

Help is at Hand

Support after someone may have died by suicide

Offered by:



This guide is dedicated to those grieving the death of someone they love. While producing this guide, we remember Conner and the others that we have lost.

This guide has been designed to help you to choose when and what sections are most appropriate for you. It is not intended as something you need to read through from cover to cover.

Your family, friends or colleagues may also find it helpful to look through this guide so that they can begin to try and understand a little of what you are going through and how to find the right help.

Some sections focus on how you may be feeling; others on what may be happening. Throughout – and in more detail at the back – are some suggestions for sources of further support. There are also quotes from people who have been bereaved and who have experienced some of what you may be going through.

A note about language

We have used the expressions ‘died by suicide’ and ‘taken their own life’. We chose these terms because they seem most readily accepted, but we recognize people will have their own preferred language. We avoided the phrase ‘commit suicide’ since it implies people who die this way have committed a crime, which is not the case.

There is no simple way to describe the differing relationships people may have had with the person who died (“loved one”, “relative or friend”, “someone close”, “someone important”) so the expression ‘person who died’ has been used throughout. We acknowledge that this may sound impersonal, but it is not intended to devalue the strength of the relationship.

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Introduction

When you first learn that someone has died in circumstances that may be due to suicide, you can experience a range of emotions. You could be feeling at a loss, and unsure about what you are thinking or doing.

We hope you will find it helpful to have information about what you might be feeling, practical matters you are likely to have to deal with and suggestions on further help and support in the weeks and months ahead.

This guide can only attempt to describe some of what you may be or will be going through.

It is no substitute for talking things over with people: either those close to you or a person from one of the support organizations listed. It has, however, been put together with the help of people who have been bereaved by suicide and who may have experienced some of what you are now going through.

We would like to express our sympathy and hope that this guide will offer you support and reassurance so that you feel you are not alone.

“In the chaos after the death, when I felt so alone, so desperate and so dazed, it helped to read something that described a bit of what I was feeling and what was happening. It felt a little as though there were others out there who were by my side and would know what I was going through.”



1

What You May be Feeling

You may be reading this soon after someone has died, or weeks, months or years afterwards.

This section focuses on some of the emotions felt by bereaved people and the feelings that are intensified when the death may have been by suicide.

How people grieve

Grief is as unique as you are, and as individual as a fingerprint.

Each person will be affected in his or her own way because everyone is different – even in the same family. Each had their own relationship with the person who has died, their own experience of other losses and differing levels of support available.

People have their own ways of expressing feelings. Some find it helpful to share feelings and thoughts. Some find it very hard to cry or to put into words how they are feeling; it doesn't mean that they are not as distressed as someone who cannot stop crying.

You may find that people suggest how you are or should be feeling: (“you must be feeling very...”) or tell you to grieve in a certain way (“you need to...”). It is probably best to accept that this advice is intended kindly but remember that everyone grieves differently. So, listen to yourself first and foremost and find your own way. It is important to remember that there are no set rules or stages and there is no right or wrong way to be feeling.

People may make assumptions that only close family grieve – however many people can be affected. You may be the close friend of the person, a work colleague, or maybe you have been professionally involved in helping before or after the person died. You may not have received the same recognition or understanding of your loss that family members have had yet you may still experience any combination of the feelings described.

Bereaved by suicide

Being bereaved by suicide has been described as ‘grief with the volume turned up’. Much of what you may be feeling now would be the same if the person close to you had died suddenly or after a long illness.

Yet people who have been bereaved say a suicide seems to intensify the normal responses to loss. For example, you may feel a sharper guilt over your own actions, a more bitter blame towards someone else who you feel could have prevented the suicide, stronger anger at the person who died or a deeper despair that someone close to you has died this way.

How are you feeling?

People often ask, “how are you feeling?” and it can be impossible to answer. When someone dies suddenly you can be left with an overwhelming jumble of feelings and thoughts. Here we explore some of the emotions that are commonly felt when someone you care about dies.

The emotions are listed alphabetically as there is no order or priority to how anyone may be feeling.


Anger
Defensiveness
Depression and anxiety **Despair**
Disbelief
Fear **Guilt**
Numbness **Physical**
Reactions
Questioning—“why?” and “what if?”
Rejection
Relief
Sadness
Searching
Sense of acceptance
Shame
Shock
Stigma
Suicidal thoughts

Anger

People who have been bereaved often feel angry. You may be angry with the person for dying in this way and leaving so much pain behind, or because you have been left to deal with lots of practical matters and you feel ill-prepared. Or you may be angry with someone whom you feel let them down, or with those who you believe should have taken better care of them. If you have a faith, you may be angry with your God. Trying to find someone to blame for the death is also a common response. Anger may occasionally feel overwhelming and can last, or go and then return, for a long time.

“My attitude changed to include feelings of anger about what she had done when I saw how her parents were suffering. I was also angry with myself for not telling her mother that I was concerned about her.

At the time I felt I needed to be loyal to my friend.”



“I wonder about when and how the dominoes had started to fall down and what actions might have stopped setting them into motion. I turn over in my mind what would have happened if we hadn’t moved houses, if I hadn’t left my job, if we hadn’t gone on holiday two months before she died, if I had given her more attention, or more space, said more, said less...”

Defensiveness

The uncertainty over how people will react can lead you to put up defenses against them in case they say something upsetting or ask intrusive questions.

Sometimes, it can be hard to let this guard down and talk openly about how you are feeling. Some people say it can be easier to talk with people who have also been bereaved by suicide. You'll find contact details for bereavement support organizations in section 5.

Depression and anxiety

Sometimes, people feel they are losing control of their mental health because the grief is so intense. This may be a feeling that comes and goes. Sometimes, but not always, you may feel these feelings have become deep-rooted. It is important to speak to your doctor for help or to one of the mental health support organizations beginning on page 43 if you think this may be happening to you.

Despair

People bereaved by suicide may question whether they can face living without the person who has died. For some, this may be a fleeting thought; for others, it can become a deep despair that leads to thoughts of suicide. If this is how it feels for you, please seek support from those around you or one of the organizations listed beginning on page 43.

