? Does the extent of unfinished business foster a feeling of guilt?

INFLUENCES IN THE PRESENT...We have looked at the past,

at the relationship, and how the loss occurred. Now we see how the influences in the present can impact how we are finally going to come to terms with a current loss.

Age and sex are important factors.

Are we young enough and resilient enough to bounce back? Are we old enough and wise enough to accept the loss and to grow with the experience? Can our life be rebuilt again? What opportunities does life offer now? Is health a problem?

What are the secondary losses that are the result of this death? Loss of income? Home? Family breakup? What other stresses or crises are present?

Our personality, present stability of mental health, and coping behavior play a significant role in our response to the loss.

What kind of role expectations do we have for ourselves? What are those imposed by friends, relatives and others? Are we expected to be the "strong one" or is it alright for us to break down and have someone else take care of us? Are we going to try to assume an unrealistic attempt to satisfy everyone's expectations, or are we going to withdraw from the entire situation?

What is there in our social, cultural and ethnic backgrounds that give us strength and comfort? What role do rituals play in our recovery? Do our religious or philosophical beliefs bring comfort or add sorrow and guilt? What kind of social support is there in our lives during this emotional upheaval?

CONCLUSION...When a person who is a part of our life dies, understanding the uniqueness of this loss can guide us in finding the support we will need and to recognize when help should come from outside family or friends.

When the loss is experienced by someone we would like to help or by someone under our care, this same understanding is essential. Thus we can guard against a temptation to compare or to judge their grief responses to our own. The awareness of those factors which affect the manner, intensity and duration of grief, should enable us to guide the grieving person in seeking those forms of support suggested by the nature of their loss and the unique way it affects them.

For information on Suicide Survivors support group in your area call The American Association of Suicidology.

1-202-237-2280

Asking the Question Why?

Asking "why did my loved one do this" is the question that haunts most survivors of suicide. The outside world demands to know from us, and we don't know ourselves. For some of us there were definite clues that our loved ones were depressed or that something was wrong. We either knew that they were in pain and did not know the extent of it, or we did know and tried everything we knew to get help for them. For others the suicide was completely out of character. Many people who end their lives are extremely good actors and actresses. They only allow us to see what they want us to see. In either instance, for many, we never thought it could really happen to us, to our loved ones, and to our families. It doesn't make sense.

So we search, trying to put the pieces of the puzzle together. Hindsight is 20/20, and sometimes we find bits and pieces, clues to what might have happened to allow our loved ones to lose hope and give up on life. We often want a specific reason, a direct cause and effect. If we can understand exactly why our loved ones ended their lives, maybe we can keep it from happening again to someone else we love.

For years I struggled with this question myself, following the suicide of my boyfriend. The best explanation was described to me by Iris Bolton, the Executive Director of The Link Counseling Center in Atlanta, GA and a survivor of her son's suicide. Iris went to Emory University and received a Masters in Suicidology in an attempt to answer this question for herself. She did not find it. Later, Iris found as close to an answer as she will have. It did not come from a Doctor, Professor, or a Therapist. It came from another mother who had lost her son by suicide. This is how it was described to me, and I share it with you.

THE CUP ANALOGY

There is a cup of water sitting on a table. It is so full, it is rounded at the top. One or two drops of water are added to the cup and it spills over. What caused the water to spill? We want to blame the last one or two drops, but in an empty cup it would not spill. It was not the water in the cup prior to the drops being added, because if left alone, it would not have spilled. It was a combination of all the drops of water in the cup that came before and the last one or two drops that caused the water to spill.

In a person's life, the water in the cup is symbolic of all the hurt, pain, shame, humiliation, and loss not dealt with along

the way. The last couple of drops symbolize the "trigger events", "the last straw", the event or situation that preceded the final act of taking one's own life. Often we want to blame the trigger event, but this does not make sense to us. Like the water, these events all by themselves would not cause someone to end their life. It is the combination of everything in that person's life not dealt with and the last one or two things that caused our loved ones to lose hope.

