

Suicide is a very tragic and complicated act. For the survivors left behind, 'the suffering, the questioning and the pain of bereavement remain, often for the rest of their lives' (Fielden, 2003)

Research has shown that people who have been bereaved by suicide 9 times more likely to take their own life.

Suicide impacts the lives of over 16,000 Australians each year – they need support and hope (S.Clark, 2000).



This fact sheet provides information about suicide survivors and their experience. It also provides a list of some ways to support survivors as well as a list of resources that may be useful.

## The experience of survivors of suicide

'The experience of bereavement following a suicide can be intense and overwhelming. People bereaved by suicide may experience a wide range of emotions and they need to be reassured that they are not alone. The stigma associated with suicide can make it difficult for those left behind to feel that they can talk about their loss openly' ([www.livingisforeveryone.com.au](http://www.livingisforeveryone.com.au)).

Below are some quotes from those who have lost a loved one through suicide:

*"Guilt and anger came together"* – John

*"The worst question you keep beating yourself up with is why?"* – Kim

*"I had only thought suicide was something that happened to dysfunctional families and never, in my wildest dreams would have imagined it striking my family and particularly, my son"* – Kim

*"It took me five years after he died before I felt any peace whatsoever"* – Aline

*"I got so depressed I got suicidal... and I can remember feeling I just wanted the pain to go away"* - Margie

(These quotes are taken from video stories that can be found on the Suicide Call Back Service website: <http://www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au>).

## Issues faced by survivors of suicide:

When someone takes their own life, the lives of those who love them are changed forever.

Below is a list of some of the issues faced by survivors of suicide:

- Guilt and shame over the suicide prevent many families from getting the help they need to work through the crisis. Some families will use another method of death when telling others that their loved one died (e.g. accident) because they do not want say that they took their own life.
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- Feelings of grief combined with feelings of anger and guilt often leave the survivor in a state of emotional confusion. They can seesaw between feeling guilty that they didn't/couldn't help their loved one and feeling angry at them at the same time. This anger can reinforce guilt, as they can then feel bad for being angry at their loved one.
- If the deceased suffered from illness (either physical or mental) survivors may have feelings of relief which is often complicated by feelings of guilt.
- Trust can become difficult for survivors after the death of a loved one. Re-establishing trust with others and learning to understand that you cannot control other people, or always know what is going to happen, is vital.
- Suicides are almost always unpredicted and sudden. This leaves survivors in a state of shock that can last for a long period of time. Having to manage the chaos that occurs immediately after the event and then adjust to the sudden loss of their loved one means that survivors are often in 'survival' mode for while before they can start to emotionally begin to process what has occurred.
- Why? Is the biggest question asked by survivors. The answer to this question is usually very complicated and may never be fully answered. Learning to be ok with not knowing 'why' is an important part of the grieving process.

### How to help

#### Do:

1. Be aware of your own grief. All of us have been affected by loss in some way and it is not uncommon for feelings of grief to resurface when we are helping others who are dealing with pain and
2. Listen. The most effective way to help is just to listen. Through listening you can truly understand where the survivor is at and what their needs are. Remember, a lot of clues will be found not in what is said, but in how it is said.
3. Be on the lookout for signs that the survivor is struggling with their grief. If you feel that the person is 'at risk' find a way to raise this with them and encourage them to seek additional help.

#### Don't

1. Feel the need to talk all the time. Sometimes the survivor may just want to sit quietly in your company. Don't be afraid of the silence.
2. Use clichés. Clichés such as "Be positive" or "Time heals all wounds" will not help. In fact it will probably make the survivor angry because they'll think you don't understand.
3. Over-assist. Part of the recovery process is slowly taking back control over the day to day tasks of life. If you continually do for them the things they can do for themselves, they will begin to lose confidence in their own ability to cope.
4. Try to offer solutions for the 'why' questions. Why is the biggest question asked by survivors and it is important that you do not try to offer your own interpretation or thoughts. Rather, spend time exploring how they see things and be aware that very often there is no clear answer for the why.



### Useful resources and websites

- <http://www.livingisforeveryone.com.au>
- [http://www.suicidology.org/c/document\\_library/get\\_file?folderId=232&name=DLFE-23.pdf](http://www.suicidology.org/c/document_library/get_file?folderId=232&name=DLFE-23.pdf)
- [http://survivorsofsuicide.com/help\\_heal.shtml](http://survivorsofsuicide.com/help_heal.shtml)
- [http://www.sprc.org/featured\\_resources/customized/survivors.asp](http://www.sprc.org/featured_resources/customized/survivors.asp)

### Contact Us:

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