“I spent a large amount of time trying to ‘solve’ why my son had decided to take his life. I internalized all these feelings which made things worse and worse for me. I just wanted to curl up in a ball and let life pass me by. I ended up reaching crisis point and was desperately trying to escape from the permanent anguish I felt. It was at this point that I decided I needed to share how I felt. That has been the game changer. Since I started talking about what I feel I have found the strength to move forward.”

Disbelief

Some people find it hard to accept that someone has died, and that the person will no longer be part of their lives. It is natural to struggle to believe what has happened, especially if the person may have died by suicide. This feeling can fade as the reality of their death sinks in, but you may still find yourself doubting what has happened for some time.

Fear

Grief can feel frightening; a shaky uncertainty because everything has changed. Sometimes people are afraid about what life will be like without the person who has died or about the impact the death will have on others. It can be difficult to imagine a different future.

Guilt

Some people may feel guilty. You could be feeling guilty for something you did or did not do or said or did not say. It may help to remember that only the person who died knows why they could no longer bear to live.

Feeling overwhelming guilt may be one of the main reasons that bereavement through suicide is so painful – and it isn't a feeling that can be diminished by someone reminding you of all the good things you did for the person who died.

The guilt felt by the bereaved can sometimes feel like failure.

“His death consumed every minute of every hour of every day and on the rare occasions I became distracted from these thoughts, I felt guilty for not feeling “the pain”.”

Numbness

Some find it hard to feel anything. People who experience this numbness can feel guilty for not expressing grief through crying or talking, especially when others around them may find it easier. For some, it can take a while for pain to break through. This can make it hard to answer well-meaning questions such as ‘how are you feeling?’ because the answer is sometimes nothing.

Physical reactions

After someone has died, it is quite common for those left behind to feel physically unwell with headaches, upset stomachs and sickness. Because you are feeling low, you may find yourself being less resilient against colds, for example, than usual. You may feel that you don't want to eat, or that you eat and drink more as a means of distraction. You may have trouble falling asleep or staying asleep or you may want to sleep all day.

Pining

There is a particular sadness after someone has died that can take the form of a desperate pining for that person. It can be a physical sensation: wanting to see, touch, hold or smell them and it can feel like a heart-breaking longing for them to return, even for just a moment.

Questioning – What if?

When people are bereaved by suicide, they may feel that they should or could have prevented it. Everyone who has lost someone to suicide will have asked themselves what they missed or could have done differently. Last conversations can replay in your head. You may continue to question yourself and those around you for days, weeks – even years. It is very likely that you were offering all your support, love and care. Equally, people who take their lives may not have shown despair to those around them.

“So I have made a pact with myself, which some days I can stick to, and other days not, that I will focus on remembering with joy all the good times I enjoyed and not the guilt-laden “what ifs” that can’t bring me anything but pain.”

Questioning – Why?

People bereaved by suicide may be left with a huge unanswered question: Why? This is a question that people may go over and over, and without an answer, it may never go away entirely.

The causes of suicide are usually complicated. Different experiences and incidences affect people in different ways. In truth, the person who died is the only one who knew why it felt impossible to live.

“After a while I realized I had to give him ownership of his decision, in whatever state of mind he’d been in at the time because, even if I had all the answers to the whys, the reality, the loss, the grief, were still the same.”

Rejection

However much you are trying to understand what happened, you may feel rejected and that your love and care was ignored by the person who died.

This can be especially true if you have been supporting the person for a long time through a period of mental ill health.

You may feel rejected by people close to you or in your community. Sometimes people seem unable to cope with what has happened and withdraw when you need them, leaving you feeling isolated.

Some don’t know how to react and are frightened of doing or saying the wrong thing and, as a result, they don’t make contact and seemingly ignore you.

Relief

For some, a person's death feels like a relief – if they have been in deep distress or pain for a long time or if you have spent a long time worrying that they might die. This is a natural response to a long period of tension and stress and does not mean that you didn't care.

Sadness

A feeling of profound sadness may be the most frequent response to the death of someone close. This can last for years and sit alongside other reactions. You may feel you want the person back and life to return to how it once was. Sometimes it might feel like people are trying to tell you that you are angry, shocked or bewildered when what you feel is deep sadness.

Searching

People who have been bereaved sometimes search for the person who has died. For example, you may want to go to where the person used to spend time (work, school, or a favorite place) in case they will be there.

Equally, some may want to avoid such places, now and in the future. It is also quite common to think you have caught a glimpse of the person who has died, for them to appear to you in a dream or to find yourself calling their name.

Sense of acceptance

There is the possibility that you accept the person's death as the choice they made given the situation that they were in. People who have been bereaved after a friend or relative has been suffering may feel some sense of acceptance that they decided to end the pain, alongside their own sadness at what has happened.

“When I got the phone call, I was not surprised. I knew my friend was in trouble and I had tried to support her as much as I could, advising her to get help and so on. Although I was devastated, I accepted the decision she had made.”

Shame

It may be that you have a painful feeling of shame or distress; perhaps thinking that you have done something wrong or did not do enough to prevent the death. You may also feel ashamed because of the way that other people talk about suicide and the stigma that persists in our society.

“We had gone through so much together and I’d given him so much support. Yet it’s as if I didn’t give enough. Or perhaps I didn’t support him in the right way? Did he think I didn’t care? Did he not care about me like I thought he did?”



Shock

The feeling of shock can last a long time and you may experience it in many ways. It may feel as if you have lost your ability to breathe normally – as if someone has punched a hole through you or you have taken a deep breath in and then can't breathe out. Or you may feel you have lost your ability to complete daily tasks and that you are detached from what is going on around you.

Stigma

Many find bereavement by suicide marks them out and complicates the way in which people respond. Some feel it would be easier to explain the death in a different way. Others may not know what to say.

People bereaved by suicide often say they feel judged in a way that would not happen if their loved one had died in a different way. There is a stigma in society over talking about suicide and this may make people avoid the subject.

“I feel sometimes that people define my mom’s life by her death. She’s stigmatized by the label “suicide”.

If someone dies from cancer or a car crash they are not blamed, nor have their death held against them like a character flaw. But with suicide I felt I had to explain how kind, lovely and giving she was. How she wasn't selfish, how she hadn't done this for attention but because depression had robbed her of her will to live.”

