

# Coping with Your Emotions Following the Suicide of a Loved One

## Objective

To identify ways to cope with the loss of a loved one to suicide.

## What to Know

Losing a loved one to suicide can add another level of pain to your grieving. You might be overwhelmed by conflicting emotions. Common reactions are described below, along with suggestions about how to cope. Check off any of the following you are currently experiencing.

\_\_\_\_\_ **Shock** is a common reaction to an extremely stressful or traumatic event. You might have emotional numbness or “brain fog,” making it hard to understand or accept what happened. Your memory, concentration, and organization skills might also be affected. You can manage shock by:

- taking slow, deep breaths several times a day.
- doing your best to pull yourself back to the present moment.
- asking for help and accepting help when it is offered to you.

Note: If you feel disoriented, disconnected, or numb for more than a few weeks, or your feelings are preventing you from functioning, seek help from a doctor or mental health professional.

\_\_\_\_\_ **Disbelief** allows you to gradually process and integrate what happened. Over time it will subside. You can:

- slowly acknowledge what happened and gradually accept reality to begin to move forward with your healing.
- focus on positive memories of your loved one.
- reduce your focus on the details of how they died.
- allow emotions to ebb and flow as you move through the grieving process.

\_\_\_\_\_ **Shame** stems from thinking you did something wrong, and may include feelings of embarrassment, disgrace, or humiliation. Remember to:

- be gentle with yourself.
- acknowledge you did the best you could with the information you had at the time.
- reassure yourself that the suicide was not your fault – you did nothing wrong.
- connect with others and talk openly about suicide and its impact.

\_\_\_\_\_ **Regret** happens when you reflect on all the “what if” scenarios. You might often wonder what you could have done differently. Regret might be combined with guilt. You can manage regret and guilt by:

- understanding the difference between guilt and regret, and instead of saying, “I feel guilty about \_\_\_\_\_,” say, “I regret that I didn’t know about \_\_\_\_\_ at the time, or I might have responded differently.”
- knowing you did not intentionally do something wrong.
- accepting you did the best you could with the information you had at the time.
- exploring whether there is something you feel bad about.

\_\_\_\_\_ **Anger** is a common reaction to grief, and suicide can make you feel that your life has been changed without your permission. Things might feel out of control. It might seem like trust, safety, and security have been compromised. You may be angry at yourself, the deceased person, your loved ones, or at God or a higher power. Try to:

- avoid judging your anger as a “bad” emotion.
- understand and identify other feelings that might be associated with your anger, like fear, rejection, or vulnerability.
- find an outlet to safely communicate and express your anger.
- learn how to release and defuse anger in effective, safe ways, like exercising, breathing techniques, journaling, taking time-outs, or visualization exercises.

\_\_\_\_\_ **Blame** occurs when you believe there has been a wrongdoing and someone should be held responsible. You might blame yourself, another person, or a group of people. You can:

- remind yourself suicide is a multi-factored event and no one thing or person can cause someone to take their own life.
- consider whether blaming others is worth the risk of losing those relationships.
- do a forgiveness ritual.
- get assistance with any legal or advocacy needs related to the circumstances of your loved one’s death, if necessary.

\_\_\_\_\_ **Abandonment or rejection** can leave you wondering how you will deal with challenges on your own. Try to:

- remember that your loved one did not necessarily want to leave you. They may not have been capable of considering other ways to end their pain.
- understand your loved one may have been convinced that everyone would be better off without them.
- focus on the love and connection you had with your loved one.
- remember their choices had nothing to do with their love for you.

\_\_\_\_\_ **Fear** is commonly experienced when things feel out of control. You might wonder how you will get through this, and if anything will ever be the same again. You may be afraid of being alone or what the future holds. Prevent these fears from interfering with your healing or taking over your life by:

- focusing on your breathing. Take five long, deep breaths when fear arises.
- identifying what you are afraid of.
- talking about your fears with someone you trust.

- doing a calming activity like going for a walk, reading a book, or writing in a journal.

\_\_\_\_ **Relief** might be a surprising and confusing reaction. No matter the cause, relief can be unsettling and cause you to feel guilt. You can:

- accept that *whatever* you feel is valid.
- understand it is normal to experience profound grief and relief at the same time.
- express your conflicting feelings to others. You might say, “Feeling relieved that she is no longer in pain doesn’t change how heartbroken I am or how much I love her.”
- process these feelings with a mental health professional.

\_\_\_\_ **Deception and secrecy** might cause you to feel shocked, betrayed, and angry that your loved one had secrets, engaged in reckless behaviors, or broke your trust. You might question the relationship and whether you ever really knew them. You can:

- remember your loved one may not have been thinking clearly before their death.
- learn about how their brain health may have negatively impacted their behavior.
- build confidence in yourself by talking to someone you trust.
- explore how forgiveness can help you heal.

## What to Do

What are the two strongest emotions you are experiencing now?

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How have you been coping with these emotions?

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Are you willing to try some of the suggestions to cope outlined above? Why or why not?

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What helps you on particularly bad days?

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According to The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, there are four ways you can take care of yourself following the loss of a loved one to suicide. Visit <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/> or call 1-800-273-8255 24 hours a day, 7 days a week in the United States for more information

about the resources they offer. The four ways are included in the following chart. Do you best to complete each section.

<p><b>1. Find a support group.</b> Your local community might have resources, or you can explore online groups: <a href="https://afsp.org/find-a-support-group/">https://afsp.org/find-a-support-group/</a> <a href="https://samaritanshope.org/our-services/grief-support/">https://samaritanshope.org/our-services/grief-support/</a> <a href="https://save.org/what-we-do/grief-support/find-a-support-group/">https://save.org/what-we-do/grief-support/find-a-support-group/</a> Did you find a support group? Why or why not?</p>	<p><b>2. Do what feels right.</b> You do not have to talk about it right now. If you choose to discuss your loss, who are you most comfortable talking to? What else feels right to you, right now?</p>
<p><b>3. Write.</b> Writing a letter to your deceased loved one or journaling about your feelings can help. This is a safe place for you to express some of the things you were unable to say before their death. Spend some time writing. How did writing help you?</p>	<p><b>4. Ask for help.</b> Let your loved ones, co-workers, and others support you, or look for resources in your community such as meal services. From whom can you receive support? What services would help you during this time?</p>

### Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_  
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

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