For us, we must find a way to pour out the water along the way. This may be through talking it out, writing it out, sometimes yelling it out, whatever works for you. We must learn to deal with our pain in a way our loved ones could not.

This analogy does not give us the concrete answer many of us are looking for, but I know it made sense for me and has been helpful for many survivors. It allowed me to let go of the search for "why", and to find a different way of dealing with my pain.

Tracy T. Dean, M.S National Resource Center for
Suicide Prevention and Aftercare

How Support Groups Can Be Beneficial:

Verbalizing thoughts and emotions helps to connect people with their feelings (no matter how "crazy" those feelings seem.)

A forum is provided for airing grief and seeking direction and support.

Grieving persons learn that all of us have resources within for helping ourselves and others.

Members have the opportunity to become friends with people who have suffered similar losses. This reverses the tendency toward isolation and provides a sense of belonging and community.

It is a relief to learn that we are not going crazy, we are just grieving. These feelings, no matter what they are, are normal. It may be the only place where survivors feel understood. There, true feelings of anger and/or guilt can be expressed without judgment.

It helps to realize that no one is alone in grief.

The longer-bereaved survivors can be models of hope.

There is a sense of doing something positive about grief. Grief can't be ignored.

This is a place to meet people who truly care about you. Everyone needs hugs and a support group is a good place to get them.

The self-esteem of a grieving person can be very low. Studies show that based on a scale of 100, an average person's self-esteem is in the 70's, whereas a grieving person's self-esteem ranks in the teens. Self-esteem is enhanced by being able to help others, which happens in support groups. By providing support and suggestions for coping, you receive a sense that you are of value to others. Other people in the group provide assurances that they too have faced similar grief experiences and yet survived.

Being able to speak to others about problems without encountering rejection reinforces feelings of self-worth. Support groups provide the opportunity to volunteer. Grieving persons feel worthwhile when they realize that even though they are grieving they can help. The process of learning to be of help to another person can develop self-esteem and self-confidence.

(Reprinted from: LEGACY, Ogden/Layton, Utah, September, 1994)

When Your Child Died by Suicide

by Iris Al. Bolton

On February 19, 1977, our 22-year-old son, Mitch, shot himself in his bedroom of our home with two revolvers. He was determined not to fail in the last act of his life. Apparently, he felt he had failed to reach the goals of perfection he set up for himself: I believe he saw death as a release from failure, loneliness, and hopelessness.

The afternoon of Mitch's death, a psychotherapist came to our home and what he said had a profound effect on me personally. The first thing he advised was to use the upcoming days and weeks to bring our family closer in a way that is not possible under normal circumstances. He said, "Never close the door to your children or make decisions without including them." He suggested we be honest with each other, share our feelings (both positive and negative) about Mitch. He also said, "There is a gift in his death if you can find it." My husband, Jack, heard his words and said they had no meaning for him. But I knew instantly that someday I would find the meaning of his words and I have. I knew also that Jack and I would grieve differently and that difference must be honored and accepted.

Ultimately, you must go through your grief alone, but it can bring you and other family members closer if you choose to do part of it together. It is easy and natural to blame yourself, your spouse, or anyone else at this time, but to do so can be destructive and helps no one. Be careful not to blame in an effort to explain why this happened. It is hard to help other children with their pain when your own is so enormous. But they need to know that it wasn't their fault, and it wasn't anything that they said or didn't say to the sibling that caused his death.

In our own family, we included our children and Mitch's girlfriend in immediate decisions that needed to be made. We talked about Mitch's good qualities and also about the times he overwhelmed us with his antics or his selfishness. Remembering him realistically helped us all and our family togetherness gave us much needed nurturing and support at that time.