Suicidal thoughts

Some people bereaved by suicide may start to have suicidal thoughts. If you find this happening to you, please reach out for help. Help is at the end of a phone every hour of every day of the year (call 800-273-8255 or text 741741). There are many people in the organizations listed in section 5 to help and support you. Please share how you are feeling with someone and give them permission to keep a close eye on you while you are feeling vulnerable and desperate.

“I too felt suicidal. Then the pangs of guilt would crash through my head about how could I feel that way, when my other two boys and husband needed me now more than ever.”

What might help

People who have been bereaved say that the following things can help:

- **Expressing your feelings and thoughts:** finding ways to let out your feelings and having people around who can listen to you and accept you.
- **Making opportunities to remember:** this may mean talking about the person, looking at pictures, and videos of them, going to places that remind you of them, creating a box with physical memories (tickets, cards, pictures etc.), writing a journal or blog about them, or continuing to do activities you did together.
- **Developing ‘rituals’:** having a way of marking their life, for example by visiting a special place, by creating a lasting memorial or by a simple act such as lighting a candle at the same time each week.
- **Participating in activities:** continuing to do things you have previously enjoyed, such as sports, social events or music.
- **Putting your feelings on paper:** you may not feel ready to talk to anyone but writing down your thoughts and feelings may help you.
- **Looking after yourself:** eating well and getting sufficient sleep.
- **Spending time outside:** getting out of the house for a change of scene, connecting with nature or doing exercise.
- **Meeting, speaking with or reading the words of other people who have been bereaved:** see details of the range of support organizations in section 6.
- **Developing an ‘emotional first aid kit’:** collecting together some things that can help when you are feeling sad or mad or bad (a music play list, your favorite chocolate, a ball to kick or pillow to punch).

What might not help

People who have been bereaved say that the following things might not help:

- **Avoiding talking about what has happened:** although it may be very difficult to start with, talking to someone you can trust can make all the difference.
- **Drinking more, taking drugs:** it can be tempting to try and blot out the pain of what has happened, but the short-term oblivion doesn’t take away the sadness and is likely to make you feel worse.
- **Hurrying to make big decisions:** it may be better to let some time pass before making major changes to your life.
- **Taking risks:** after someone close has died you may feel ‘what’s the point?’ and take risks with your own health, for example by driving too fast. Try and talk to someone you trust if you think you are risking your safety or that of someone else.
- **Not seeking help:** you may feel you can’t ask for help as you are worried it will make you seem weak, or that you shouldn’t bother other people when they are grieving (such as members of your family), or when they are busy (such as your doctor). But how you are feeling is very important, and there are people who want to help. Section 5 includes details of support organizations.

2

What May be Happening

When you are faced with the sudden death of someone, and especially in the early days, there will be several practical issues that need to be handled.

This section has information to help guide you through these matters.

Letting people know

One of the first and hardest challenges you could face is letting others know what has happened: these may be family, friends, work colleagues, or neighbors.

You are entitled to tell people when you are ready and to say whatever you want about how the person died. Some say that they found it helpful to be honest from the start as it meant they didn't have to keep any secrets or worry about how and when the truth might one day be revealed.

You are also entitled not to answer any questions from other people if you don't yet feel able, or you feel their questions are inappropriate.

You are likely to find that the people you are telling could be at a loss about what to say to you – and they may say or do thoughtless things in their shock. It may be difficult but try not to feel offended or let down by their first reactions.

Section 3 provides some guidance on talking to and supporting children and young people after a death by suicide.

Here are some things you could say:

[person's name] has died...

...I'll tell you more when I feel able to.

...It is too soon for us to talk about how he/she died.

...I don't want to say any more at the moment.

...It looks like he/she might have taken his/her own life.

...We cannot imagine what happened. The police think he/she may have taken his/her own life, but we don't know yet.

... We think it was intentional. We knew he/she had thought about it before and we hoped that he/she would find a way through his/her problems.

In the days and weeks after someone has died

The following information is designed to give you some idea of what practical things are likely to take place in the days and weeks ahead.

Depending on the circumstances surrounding the death there may also need to be some specific considerations.

Care of the body

While the initial investigation is happening, the body of the person who has died will usually be looked after by the medical examiner. If you choose to do so, you will be able to see the body.

Choosing to see the person after their death

No-one can make the decision for you about whether to see the person who has died; what is right for one person may not be right for another.

Some people, with the best and kindest intentions may suggest you don't view the body. They may say "it's better to remember him/her as they were". You may feel this is right for you or you may feel you will not be able to accept that he/she has died until you have seen him/her and said goodbye.

Funeral directors are experienced at supporting people who have been bereaved and will be able to talk to you about viewing the person who has died.

Arranging a funeral

Planning a funeral is difficult. Planning a funeral for such an unexpected death will seem insurmountable.

Before you talk to a funeral home or similar entity, designate a person or person(s) that will help you and be witness to the entire proceedings. This will protect you from making rash decisions and possible unsound financial decisions while in such grief. You can talk to a funeral director to start planning what happens next but are under no required timeline or rules on making decisions.

It is advisable to contact a funeral director who is a member of a recognized trade association, such as The National Funeral Directors Association.

What else may be happening

There are other issues that you may also have to consider depending on the individual circumstances of the person who has died.

Visiting where they died

It may be that the person died at your home, which can make continuing to live there tough. It may help to ask a family member or friend to stay with you for some time. Or it could be that you move out, even for a short time. It can be especially hard if there is no alternative place for you to go. On the other hand, it can be comforting to be at home if there are also positive memories.

It may be that person died somewhere else and you may want to see where that was. This could be difficult if the police are investigating what happened, or if it is unsafe to do so (for example, on a railway line). If it is in a dangerous or inaccessible place, you can ask the coroner's officer if they could help you see where the death took place.

You may feel you want to place flowers and messages at the place where the person died, if it was outside the home. This can be a way of expressing your grief, but there is a danger that such memorials may encourage other people to take their lives at the same spot.

Final messages from the person who has died


Many people die by suicide without leaving a message. This can leave you feeling hurt and increase your intensity to try and understand "why".

If a final message has been left, the words may bring a measure of comfort; the person having taken one last opportunity to express their loving thoughts.

Occasionally, the message may cause pain and other conflicting emotions if the person, in their distress and despair, is angry or accusatory.

