

Coping with Suicide

When a person dies by suicide, the grief felt by friends, family members, and coworkers can be complicated. Not only do survivors feel the pain and sadness of loss, but they're also left with unanswered questions about why the person chose to die. The normal range of emotions associated with grief and loss tend to be experienced much more intensely because of the complicated circumstances of the death.

Common reactions to suicide

Shock: This is usually the first reaction to a suicide and can be accompanied by a feeling of physical and emotional “numbness.” This is the mind’s way of protecting us from feelings and thoughts that are too overwhelming to deal with all at once. This numbness allows us to deal with the pain in smaller, more manageable steps.

Confusion: Fewer than 20 percent of suicide victims leave an explanation for survivors. (Cerel et al., 2014) Even with a suicide message, many questions remain for those left behind. One of the hardest tasks for survivors is accepting that they may never know the answer to the most haunting question – “Why?”

Anger: Reaction to suicide is further complicated by the fact that friends and family often feel intense anger at the victim for taking his or her own life. Survivors may also find their anger being directed toward doctors, therapists, family members or themselves. Survivors need to give themselves permission to have these feelings. Accepting them as a normal part of the grieving process is an essential part of healing.

Guilt: Loved ones can struggle with ongoing thoughts of “what if/if only” scenarios following a suicide. “What if I had done this ...,” “If only I hadn’t said that ...” “Why didn’t I notice the warning signs ...?” In time, survivors learn that they didn’t have control over the person’s choices and behaviors. There is no fault or blame to assign.

Despair and depression: Feelings of sadness and despair can affect a survivor’s sleep, appetite, concentration and hope for the future. These feelings may lead to depression. Survivors should not hesitate to seek help from professionals as they learn to cope with their reactions. Survivors may also be traumatized by having witnessed the suicide or by finding the victim. In these cases, they may also experience stress reactions associated with trauma, such as nightmares and flashbacks.

Stigma and shame: Societal, cultural, religious, and personal beliefs about suicide can add a feeling of shame. Survivors may feel uncomfortable about revealing the cause of death, or be unable to talk about it because they feel ashamed of the person’s choice to die. For this reason and/or out of respect to the deceased, families may choose to publicize a death by suicide as “accidental.” Loved ones may end up feeling very isolated and unsupported when struggling with grief due to suicide.

Understanding: In many cases, a suicide occurs after years of coping with emotional pain and/or suffering from a difficult physical condition. Understanding that this burden was more than the person could bear, a loved one may sympathize with the individual’s choice to bring it to an end. These thoughts can feel wrong, as if one is condoning the suicide. In fact, it is simply an indicator of the compassion felt for the person who committed suicide.

The following are some suggestions for how to cope with the suicide of a coworker

One of the most difficult emotions to manage after the suicide of a coworker is guilt. Coworkers are often like a second family, and a suicide can lead us to question what we “could have” or “should have” done differently. It can feel like signs were missed. It’s important to acknowledge this as a normal reaction, but not dwell on hindsight. The reality is that there is often no clear indicator that the person is considering suicide.

Coworkers in mourning can be a natural support system for each other. There is comfort in knowing you are all going through the same thing and probably having many of the same reactions. If needed, there are also formal support groups for survivors in most communities.

Recognize that suicide may add more layers to the grieving process and can intensify all the normal grief reactions. Do not hesitate to seek professional support to help you through the process.

It is important to remember the life of your coworker, rather than focusing on how they died. Consider a memorial service or appropriate workplace ritual that can honor your coworker in a positive way.

Eventually, you may begin to sort out the conflicting emotions associated with a suicide. You may find a way to accept the circumstances surrounding the death. Remember that not everyone will arrive at this place at the same time, if at all. No two people will grieve in the same way. Allow your coworkers to find their way forward in their own time, while reminding each other that we can best honor a person’s life by the way we carry on with our own.

How you can help someone who is grieving a loss by suicide

Let the person know you are available to listen and give support. This is especially important after the first few weeks, when things “get back to normal” for everyone except the bereaved. If you don’t know what would be helpful, ask.

Be patient, compassionate and understanding. Try to avoid clichés that provide a simple explanation for their loss. “Everything happens for a reason.” Accept that survivors will be struggling with intense emotions that may go beyond the grief felt in other types of deaths.

The stigma, guilt and blame that survivors can feel often isolates them from others. They may be ashamed to talk about their loss. Follow the lead of the bereaved. If they are able to discuss the loss as a suicide, don’t be afraid to acknowledge that. If they are unable to talk about it as such, use the same language they are using to discuss their loss.

Provide unconditional support without making judgmental statements about what could have or should have been done differently. Listening without judgment is the best resource you can offer. A nonjudgmental listener can help the person process and begin to move past feelings of guilt.

If you or someone you know is struggling with a loss by suicide, your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is a good source for locating counseling services and information on coping with grief. Mental Health America (mentalhealthamerica.net) and the National Institute of Mental Health (nimh.nih.gov) also provide information and resources on coping with grief for friends and family members of suicide victims.

Reference

Cerel, J., Moor, M., Brown, M.M., van de Venne, J., & Brown, S.L. (2014). Who leaves suicide notes? A six-year population-based study. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, (45)3: 326-334. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sltb.12131>