It is important to experience the pain and get it out. People release their emotions in different ways. Crying is helpful and necessary. Sometimes it is helpful to talk about how you feel to your spouse or a friend. The world we live in does not support your hurting. Well-meaning friends may offer you a drink or a tranquilizer and say, "Don't feel bad, take a pill... have a drink." I believe that in this tragedy, as in so many others, you have to hurt and allow yourself to hurt, without judgment, in order to someday get beyond the intensity of the pain. I believe I will not get beyond it until I go right straight through it. There is no way to go around, over, or under it. To be with your feelings, to make no apologies for your emotions, is a very necessary part of the process. Then, one day, you will know that your healing has begun.

Many of our feelings may frighten us, but know that all feelings are normal, natural, and to be expected. You may think that you are losing your mind, but even that thought is normal. So is feeling nothing, feeling hopeless, or having thoughts of wanting to die.

It is important to know that survivors of a suicide often do not want to go on living for a time, and feel overwhelmed by these thoughts. This soon passes as the healing begins. Experiencing a sense of shame is common. For a few weeks, I felt "foul" to myself, to my family, and to the counseling center where I worked. But, in time, I realized that I was still me; I had the same values, morals, and principles I'd always had. I was me... but I was different. I would never be the same but I had the choice of surviving or not.

I have been a counselor at The Link Counseling Center since 1972, and have helped parents allow their kids to make choices and take responsibility for those choices. I have suggested that we, as parents, can only guide, advise, suggest, inform, persuade. We can only offer ourselves, our humanness- our best selves and sometimes our worst selves. What our child does with that is his responsibility and his alone. We cannot insure that our child will have our values, morals, or goals. Ultimately, it is the child's decision regarding what he does with we offer him. He was responsible for his life and I am responsible for my life. I must stay aware of that fact.

I can grow with this event and survive or I can go down with it and destroy my own life. It is my choice and I have chosen to survive. So has my husband, Jack, and so have my three other boys. We have chosen to get beyond the pain by going through it and somehow making meaning out of its meaninglessness.

There is a need to ask "Why?" The questions must be asked, even though you may never find the answers. It is an enigma and it is part of the process of healing that we all go through. But, ultimately, if there are no answers, you may need to stop asking the questions, for to continue only becomes an obsession, which can be destructive to yourself and those around you.

I found I only had partial answers and nothing really satisfactory. I will never know all the answers as to why my son chose to end his own life, but I came to the conclusion that I didn't have to know in order to go on with my own living. I finally chose to let go of the question, but only after I had asked it over and over and struggled with the WHY. Had I not done that, I could have allowed mourning to become my life-style for the rest of my life. (Compassionate Friends Newsletter, Vol. 4, No. 1, 1981)

A Father Speaks Up

by Jack Bolton

Trying to Talk about Mitch's suicide in 1977, even more than ten years later, still brings many thoughts to mind regarding all of my feelings... then and now. The feelings are so personal, so private, so utterly my own, that the thought of sharing them with another is still difficult today.

Surely nothing in my life has taken so much out of me and at the same time given me so much hope for others. My hope is that through the opportunity of talking about our loss, others may find that they too can proceed to make the journey through the pain and anguish that can be mastered.

I admit that in the aftermath of Mitch's death there were so many questions that it is hard to bring them to the conscious level. One of the many was the "Who's fault is it?", and an anger that could not be easily put aside. There is the dichotomy I faced in trying to bring to terms the different feelings that racked my body and mind. Who could possibly know what I was feeling? No man, no woman, no priest, no counselor... No one knew.

I thought that everyone in the world knew that Mitch shot himself and that this father of his was about to enter a room, call on the telephone, or write a letter. To my surprise, a lot of people did not know, but those that did know, went out of their way to give me the support of love and comfort. My faith would tell me that I should expect help from our church... but I had no concept of the strength, love, and support that waited for me. This came from the church and others around us. It seemed that as soon as I could permit myself to express, to expose, I received the reinforcement to proceed.

Time became the major factor, slowly rebuilding the strengths that I knew I had, to overcome the agony. I found that time moved impossibly slow. When would I feel better, when would it be over? The truth is, that it is never over, but then it is not supposed to be over. The truth is that it will never be, but my growth and gaining strength will make it bearable.