Like the act of suicide itself, a final message allows for no reply. Some people find it helps to write a reply, either to keep or later destroy. Some decide that it feels right to destroy or erase any final message: others choose to keep it.

It is important to remember words left offer just a glimpse into what the person was feeling at that very particular time, and not what they represented throughout their relationship with you.

A photograph of a wooden door with a pet door, a black and white dog standing in the doorway, and a large pink circular graphic overlay containing text. The scene is indoors, likely a kitchen or dining area, with a wooden table and chair visible on the left. The door is open, and the dog is looking out. The pink circle is semi-transparent and contains a quote in white text.

“I have to walk where he died ten to fifteen times a day. That brings with it mixed feelings. Most days, it means I am in and around the places where we enjoyed happy times together, so it brings back positive memories. Other days I find it difficult, especially when it’s coming up to an anniversary or his birthday and all I want is for him to be here with me.”

Informing services

When the coroner issues an interim death certificate/fact of death document, this will also allow you to begin to let other people know that the person has died (for example, banks, insurance companies, benefit offices). There is a checklist on page 26 to help you to think about this.

Many banks, building societies and utility companies (like gas and electricity) have staff trained to make arrangements easier for people who have been bereaved; you can search on the organization's website for a number for their bereavement team or ask for this when you get through on the phone.

Registering the death

After the inquest, the coroner will notify the local registrar directly who will then register the death from the information the coroner provides. The coroner will let you know that this has happened, and, in most circumstances, you will not have to register the death in person. You will then be able to get copies of the death certificate.

Life insurance

Some life insurance policies have a clause (sometimes in the small print) that makes the policy invalid if the person whose life was insured dies by suicide within a certain time after taking out the policy.

The companies that issue the policies have trained staff who handle matters after someone has died, and they will be able to talk to you about this in a sensitive way.

Bereavement benefits

You may be entitled to bereavement benefits after someone has died. These differ depending on your relationship to the person who died, your altered responsibilities since they have died (for example, looking after children or grandchildren) and what other benefits you may be receiving already.

Dealing with the media

For reasons that can sometimes be hard to understand, a death by suicide is often considered newsworthy.

You may find yourself approached by journalists and photographers for details of your loved one and the circumstances of their death. This can be particularly true when the death has taken place in a public place, or if it is a young person who has died.

Despite the pressure that a journalist can try to apply, remember that you do not have to cooperate, and you do not have to say anything about the person who died. Equally, you can ask the media not to report the person's death – sometimes this is successful.

If media interest is expected, then some families prepare a written statement about the person who has died: both factual information (their name, age etc.) and also what they were like (what they enjoyed, how they will be remembered etc.). In this way, it can give families the opportunity to have a little more control about what is said or written. The statement could also include whether you are prepared to comment or be interviewed now or later. Before agreeing to speak to a journalist, it is always wise to consider the possible implications of making the information public. There is no guarantee that the media will use what you provide. They

may choose to do their own research using information publicly available. This could include taking photos from social media accounts.

It is worth noting that once the media have a photograph, it can be used at any time (for example, in connection with a similar event). There may be no preparation for suddenly seeing a photograph of someone you know reappear months after they have died in connection with a different event.

Sometimes, appropriate media coverage can feel like a way of sharing the life of a person with a wider audience. Some people choose to talk publicly about what has happened as a way of remembering the person, or to help raise awareness of the issue of suicide to try and prevent other deaths. Remember, you have a right to decide what you feel comfortable with.

There are clear media guidelines issued about how to report appropriately on a suicide, and you should complain if you feel these have been broken.

Occasionally, people feel the person who died was unfairly represented.

“Seeing my story laid out in black and white, his face smiling out at me from the pages of the magazine, was heartbreaking. But then, the messages started to flow in from readers who had read our story and who had suddenly realized they we’re not alone in this.”



Social media

An increasingly common aspect of experiencing loss is the role of social media. You may want to keep what has happened private, yet versions of what has happened may already be circulating on the internet. This is one reason why, although it is so hard and painful, it is usually best to be honest about how the person died.

You may want to post a message about the death on the social media pages of the person who has died. Before you do, consider if there might be a gentler way of letting people know; it can be very shocking to learn something online when you have no support around you. Consider also who will read it both now and, potentially, in the future, and the fact that they may not react with kindness.

After a death, social media pages are also used as a place for people's memories and photographs of the person who has died. Many people talk about the comfort that sharing recollections can bring.

It can be a helpful way to continue to mark birthdays and other important anniversaries.

“It’s brought me great comfort to be able to share stories about her on Facebook and to have other people give me their reminiscences.

There have been times I’ve felt sad, but by being able to instantly tell others that is how I am feeling and to then hear back from my friends has really helped. I’ve also learned about things that she did or said that I never knew about, some of which have brought a real smile to my face.”

If you want to, you could use the social media accounts of the person who died to inform their contacts and, maybe to establish a place for people to remember them. Different sites, e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram have different procedures for how to operate or “memorialize” (that is, leave untouched) the account of someone who has died.

Handling these practical matters

The time after someone close has died is the time when you may be feeling most exhausted, confused and anxious. It is so hard to understand what needs to be done and even harder to do it.

Accept any help you are offered by people you trust – for example, to produce and post letters, to look up relevant phone numbers or to sort through paperwork. Check what you actually must do (for example, respond to any requests

or questions from the coroner and what you feel you have to do (for example, tidying up, letting people know) and use any energy you have on the “musts”.

There are many professionals who are there to help you through this time, so talk to the coroner’s officer, your funeral director, your doctor or to one of the helplines listed in section 5 about any concerns you may be having, or to ask them to guide you through the things you need to do.

“The human mind has a way of protecting us in times of crisis: when things get to be too much we close down and blank off our feelings and emotions, allowing us some time to adjust and acclimate.

If you take the pause in the storm to make a short list of your priorities, it may help you focus on the important things while you work through the pain and problems in the months and years ahead.”

Contact details

After someone dies, it can feel as if there is so much to think about and do. The checklist on page 26 may help you consider who you might need to contact. It focuses on persons or organizations that your lost loved one may have had dealings with. Maybe a friend or family member can help find the numbers for you and make some of the calls or send the letters?

