



Fact sheet 19

Someone I know is bereaved by suicide

People bereaved by suicide may experience a wide range of emotions and they need to be reassured that they are not alone.

This fact sheet provides information to assist in understanding and supporting someone bereaved by suicide.

The importance of understanding how people react to suicide

People bereaved by suicide often experience a very complicated form of bereavement, partly due to the combination of the sudden shock, the unanswered questions of 'Why?' and 'What could I have done?' a sense of rejection, and possibly the trauma of discovering the person who has taken their own life. They may experience a range of emotions including shock, alarm, disbelief, denial, regret, anger, shame, sadness, rejection, yearning, despair, blaming, detachment, loss of confidence and guilt. This range of reactions emphasises the dramatic personal effect that a suicide can have and the important but sometimes difficult task of helping someone bereaved by suicide.

Responding to someone bereaved by suicide

When a person loses someone to accident or illness, family and friends usually spend time listening and providing comfort. After suicide, insensitive or uninformed responses from friends, the community and the media may compound the grief. People bereaved by suicide often tell how they felt stigmatised by friends not speaking to them. When friends have spoken, they may say 'I didn't know what to say' or 'I didn't know what to do'.

Everyone affected by suicide needs to be reassured that they are not alone. The following suggestions may assist in providing understanding and support:

- Be respectful of people who are bereaved and the experience they are going through. Grieving is a normal human reaction, and someone lost to suicide creates a distinctly different and often more intense sense of grief.
- Understand the different type of grief associated with suicide where emotions can fluctuate from feelings of loss and confusion, through guilt and anger, to deep sadness and depression.
- Allow the person to grieve without feeling guilt. The role of the helper is to support, not to cure.
- Give people bereaved by suicide time to begin their healing process. Don't expect that they will be 'over it' in a few weeks or months. It can take many months or years to come to terms with suicide and to find a way to live with the loss. Try to remember birthdays and other special days. Be aware that these may be particularly difficult times.
- Concentrate on doing no harm including:
 - Don't ask for details about the suicide;
 - Don't blame or give reasons for the suicide;
 - Don't avoid talking about the person who has died. It may seem that you are denying they ever existed, which can be very upsetting for people left behind;
 - Don't use clichés that make judgements or assumptions about the person who died, such as 'They've gone to a better place' or 'It was the best thing for them'; and
 - Don't use clichés when talking to the person who is bereaved, such as 'You must be strong' and 'Life goes on'.

The following letter to a newspaper provides guidance on what to do.

'After a recent suicide in our family I would like to let your readers know what helps a survivor of this tragedy:

- *Call immediately after the tragedy, but do not drop by unannounced.*
- *Telephone first; some may not want visitors.*
- *Do not ask for details or jump to any conclusions.*
- *If your initial call seems unwelcome, be forgiving and call later.*
- *What is important to the survivors is that you acknowledge the situation and let it be known that you care.*
- *Tell the survivors what the person meant to you.*
- *Recalling a good (and happy) story will be appreciated.*
- *Don't tell the survivor how the tragedy could have been prevented as it makes the survivor feel at fault.*
- *Do not place the blame on anyone.*
- *Let the survivor talk and be an attentive listener.*
- *Tell the survivor you are sorry that this has happened, that life is sometimes very unfair – but never say, 'it's probably all for the best'. The family members of a suicide victim will not be comforted by these words.*
- *If you can't make a personal call, send a note.*
- *If you aren't sure what to say, 'thinking of you' will convey your message adequately.*
- *Do not hesitate to send a belated sympathy card or note if you failed to do so immediately. The survivor will appreciate being remembered even though your message was quite late.*

The hurt of being ignored is very difficult to forget, I know.

*Signed,
A Survivor'*

More information

- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) – offers support to the newly bereaved and provides opportunities for survivors to get involved in a range of activities: www.afsp.org
- Console – Living with Suicide (Ireland) is a registered charity supporting and helping people bereaved through suicide in Ireland. Includes detailed fact sheets on suicide and bereavement: www.console.ie
- Department of Health, UK – Help is at Hand: a resource for people bereaved by suicide and other sudden, traumatic death: www.dh.gov.uk
- Ministerial Council for Suicide Prevention – Information and Support Pack for People Bereaved by Suicide or Other Sudden Death, 2nd edition: www.mcsp.org.au
- New South Wales Government Department of Health – Care and support pack for families and friends bereaved by suicide: www.health.nsw.gov.au
- SANE Helpline – offers a wide range of information on mental illness and suicide prevention: Ph: 1800 18 SANE (7236); www.sane.org
- The Survivors Division of American Association of Suicidology (AAS) – dedicated to understanding the issues of survivors of suicide and incorporating these in suicide prevention efforts: www.suicidology.org