Years have passed since I went back to Mitch's room to find him dying by his own hands. That image is with me today, and yet I find that I can look at that image and be at peace with myself. I know I did not plan, nor want, nor envision, that my son could or would take his life. But it is a fact, and I can live with it today, knowing that I have made it this far.

It was a gift Mitch has given us...a new knowledge of strength. Mitch has renewed our faith in God and the world. This was a faith, this was a love, this was a caring, and this was a friendship that I had taken for granted. NO more! Time is precious. Life is precious. You are precious. Each day is a new revelation of this gift, a gift from Mitch.

The Father's Experience

by Bill Clover

I had the great privilege of knowing a son for 16 years. He was a total pleasure to me, and every day of his life I told him how much I loved him and how much I liked him. On the surface, he was the happiest kid I ever knew.

I was a father. Part of a father's job is to keep his family safe, so I kept a handgun in the house to protect my family. Once Billy used it to ward off someone breaking into the house, and the next time he used it on himself after a disappointment with a girlfriend. No prior attempts, no drugs or alcohol problems, no visible clues.

Left us a beautiful note letting us off the hook! Said he was "Just fed up. Simply that." I will go to my grave trying to understand what "just fed up" means to today's 16 year old.

That was two and a half years ago, and I finally believe that I will survive it! And I can honestly say that more than half of my memories of him each day are sweet thoughts that make me smile, and then go on.

The worst day of my life was, of course, the day of Billy's death. The next worst day came four months later when my wife and I read that Billy's death at Roswell High had triggered at least four more attempts in the next ten days. We thought we had escaped the "cluster" syndrome, but we hadn't. Inadequate postvention, even in a school that had undergone training immediately before it!

Next came the support groups, Compassionate Friends and Survivors of Suicide. As a businessman and scientist, I had always poooh-paahed support groups, and I went to the first one kicking and screaming, sure that it would serve no purpose to share my pain with strangers. After all, how could they possibly understand? In my grandiosity, I firmly believed that nothing this bad had ever happened to anyone in the history of the universe!

We got there early, as did two other new couples. As we introduced ourselves, we found that we had all lost a son, all within six months of the same age, all within a 15-day period, and all were buried in a 50-foot circle in the same cemetery. Suddenly, these strangers were my brothers and sisters, and we saved each other's lives! In my opinion, support groups are a key element to surviving a suicide, along with one-on-one therapy for some people.

I know now that support groups are for people with common experiences that can't be shared with "civilians," people without that experience. Parents who have lost children scare the you-know-what out of other people, because it is a reminder that it could happen to them. We are the walking wounded who have to learn to walk and talk and laugh and love life again. Survivors are even worse. And as one said at a meeting, "The worst thing about this is that it forever removes suicide as an option to stop our own pain!"

I am determined that my son's life will still mean something, so I try to share my experiences in the hopes that some other family might be spared the terrible experience of the loss of their precious children.

My Brother Jay

By Ann Clark

In the years since I lost my brother, Jay, it is still hard to believe that the whole thing actually happened to me, to my children, to my family of origin. It remains only partially dealt with and only partially believable. And of course, the pain continues.

I feel that I can remember every detail of every second of the afternoon I was told of Jay's death. I can remember what everyone said and what their faces looked like. I can remember my Mamma wearing an orange cotton pants outfit with a scarf loosely tied around her neck. I found the scarf later that night after she left it lying in the driveway. I put it under my pillow that night as a way of being close to her. I remember walking up to the car to greet Mamma and my sister. Because of what a family friend had said earlier when he called looking for mother, I knew he had some very bad news to tell me about one of my brothers. I remember Mamma walking up to me and saying, "Something terrible has happened, Ann Marie. Jay is dead. It happened in the car." I remember screaming out and thinking that the best thing for me to do would be to run. Somehow I knew if I could run away from Mamma before she finished telling me about my brother that I would be able to interrupt this thing and it would not have taken place. Mamma told me she needed me though, and I did not leave her.