On page 27 is a sample letter which you could copy and complete for each contact.

Check List for Critical Things to Address

Organization	Name/reference	Contact details	Informed?
Police officer/Family liaison			
Coroner's officer			
Funeral director			
Suicide Bereavement Liaison Officer			
Medical Examiner/Coroner			
Workplace (yours)			
Workplace (person who died and their national insurance number)			
School/college (of person who died and/or of any bereaved children/young people)			
Voluntary work			
Doctor (theirs/yours)			
Hospital/health services (hospital number)			
Solicitor			
Executor of will			
Life insurance company			
Bank			
Mortgage provider/landlord/housing officer			
Pensions provider(s)			
IRS/State/Local tax office			
Car insurance			
DMV (driving license)			
Phone (mobile/landline)			
TV/internet provider			
Electricity/gas			
Water			
Passport office (passport number)			
Dentist			
Library			
Hire purchase/loans			
Clubs (social/sporting etc)			
Socialmediaaccounts(Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram etc.)			
Other			

Letter of Passing

To whom it may concern

Name of organization:

I wish to notify you of the death of:

Title

First name(s)

Surname

Date of birth

Address

Telephone

Email

Date of death

I understand that the person named above had dealings with your organization.
Please amend your records. Thank you.

Their reference number/membership number for your organization:

If you need more information, my details are:

Name

Address

Telephone (home)
(mobile)

Email

Relationship to the person who died

Signature

Date



3

People with a Particular Connection to the Loss

Some people will have particular responses and reactions to a death by suicide depending on their relationship to the person who died.

This section helps guide people with a particular connection.

Partners

When your partner dies by suicide, it may feel as if you and your life together have been rejected. You may ask unanswerable questions such as: ‘wasn’t I enough reason to stay alive?’. It may be so hard to remember the good parts of your lives together because a death by suicide seems to wipe out the positive memories, at least for a time.

“I’ll never understand – how could all that love we had not have been enough? How could death seem preferable to that...to me?”

If the death was unexpected, you are likely to be feeling as if the ground has disappeared from under your feet. If you have been supporting your partner through mental health issues or previous attempts for a long time, there may be confused feelings of frustration, exhaustion and relief.

Persons whose partner has died by suicide sometimes say the manner of their death can make others treat them in a very different way, as if they were “tainted” or to blame for what has happened. This can sometimes be the case with a partner’s relatives who are, of course, also grieving.

If you and the person who died have children, you may feel extremely hurt and angry on their behalf.

The death of an ex-partner can hurt unexpectedly. You may feel you are not entitled to grieve – but that won’t stop it happening. You shared parts of your lives together and you are allowed to grieve for the person you knew.

Your reasons for grief might not be easily recognized by others. Some find themselves excluded from funeral arrangements and support, either deliberately (for example, because they were in same sex relationships that their families have felt unable to accept) or unintentionally (because your connection was unknown and had perhaps been kept secret from your partner’s family).

“An entire life together – friends, the house, the cat, putting out the bins – yet I wasn’t even seen as his next of kin.”

Parents

For any parent to have a child die – whatever their age, whatever the cause – is devastating. It seems to break the “normal” rules when a child dies before their parent. People talk about the fierce pain of not being able to hold their child, of not seeing them grow up and share their lives, of the loss of their dreams for their child’s future.

Parents can tear themselves apart with questions such as “why?”; “what could I have done to stop this?”; “why didn’t I notice?”; “if only...”. You may feel that others are judging you – and your child – in a way they would not if your child had died in other ways.

Even if your child had grown up and left home many years before their death, you may endlessly wonder if there was anything you could have done that would have changed what happened.

“As his mom, I felt responsible for his death; that I should have seen his inward struggle and that I had missed the signs. The battle to deal with the intensity and complexity of his death hit our family and whole community with the ferocity and fallout of an atom bomb.”

Parents may grieve in different ways. Whilst one may find it impossible to talk about what has happened, seem unmoved and keep themselves busy, another may need to talk, to cry and to express feelings and pain. This may lead to a sense of being estranged from each other at a time when you most need each other’s support and may lead one parent to think that the other does not care. Single or separated parents may feel very alone and unsupported.

Parents whose adult child has died by suicide sometimes feel they have to support their child’s partner and any children first and put their own grief “on hold”. Parents can feel responsible for their child causing pain to others.

It can be especially difficult to support any other children while you are grieving; you know they need you, but you may feel you have nothing left to give.

You may end up hiding your feelings and not talking about the enormity of what has happened. Parents bereaved by suicide worry that their other children will also consider suicide, which can result in becoming super vigilant and over-protective.

If you are a parent whose only child has died, you may wonder how you now define or describe yourself. One parent described it as being “a mother without a child”. It may make answering the question “do you have any children?” very challenging. The Compassionate Friends have an online message board for childless parents (see section 5 for details).

Children and young people

For children of any age, the death of a parent by suicide brings particular challenges. They are likely to feel abandoned and it can be very hard for children to avoid feeling that somehow, they weren't enough of a reason for their parent to keep living.

Some who have survived an attempted suicide explain reaching a point when desperate despair removed their ability to see anything beyond an end to their mental anguish; and a feeling those they love and care about will be better off without them.

Talking to children about how the person died will depend on the child's age or level of understanding.

If there are young children who have lost a parent or sibling to suicide, a natural response is to want to protect them from knowing what has happened, and to think up an alternative explanation for the death. However, because of the likelihood of overheard conversations, media coverage, gossip and visits from the police, it is hard to keep the cause of death a secret.

It is better for children to hear the truth from people who love them than from someone in the playground or on social media: this is a time when they need to feel there are people they can trust.

Talking about what has happened is a chance to answer any questions (within the limits of their age and level of understanding) and to check that they have understood what has been said. It is also a chance to reassure them they were not to blame. Ideally, a parent would be the best person to tell the child what has happened – if this is not possible, ask someone they trust to explain what has happened.

If the child has already been given a different explanation for the death, it is possible to go back and change it. For example, you could say something like: "You know I told you that your dad had an accident and that is why he died. Well, I've been thinking about this and I would like to tell you a little more about how he died. I didn't know what to say when it happened, it was such a shock. Now I'd like you to know what actually happened that day."

