

RECOVERING FROM YOUR CHILD'S SUICIDE



The suicide of a child of any age presents unique circumstances that can intensify and prolong the mourning process for parents, family members and friends. Suicide is believed to be a reaction to overwhelming feelings of loneliness, worthlessness, helplessness, hopelessness and depression.

While mental illness often plays a role in suicide, not everyone who dies by suicide is mentally ill. Some families have experienced years of treatments, hospitalizations and medications with their child, while some experience none at all.

Sometimes there are warning signs of the person's intentions. However, clues may be so disguised that even a trained professional or counselor may not recognize them. Occasionally there are no discernible signs and the child's suicide becomes a catastrophic decision that may never be understood.

There is a change taking place in the terminology when talking about suicide. The term "died by suicide" is being adopted. This new language is reflective of the changes in our understanding and compassion as we move away from the harsh statement and stigma of the words "committed suicide", which can be offensive to families whose children have taken their own lives.

After Suicide

Feelings of shock, denial, guilt, anger, and depression are a normal part of grief. These feelings can be especially heightened when a child has died by suicide.

The suicide of a child can raise painful questions, doubts and fears. You may question why your love was not enough to save your child and may fear that others will judge you to be an unfit parent. Both questions may raise strong feelings of failure. Many bereaved parents wrestle with these feelings, but in time come to a place where they understand their child made the choice to end their life.

It is not uncommon for newly bereaved parents to express thoughts of suicide, regardless of how their child has died. Suicide is not inherited. If you are having thoughts of suicide, be gentle with yourself. The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255 and suicidepreventionlifeline.org provides free and confidential emotional support from a trained counselor and is available 24-hours a day/7-days a week. However, if the thoughts turn into plans to end your life, please seek professional support immediately.

Stigma Associated with Suicide

The stigma associated with suicide in our society as a result of cultural and religious interpretations causes some families to be reluctant to talk openly about the cause of their child's death. Keeping the cause of death a secret can deprive you of the joy of speaking about your child with family and friends and may cause isolation between you and those whose support you will need. Finding support from others who allow you to openly share your feelings about your child's, sibling's or grandchild's suicide can help you to focus on your own healing and survival.

Anger

Anger is a common emotion experienced by parents whose child has died by suicide. Anger may be directed at your child, those you believe failed to help your child, God or just the world in general. You may be angry with yourself

because you feel you were unable to save your child. Anger can be destructive, but it can also be constructive. Finding constructive ways of expressing your anger can help in the healing process.

Guilt and Regret

Parents, family, friends, classmates, and even coworkers often have feelings of guilt and regret following a child's suicide. "If only" is a phrase many find themselves repeating over and over. Intellectually, you may come to understand that your child's decision to end their life was their own. Emotionally, however, it may take much longer for you to accept that you are not responsible. Be patient with yourself. Letting yourself fully feel an emotion is often an important part of processing and working through it.

Questioning

Often parents ask "why?" Rarely are there clear answers, which may be highly frustrating. At some point, you may begin to realize that there are some questions about the death of your child that will never be answered.

Depression

Lack of energy, sleep problems, inability to concentrate, not wanting to talk with others, and the feeling there is nothing to live for are all normal reactions in bereavement. Situational depression, as opposed to clinical depression, should eventually subside. This type of depression can be helped by integrating moderate physical activity, plenty of rest and water, and a nutritious diet into a daily routine. Try to allow family and friends to take care of you. You don't have to be strong. Try to stay connected with people you value and trust. Talking with others who have been through a similar situation may also help you to cope. If the depression does not appear to lessen over time, you may want to talk with a qualified professional who can determine how best to help you.

Disillusionment

Often parents find themselves in a spiritual crisis and question their beliefs or feel betrayed by God. Religious concerns about the hereafter may also surface. "Why did God let this happen?" is a question we may never know the answer to. Talking about spiritual and philosophical questions with other parents who have experienced a suicide may be helpful. For those with concerns of a spiritual nature, it could be helpful to find a gentle, caring and nonjudgmental member of the same faith and open yourself to that person.

Ideas to Help You Cope

- Talk about your child's death with family members and discuss your feelings of loss and pain. Talk about the good times you had as well as the times that were not so good. It can be helpful and therapeutic to express feelings rather than to internalize them. Giving the gift of tolerance for all family members to grieve in their own way allows each person to feel validated in their own unique grief experience. Keep in mind that everyone's grief journey is as unique as the relationship they had with the child that died. You may find it helpful to write your feelings or to write a letter to your child; this can be a safe place for you to express some of the things you were not able to say before the death.
- Ask for help. Don't be afraid to let your friends know what you need when they ask; they want to help.
- Consider becoming involved with a self-help bereavement group such as The Compassionate Friends. Through sharing with others who have walked a similar path, you may gain some understanding of your reactions and learn additional ways to cope. Seek professional support and family counseling if necessary.

Give yourself time, time and more time. It takes months, even years, to open your heart and mind to healing. Choose to survive and then be patient with yourself. In time, your grief will soften as you begin to heal and you will feel like investing in life again.

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www.compassionatefriends.org