We came inside the house to call one of my other brothers. It was during my Mamma's conversation with him that I realized that Jay had killed himself with a gun.

It was too horrible to believe. I remember some weeks after the funeral calling the coroner for a confirmation wondering if it was really my brother that was dead. The casket had remained closed. Perhaps he was still really alive. Perhaps it was not him the police found in his car but a body some kidnapper had placed there. Or perhaps Jay was playing some awful trick on us. Or perhaps he had been murdered and the murderers were still at large. The coroner gently confirmed that the person the police found in the car was my brother and that he had died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head.

I remember the days after I heard about Jay as being heavy, filled with pain, and very confusing. I remember lying on the kitchen floor and crying and crying. I went to work, but driving was a tremendous effort. I canceled a few appointments at my partners' insistence. There was such an element of unreality about it all. I had very little emotional support. I tried to contact a few old friends but didn't get very far. One of my oldest and best friends immediately responded by saying she could not go to the funeral because of her busy schedule. I had not even asked her to come. Another very close friend was out of town and could not be located.

My pastor was also going out of town. When he returned, he did not come to our home or call.

My relationships with my family of origin were tremendously

affected. Immediately after Jay died, my role as sister became more important than ever to me. My parents had placed a significant responsibility for taking care of my three younger brothers and one younger sister on my shoulders, and at times I was sort of fussy and bossy towards them. I became bossier and fussier after Jay died and probably appeared critical of them but I was really concerned for their welfare. I can see now that this process was more an attempt at self-protection than anything else. I was trying to protect myself from losing another brother or sister. I have recognized that there are limits to what I can control, but I have to keep reminding myself of those limitations.

In retrospect, there are two experiences I wish we could have had as a family after we lost Jay. First I wish that we had all gone to family therapy. Not that anything was "wrong" with us, or that we were sick or evil persons who needed fixing. I believe that the power for the most thorough healing is found in the family context and that therapy for the whole, extended family would have been very helpful. Secondly I wish we had gone to the beach as a family unit and processed our grief together. The beach is a special place for my family of origin and my nuclear family. We've made many trips to the ocean and have always found them nurturing and revitalizing.

I really cannot say that I knew Jay was going to kill himself- I didn't. I knew that I was worried that something terrible was going to happen some day to someone in our family as evidenced by recurrent dreams. I still deal with feelings of guilt regarding Jay's perception of my availability or unavailability when he needed me. Jay must have been in excruciating pain. That is what hurts the most now. That my brother was hurting so deeply that he killed himself to stop the feelings. No one should hurt so badly.

The reason I have called this event "The Thing With Jay" is because for the most part, the subject is taboo and I have personally had such a hard time dealing with it. Also, I did not tell my young son about it, he was only two and a half when it happened. The phrase "The Thing With Jay", to me, underscores the difficulty of actually pinpointing what happened and what meaning this event has had and will have in the future. Plus, the phrase sounds like the kind of perplexed comment a sort of bossy and fussy older sister might make about her younger brother's behavior.

Please Don't Ask Me to Explain...Again

Addressing Other Losses by Suicide

I am writing this for anyone who has lost someone they loved and cared about by suicide. I am a Survivor of Suicide, defined as anyone who has lost a loved one by self-inflicted death. Eleven years ago on December 5, 1986, my boyfriend, Andy, shot and killed himself. He was 17 years old. At the time, no one seemed to doubt my pain or my significance in his life and his in mine. His family included me like one of their own in the memorial and funeral services.

I remember during that time, my life seemed to have no purpose or value, full of seemingly endless pain. Well-intentioned comments such as "You're young, you'll have many more loves in your life" deepened the excruciating wounds they intended to soothe. How could I ever replace this dear person? I never will. I don't want to spend my life alone, but risking love again? My love is no good, it only causes pain and despair. I felt broken. And who could I trust enough to love? Would they leave me too?