You may be wondering whether children should view the person's body or whether they should attend the funeral. These decisions will depend on your knowledge of the child's level of understanding. Children and young people appreciate being given the information to make a choice.

“It was so hard to tell them that their dad had killed himself. I tried to avoid it, said he’d had an accident, but how long could I keep that up for? I thought they’d understand better when they were older, but how old?”

I can’t understand it and I’m an adult – why do I think there is a magic age at which it’ll be OK for them to know?

Then I realized I was just trying to protect myself but more than ever they needed to be able to trust me.

Turns out they’d guessed something wasn’t right all along and they just wanted me to be honest, so we could talk about it together.”

If children wish to see the person’s body, and you feel this is appropriate, prepare them in advance for what they will see and suggest they bring something (e.g. a flower, a card) to leave with the person. If they decide to attend the funeral, consider offering them a role (e.g. choosing some music).

Children and young people will have the same range and intensity of feelings as adults but may need help identifying and expressing their emotions.

It may be the first time that someone they know has died and even the concept of death is new to them. Understanding suicide can be overwhelmingly difficult and confusing.

They may find it very hard to cry: it doesn’t mean they aren’t as distressed as someone who can’t stop crying. The way children grieve is often described as “puddle-jumping”: moving rapidly from great distress to physical activity, for example. This is normal.

Some emotions can be strongly felt by children and young people depending on their age and level of understanding.

It is common for a child who has been bereaved by suicide to feel that they were in some way to blame – for something they did or did not do; or something they said or did not say. Giving regular reassurance is important.

Young people may become extremely angry – with the person who died, with other members of the family, with themselves. Grief can put a great strain on relationships and young people may fall out with members of the family or with friends.

It is also very natural for a child to be scared that someone else in the family may also die by suicide. If you can, reassure them.

You could say something like: “I know I have been very upset, angry and shaky since your Dad died but I am not going anywhere. I will get upset, because I am still so sad that he died, but it does not mean I will die the way he did.”

It is natural to be afraid that affected children will grow up believing that suicide is an option. Making it clear that talking about what has happened is allowed, and that it is helpful to share how you are feeling is important. It also helps to explore with them alternative ways of coping with difficulties.

Children may also appreciate being helped with how to answer questions from others: their friends may be very direct and inquisitive.

Help them find something they are comfortable saying, for example: “My sister died at the weekend. It is very sad. It was suicide.”

Please don’t ask me for any more information. If I feel I can talk about it, sometime, I’ll let you know.”

Some young people may find it easier to talk and may want to say something like: “Please don’t avoid talking about your father just because of what happened to mine. It’s tough but I’d rather we talked about it.” It may be that other young people, in person or through social media, ask intrusive questions; it can help to have a sentence ready such as: “Thanks for being interested, but I’m not going to talk about it so please don’t ask me.”

If the person who died was a friend, young people may need intense support; they may have shared things together and they will wonder if there was more, they could have done. Their friend may be someone they knew online, and other people may not understand the intensity and importance of that connection.

It can help if young people know there are places (such as support organizations, school counsellors, helplines) where they can talk about their feelings, as sometimes they may struggle to share their thoughts with other members of the family.

It is important that children and young people get the right support at school or college. Some places can be very understanding and supportive.

When you call to inform the school or college what has happened, ask if there is someone on the staff with a particular responsibility for supporting students who have been bereaved and try to speak to them. One of the organizations on page 65 could help you – and help the school– know what to say about the death and how school or college can help.

Several child bereavement services (both national and local) can guide you on supporting children bereaved by suicide.

Some of these have programs of support, such as groups, for children and young people who have been bereaved by suicide. See the list of organizations beginning on page 43.

Siblings

If your brother or sister dies, you immediately lose someone who you have grown up with, laughed with, argued with, and with whom you share a lot of memories. You could feel you should have protected them, or you may feel really hurt that they did not turn to you for support, especially if you are the eldest. If you have had a troubled relationship, you may feel as though you are left with unresolved issues.

“He was my baby brother. I don’t know why he couldn’t talk to me. As many teenagers do, he’d often stay up late, playing his music and at times he’d come in and talk to me. I was there that night and I often think why he didn’t come and see me and tell me about how he was feeling.”

Not only do you have your own grief and confusion, but you can feel responsible for helping to support your parents with their grief too, and also feel that you have been given additional responsibility for looking after your parents as they age.

You may also find people enquire after your parents without recognizing that you are also grieving. Sometimes, it may feel as if you have lost all your family at once because your parents withdraw from you into their grief, and it can be hard not to blame the person who has died.

It can be helpful to talk through how you are feeling with your wider family and friends to get their support.

“I often think (she) would have loved this and that as things occur. She would have been an important person on my wedding day and in my children’s lives. Her loss has made me more conscious of my children and their well-being... it can still make me weep when I think about it, to have lost such a kind, beautiful and funny friend to suicide.”

Friends

Most people who have died will have had friends with whom they had shared many experiences and with whom they felt closer than they did with some of their family.

As a friend of the person who died, you may sometimes feel that your grief and needs can be overlooked and that it is difficult to get your voice heard or obtain support. It can be hard to find yourself in a secondary role after the death and having little or no involvement in planning the funeral or other arrangements.

You may also have particularly intense feelings to deal with if you are the person who knew how low your friend was feeling. Maybe they knew things about you that no-one else did – and now, no-one does.

Friends can sometimes feel that they are not “entitled” to any support after someone dies. It is important to remember that what matters is how this loss affects you, not whether you were related to the person who died.

If you are grieving, you deserve to be supported in your grief, and the organizations listed in section 5 will do their best to help.

The role of culture and faith

Some people bereaved by suicide benefit from the help and understanding of their community. Spiritual support can make a significant difference in dealing with the emotional distress.

There are some cultures and faiths with strong views on suicide that may complicate grief and mourning for those bereaved by suicide. You may feel yourself excluded from your community.

For some people bereaved by suicide, the fact that their religion does not seem to join them in loving and respecting the person who died becomes a factor in their leaving that faith. It can be particularly hard when your personal faith opposes suicide.

People in this position have said that they feel certain that their God understands and loves the person who died, even if other believers find that hard to accept.

You may find spiritual support in unexpected places; for example, through support groups for those bereaved through suicide, online or through an interfaith or different faith bereavement group.

