

Surviving Suicide

Transforming Grief Into Hope

STATEWIDE OFFICE OF SUICIDE PREVENTION, FLORIDA OFFICE OF DRUG CONTROL

The term suicide “survivor” refers to family members and close friends who are left behind following the death of a loved one by suicide. Exact survivor rates are unknown, but conservative estimates suggest there are at least 4.4 million survivors in the United States (suicidology.org). The death of a family member is one of the most substantial life stressors any individual can endure. It is widely accepted among scientists, therapists, and the public that suicide causes a particularly troublesome and lengthy grieving period (Ellenbogen & Gratton, 2001). Suicide survivors may have a tendency to hide their grief as they struggle to understand why their loved one ended his or her life; they often do not receive the degree of understanding from support networks they need, and tend to blame someone (often themselves) other than the victim for the death (Ellenbogen & Gratton, 2001).

But just like other bereaved persons, survivors need help and support to heal. Dr. Alan D. Wolfelt provides the following list of ways to promote healing on the website survivors ofsuicide.com.

Accept the immensity of the grief. Survivors don’t “get over it.” Instead, with support and



understanding they can come to reconcile themselves to its reality. Be patient, compassionate, and understanding.

Listen with your heart. Assisting suicide survivors means you must break down the terribly costly silence. Helping begins with your ability to be an active listener. Your physical presence and desire to listen without judgment are critical helping tools.

Avoid simplistic explanations and clichés. Comments like “You are holding up so well”, “Time will heal all wounds”, “Think of what you still have to be thankful for”, or that their loved one was “crazy or insane” are not constructive and they can only complicate the grieving process.

Understand the uniqueness of suicide grief. No one will respond to the death of someone loved in exactly the same way. While it may be possible to talk about similar phases, everyone is different. Remember the death of someone to suicide is a shattering experience – your friend’s life is under reconstruction.

Be aware of holidays and anniversaries. These events emphasize the absence of the person who has died. Respect the pain as a natural expression of the grief process.

Be aware of support groups. In a group, survivors can connect with other people who share the commonality of the experience. They are allowed and encouraged to share their stories.

Respect faith and spirituality. If faith is part of their life, let them express it in ways that seem appropriate. If they are mad at God, encourage them to talk about it. Do not judge them.

WARNING SIGNS

Warning signs typically include:

- Withdrawing from friends and family
- Depression
- Loss of interest in usual activities
- Sadness, hopelessness, irritability
- Changes in appetite, weight, behavior, level of activity or sleep patterns
- Loss of energy
- Making negative comments about oneself
- Recurring suicidal thoughts or fantasies
- Sudden change from extreme depression to being “at peace”
- Talking, writing, or hinting about suicide
- Previous attempts
- Feelings of hopelessness or helplessness
- Purposefully putting affairs in order
- Giving away possessions
- Sudden interest in wills or life insurance