As time went on, the well-intended comments turned to "You should be over this by now, after all, he wasn't a relative of yours." Causing me to feel more alone, crazy, and believing there was something terribly wrong with me. Everyone seemed to want me to be "normal" again. I wanted to be "normal" again. I would vacillate between putting on a brave face and a good act and shutting down in isolation. My continuous attempts to be what everyone wanted crumbled in my hands, feeding my belief that I was damaged and always would be.

My mother, sensing my extreme pain and desperately wanting to help, found the name of a woman at the local counseling center who had lost her son by suicide, Iris Bolton. I don't remember much of our meeting, as I have lost memory of at least two months of that time, however, I remember feeling real hope for the first time in months. My Mother later told me I said two things when I left her office; that she thought she was going crazy too, and at least she knew the pain. Here was a woman who didn't make me justify my pain, she accepted it to be real and valid. And in that simple acceptance, she gave me the gift of hope that I too would survive and one day live a happy productive life.

After that I entered therapy with a counselor she referred me to, went on to college, completed my Masters in Counseling, and began working with Survivors. Currently, I've been happily married for three years and coordinate The Link Counseling Center's National Resource Center for Suicide Prevention and Aftercare. I still get the occasional well-intended question or comment such as "What was so special about Andy that he made such a profound impact on your life?" And I think to myself "Please don't ask me to explain ... again." You see, I don't mind telling my story, because in the telling there is healing for me and education for others, but I refuse to justify my pain to anyone. I have learned that it is valid just because it's mine. It doesn't need to follow anyone else's rules or guidelines based on

how they think I should feel.

Whatever brings you to read this article, the loss of a parent, child, sibling, spouse, friend, or any other relationship, do not compare your pain to others, it is unique and different. For the person you lost was unique as was your relationship. There are common threads that bind us as we try to put our lives back together. It is not our old lives, but different ones. We will never be the same. We will create a "new normal" for ourselves defined by our own healing and growth. Know that your pain is real and valid. And that there are people willing to listen and be with you in your pain and not ask you to justify or explain.

Tracy T. Dean, November 1997

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"Ode To NinaJo"

In May of 1996 I moved to Atlanta, Georgia from Chicago, Illinois not realizing why God had lead me there. The reasons for my move have become crystal clear to me now. An incredible woman whom I met here in Atlanta; Iris Bolton, has been a catalyst for much of my healing journey. I will never forget the time I saw Iris Bolton at my first S.O.S. meeting. I thought that Iris was losing it when she told us we would eventually find "a gift" in this dreadful experience. Well, thanks to my faith in God and Iris Bolton I am indeed discovering a gift and a part of that gift is my ability to share with you today!

I remember so vividly after the devastating loss of my mother, the void that I felt, and the longing to find ANYBODY who could even remotely understand what had happened to me and ONLY ME (so I thought). I found in my S.O.S. groups that this "family" of survivors could finish my sentences and comfort me in a way I never thought possible.

My journey began very early on since my mother and father had both turned to alcohol to deal with the stress in their lives. I was the youngest child and proudly assumed the role of "nursemaid and caretaker" primarily for my precious mother, believing deep down that if I was good enough, my parents might stop drinking. This "responsible" role that I took upon myself helped me to fine tune the art of numbing all my feelings and being "strong". (It felt pretty good at the time.)

In 1979, my mother became sober and I was in "2nd heaven". I adored her; she was creative, funny and a wonderful friend (much more so than a mother). She divorced my father, and she and I moved to a condo across from my high school in Oak Park, Illinois. In September of 1980 I was off to college. We got together and talked often. I had three incredible years with "Nina Jo" for which I am intensely grateful.

The last time that I saw "Mum" was Saturday, February 6th, 1982. I took the bus from school so that we could spend some time together. When Mom drove me to the bus station on Saturday, I knew she was incredibly sad because of a break up with her boyfriend. To this day, I could never tell you that I had any clue what mom meant when she told me "the scrimshaw artwork in the living room is worth a lot of money, just so you know in case anything ever happened to me." I never made the connection. Now I believe that even if I had, I was helpless over my mother's choices. I learned as a young child that you could not take away the "bottle" from the alcoholic because they would find a will and a way to get another one. Just as I know now that if I had taken away mom's gun (which I had no knowledge of at the time), she would have found another way to end her pain. I am relieved that today I do not feel responsible for her decision. (That took me awhile.)