“Without the kindness and prayers of our church, I don’t know how my family would have coped with the enormous pain and suffering of losing three members of our family to suicide.

I’d say to other families who become bereaved to seek out people to have around you who will show you compassion.”

4

Getting Through and Facing the Future

Rebuilding your life can seem like an enormous challenge.

This section has advice from people who have been bereaved by suicide.



Taking care of yourself

After someone dies, it may be that you look after everyone except yourself. This can be especially true after a death by suicide, partly because the world has been shattered around you and partly because you feel you can't allow others to look after or support you. Some people have said, after a death by suicide, they feel that they are not 'entitled' to sympathy. You may be the type of person who has a reputation for "coping" and it is important to you not to show the world how you are feeling.

It can sometimes be tempting to become very busy, and to exhaust yourself with tasks so that the tiredness can blot out some of the pain, even for a moment or two. You can become so busy trying to protect others, such as your children, that you don't protect yourself.

Taking care of yourself may mean time spent in the company of friends with whom you can be open, or it may mean choosing to be alone: and you may want different things on different days. It is important to recognize your needs and to make sure you care for them.

"It's like they say on planes – put on your own oxygen mask before you look after others. I found I had to take a few moments for me or I'd have gone under and been no help for anyone."

Finding a listener

People who have been bereaved by suicide say that the most helpful thing is to find someone (or more than one person) who can listen. They may not be the most obvious people – friends may not be as easy to talk to or as available as you might hope. Look out for people who will simply listen and let you "be you".

If friends and family seem to struggle to know how to support you, or if you find it more helpful to talk to someone who does not know you, consider calling or emailing one of the organizations listed in section 6 where you will find people who will listen to how you are feeling.

Having a listener who is on your side does not mean you have to talk to them about how you are feeling. Sometimes their best support may be doing something alongside you in silence such as going for a walk or watching TV.

"After my son died, I found it really difficult – I felt I had failed as a father and a husband. My "practical" self was telling me I had to fix the situation for my wife and two other sons.

I was scared to talk about me and thought I would be perceived as weak and not able to care for my family in the way they needed me to. I had some very dark times, but with time I realized it was the exact opposite – talking

about how I was feeling made me stronger and more able to deal with what had happened. I would say to anyone that it's essential to talk to someone. It does not make you any less of a man to do so.

Losing my son will never change, but I now know that talking makes me better equipped to cope.”

Meeting others

Some people who have been affected by suicide find it helps to connect to others who have been bereaved by suicide. It may be helpful to learn about their feelings and to feel less isolated. This could be through reading articles or books by bereaved people or by attending a support group for people who have been bereaved by suicide.

You can find out what support is available near you on page 43. Groups exist in every part of the country and there is also telephone support and online forums and message boards run by many of the organizations we have listed.

It may be daunting to imagine walking into a room and joining other people who have been bereaved or affected by suicide. Some people fear they will not be able to face other people's pain. However, support groups are designed to do just

that, to support people, and they will do all they can to help people attending for the first time to feel accepted, less isolated and under no pressure to talk about their experiences.

Some people might prefer not to attend a group and instead find support in other ways, and some people might choose to wait a while before going along.

“As I left my first support group meeting for people bereaved by suicide, I felt like a huge weight had been lifted off my shoulders. I knew that I wasn't alone”.

Additional support

You may feel you need or would like some professional support. Some of the mental health organizations listed beginning on page 43 can support you. There are many more out there and you need to find one that you are comfortable with. You could also ask your doctor if counseling is available. It is worth asking if it is possible to see someone who has some experience supporting those bereaved by suicide.

Try and avoid saying to yourself “I'm not ill, I'll be fine, I don't need any help”. Losing someone through suicide is unbelievably tough. It is not a sign of weakness to have to ask others to help you through this difficult time.

Helping others

Some people who have been bereaved by suicide may feel they want to get involved in helping others.

You may find you would like to add your support to one of the organizations that work to reduce suicide. Some of these are particularly aimed at supporting young people to find resilient ways of handling overwhelming feelings.

Some provide support to those who are thinking of suicide. Some provide training to doctors and teachers to help them better identify those who may be at risk of suicidal thoughts.

Or, in time, you may feel that you could support others by volunteering for one of the support organizations offering support to those bereaved by any cause or particularly suicide. You may also be willing to share your story publicly to raise awareness of suicide and encourage others to get help or to get involved with suicide prevention work.

It can feel as if you have to do something in order to make some tiny bit of sense out of what has happened: action can be comforting. It is also very understandable if you feel that you cannot handle anything to do with suicide or other people's grief.


“I think many living with loss know of nothing more powerful, as a force for healing, than to share with others bereaved by suicide and to know that we are not alone.”

Anniversaries

There may be days when it is especially difficult to deal with what has happened. These might include: the birthday of the person who died – and your own birthday; the anniversary of the day they died – and maybe of the funeral; Father's Day or Mother's Day; and occasions such as Christmas.

“Three years ago, the day after my birthday, a close friend took his life. At first, I considered cancelling my party, but then went ahead, bringing friends together in a safe, loving space.

Each year, around my birthday, I know I'll always make time to remember him and celebrate his life.”

A photograph of a desk with a trophy, a pen holder, and a window. The trophy is a large, ornate silver cup with two handles, sitting on a wooden base. In front of it is a silver pen holder with a handle, containing several pens and pencils. To the left is a small potted cactus. In the foreground, there are keys with a red tag and a black wallet. A blue circular graphic is overlaid on the right side of the image, containing text.

“If you’d have told me weeks before
that this would happen, I would have
been certain that I would have been
unable to cope, that my own death
would have been the only solution to
unbearable grief. But it didn’t turn out
that way. It is an exhausting, painful
and long process, but it is possible to
enjoy life again. Slowly, we have found
we have survived and the sun has
come back into our lives.”

Sometimes people say the first time these come around is the worst, others find it isn't until future anniversaries that it hits home that the person won't be able to share these days again. These days will always have a special resonance and it may help to find a way of marking them. This may be something as simple as lighting a candle or visiting a place that has a connection for you to the person who died. Or it could be bringing out the photo album and telling stories while eating their favorite food and listening to their favorite music.