My tragic journey began on Monday, February 8th, 1982 with a phone call from my father, that has left a permanent scar in my memory. He said "they found Nina's body, apparently she had bought

a gun." That's all I remember. And then I went into what felt like a permanent state of NUMB. Being that I was closest to mom and that I was so good at "taking care of things", my 63-year-old father decided that I should be the one to make all of the decisions about the funeral, etc. So, at the age of 20, I stood there at the Oak Park Funeral Home, never having dealt with death whatsoever in my life, realizing that it was all "up to me".

My most difficult decision was choosing not to see my mother before she was cremated. I believe now, that even if I had just seen her hand it would have helped me find a small piece of closure to this surrealistic event. I regret that decision and feel angry that I let others convince me that it was best to have a memory of her as I had last seen her.

I spent the next 10 years of my life dealing with this "surrealistic event" in a complete daze. As a sophomore in college, I became rebellious and very much a "party" girl, trying to fill the void that mom had left. In 1986, I was using cocaine to numb my feelings. I then resorted to food as my "drug" of choice, and struggled with an eating disorder. I spent the next couple of years in very dysfunctional relationships, taking care of everybody, but myself (as usual).

My life vest and good friend, Rebecca sent me to her therapist, Sheila. I did some incredible healing work with her but didn't give it enough time to really work through my intense grief over my mother. I realized in 1992 that I was failing in a relationship because I had spent so much time denying my own needs.

My best friend referred me to a grief therapist. This was an incredible funnel for me in beginning to look at my mother's suicide. Part of my therapy work was writing a letter from mom to me and from me to mom, since she had not left a note. I also reluctantly read Iris Bolton's book; *My Son, My Son*. I found it fascinating that someone else could feel the way that I did. Little did I know that my future husband, Michael would be transferred to Atlanta, in 1996, the year we were married.

Once in Atlanta it took me six months to call Iris and boy was I nervous. I made an appointment and went in to talk to her. Iris is an incredibly comforting person and very realistic, I liked that (I was finally ready for that!) She referred me to a therapist at The Link. This has sped up recovery. My journey has become a difficult yet also very wonderful road towards self-discovery. I am intensely grateful to be able to share my story with you and feel OK with being vulnerable. The most important thought that I can leave you with is that You are not alone! (Thank God I found that out!)

My heart on paper,

Susan February 15, 1998

The Center of My Life

(On the Death of A Spouse)

I lost the center of my life on Friday, July 13, 1984. Brenda, my wife often years, succeeded in killing herself during a full moon while I was at an Al-Anon meeting (where I was trying to cope with her alcohol and drug problems).

I had intervened on three previous suicide attempts, so I thought I was ready for the possibility of her death. However, nothing the many doctors and counselors we had seen, not the books I had read, prepared me for the devastating grief that overwhelmed my entire being.

For the first time since childhood, I cried bitter, angry guilt-ridden, frustrating tears for months afterward. I had virtually no energy, finding that grief demanded most of my physical, mental and emotional resources. My first wife, who also struggled with addiction, told me at the memorial service about Iris Bolton, her book, *My Son... My Son*, and The Link Counseling Center. Support from her book and her Survivors of Suicide group paved the way towards my eventual recovery and transformation, though too often I would ignore the loving advice given at those vital monthly meetings.

Survivors of Suicide and, at first, my Al-Anon group formed the backbone of my recovery. Talk and the expression of feelings openly in the groups were crucial to my one-day-at-a-time climb out of the black pit of my existence. Because of my background (strict family upbringing, Army training, and years in the corporate sales field), I was totally out of touch with my emotions.