“It’s been six years now, and I mark the anniversary of her death by always being with my daughters, doing something together that she would have enjoyed. And on her birthday, I do her favorite walk to see the view that she so loved. It helps me having these rituals.”

Facing the future

We're not going to tell you how you should grieve; if anyone tries to do so, you can remind them that everyone grieves differently. Grieving for someone has a definite start point but no definitive end point. The truth is, you will always carry what has happened inside you.

You may find that some days all you can think about is the loss and some days you are able to do some tasks or think a little about your next steps in life. You

may switch between these on an hourly basis: this is natural. Sometimes it can feel as if grief takes over.

But people bereaved by suicide report that one day, perhaps against expectations, you may find that there is space for something else – a plan, a hope. And one day, maybe there is a little more space. It isn't so much that your grief is growing smaller; it's that you are growing around the grief.

“Time allowed hope to enter back into our lives like a long-lost friend.”

There will be days when on waking up you will forget what has happened – and feel guilty for having done so. Then there will be days when, for a while, you can laugh with a friend, enjoy a program on TV or admire a view.

And one day, you will find that you remember and think more about the life of the person who died than about how they died. You won't forget that, but it will seem less vivid than who they were and what you shared with them while they were alive.

“You feel like you are in the eye of the storm. But that does pass. You can rebuild your life.”



5

Help and Support

We have listed some organizations and resources to help you.

Some offer helplines and forums to share your feelings with people who understand. Some offer more practical support and information.

Helpful organizations

There are people available to help; who will accept how you are feeling and recognize the difficulties that you are facing. There are also organizations that can give you some support in the practical issues that arise.

All of the information was correct at the time of printing, but you may need to check.

ConnerStrong Foundation is not responsible for, nor does it endorse, the information and advice of the organizations listed.

This is not all of the support available. We encourage you to find a place that is the right fit for you and your needs.

Bereavement support for adults after a death by suicide

Open Arms

Contact Person: Mary Crenshaw

Phone: (571) 299-8278

Email: Dr.M.R.Crenshaw@gmail.com

Woodbridge, VA

Contact for meeting times

Suicide Survivor Support Group Fairfax/Falls Church Community Services Board

8348 Traford Lane, Suite 400
Springfield, VA 22151

Contact Person: Annemarie M. Bezold

Phone ☺ (703) 866-2100

Email:

Annemarie.Bezold@fairfaxcounty.gov

Haven of Northern Virginia

Haven is a nonprofit, nonsectarian community organization of trained volunteers that offers emotional support to the bereaved.

4606 Ravensworth Road
Annandale, VA 22003

Phone:

(703) 941-7000

Email: havenofnova@verizon.net

URL: www.havenofnova.org

Support Group for Adults Survivors of Suicide

Contact Person: Mary Livingston Azoy,
LPC, CPT

Phone: (703) 516-6771

Wendt Center for Loss & Healing

4201 Connecticut Ave., NW Suite 300
Washington, DC 20008

Phone: (202) 624-0010

Fee based, assessment required by
clinician for group placement

My Grief Angels

Proximity based grief support network.
Online books, resources, forums and
network of survivors.

URL: <http://www.mygriefangels.org>

ACTS Helpline

P.O. Box 74
Dumfries, VA 22026

Contact Person: Victoria L. Graham
Phone: (703) 368-4141

PRS CrisisLink

A northern Virginia hotline bringing immediate hope and healing to empower individuals facing serious life challenges, suicidal thoughts, emotional or situational problems.

Phone: (703) 527-4077
Call 24 hours/day

Bereavement support for parents after the death of a child by suicide

Compassionate Friends - Arlington
(meets at Trinity Presbyterian Church - Lewis Room)
5533 16th St. North
Arlington, VA 22205

Contact Person: Lois
Phone: (301)-530-1115 or (301) 520-0225
Email:
arlingtontcf@gmail.com
URL: <http://www.tcfarlington.org>

Compassionate Friends – Fairfax

(meets at St. Mary's Church – historical Hall)

5612 Ox Road
Fairfax Station, VA 22039

Phone: (703) 622-3639
Email: arlingtontcf@gmail.com
URL: <http://www.tcffairfax.org>

Bereavement support for children, teens and young adults (ages 5-25)

Comfort Zone Camps

Provides bereavement camps and community programs around the country for children ages 5-25 that have lost a parent, sibling or primary caregiver. They deal with every cause of death but do have suicide specific programs

6606 W. Broad Street
Suite# 401
Richmond, VA 23230

Phone: (804) 377-3430
URL: www.confortzonecamp.org

Suicide Bereavement for Teens - The Music Loft

Ongoing peer support group for young adults aged 14-18 who have lost a loved one, a friend, or a family member to suicide

20915 Ashburn Road
Ashburn, Virginia 20147

2nd Tuesday of each month 8 – 9:00 PM
Contact Person: Jessica Lincoln
Email: sb4tloudoun@gmail.com

Sibling Survivors of Suicide Loss

Online support forum for those who have lost a brother or sister

<https://www.siblingsurvivors.com/>

The Landing – New Hope Church (non-denominational)

Students in middle and high school dealing with difficult life issues such as (but not limited to); Anger, Fear, Depression, Self-Harm, Bullying, Abuse, Alcohol & Drugs, Food Issues, Pornography, Divorce, Greif & Loss, Self-worth Issues, or any other issues that are interfering with a healthy daily life.

8905 Ox Road
Lorton, VA 22079

Contact Person: Wendy Hunt or Scott Steele

Phone: (703) 971-4673 ext. 120

Email: info@thingscansuck.com

“For a long time after she died all I could think about was her death and the manner in which she died. They were torturous thoughts and it pained me that I couldn’t remember anything of her life beforehand. I had no memories, no dreams. But then good thoughts started to come back. Now when I think of her, we’re always enjoying the time we spent together.”.

Acknowledgments

Many people have helped produce this guide and we thank them all for their careful and thoughtful contributions. This is a living document and your situation & circumstances will dictate similar or very different experiences. We encourage you to utilize all resources and help from this document as well as any others you may come across in your journey.

We would like to thank those who have generously shared resources, information and guidance in assembling this. Our heartfelt thank to those who shared their personal experiences of being bereaved by suicide to help others.

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