I found in the groups a living, non-judgmental acceptance of my needs. The group members who shared my pain, plus many caring and gifted counselors who coached me on letting my feelings out paved a winding, pot-holed, bumpy road back to feeling normal again. The road was often more like a roller coaster, though as I would sink back into self-pity and denial in the early days, I had to learn about the phases of grief, and more importantly, the immense patience and forgiveness I needed to give myself.

There were precious few books then to ease my burden, but Iris' book plus the works of Dr. Elisabeth Kubler Ross helped immensely. Since then, many new books have become available to those of us who have to live on after someone we love chooses to die, including Dr. Threse Rando's *Grieving: How to Go on Living When Someone You Love Dies*, and James' and Cherry's *The Grief Recovery Handbook*.

I was encouraged by Iris and others to write about my feelings and thoughts as a tool for recovery. I found great release in the exercise, which eventually grew into my book, *Life After Grief* and my now full-time occupation as a writer and speaker (one of the gifts that Iris said might come from my loss).

Long walks helped, as did extended soaks in a hot tub as I listened to quiet music. When I felt there was some pain needing to come out, I would look at pictures of us or play some of our favorite

music, for I didn't want to take the chance that suppressed feelings might cause physical problems. I treated myself to chiropractic adjustments and massages as my grief ravaged body cried out for relief.

A lesson, and also another gift, became my program to eliminate or reduce, or just accept, some limitations in my own behavior. I learned of my own codependence (a compulsive need to please and help people, even though they don't ask to be pleased or helped). I discovered how to get better rather than try to be perfect. Again with much help from supportive people, I rebuilt my very fragile self-esteem.

Another important lesson I have learned: there is no right way to heal, just any way. All the advice from all the sources could not give me a timetable or prescription for my healing, I had to do it my own unique way, as all of us must.

Even now, I sometimes talk to my wife, for another gift I received after her death was a firm belief in eternal life. She is alive in some dimension I cannot see, though I think she can hear me. Even if she can't it helps me to be able to say what I must to her.

Slowly, oh so painfully slowly, my world turned right-side-up again, as time healed my enormous psychic wound. Gradually, I could function again without the confusion so prevalent during deep grief. I began to date, probably too soon, but nonetheless a necessary step for me.

As the years passed, I discovered perhaps the most important gift of all from my wife's passing. I found a new center for my life, the part of me that is a part of God.

-By Jack Clarke

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Holidays and Special Days

Much has been written about dealing with holidays and other special days of the year after there has been a death among family or close friends. Here are some ideas for preparing for the special days of the year.

Because holidays are usually hectic, emotional, tied to tradition and times for togetherness, the absence of a loved one can seem an enormous part of the day or season. How to cope with this hole in the holiday? How to muddle through when others are being festive?

For some, doing the traditional tasks and meals and togetherness brings a sense of reassurance and comfort. For others, the idea of doing everything as it's been done for years is impossible in the aftermath of tragedy. Any of these reactions are normal - and it's best if family and friends can talk and plan what to do - or not to do - this year. It may be

tempting to think that the holidays will "just go away" this year, since little about life may seem celebratory. But life is going on despite grief and mourning, and it's best to plan something, rather than allow well-meaning family and friends to decide for you.

Some families include the deceased loved one by lighting a candle or displaying a cherished item that belonged to the person. Some may intentionally leave an empty place at the table - if it's not intentional, however, the empty chair can be a horrible reminder of the loss.

You may wish to be with family and friends during holidays and special days or you might be better off going away, if a different environment is needed. It's also helpful to know that the days and weeks of anticipation

leading up to a special day or holiday are often worse than the day itself.

Communicate what you and your family need to extended family and friends.

Do you need to talk about your dead loved one? Then let others around you know that even though you may cry, to not mention the person's name at all seems like another death.

What to do about already purchased gifts or with the money set aside for a gift? Perhaps donating the gift or money in memory of the person will help to make some meaning from the loss.

Take one day at a time, be realistic, know and discuss your limitations, and plan what you can for days that bring back memories that may seem painful in the aftermath of a death.

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HOLIDAYS AND SPECIAL DAYS