

The Role of Survivors in Preventing Suicide

If you are thinking of hurting yourself, or if you are concerned that someone else may be suicidal, call the [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](https://www.nationalsuicideline.org/) at 1-800-273-TALK (8255).

When I got home, there was a phone message from my mother. I knew from her voice that something was very wrong. When I called her back and asked, "What happened?" she said she couldn't tell me, that it was too difficult. I insisted, and she replied with words I will never forget: "Kathy's dead." I went numb and dropped the phone. When I picked up the phone, my mother told me that Katherine had taken her own life. I couldn't believe it. Why? I was brought into the world with an older sister, and I didn't know how to make sense of it without her. I was devastated. As the weeks passed, I needed support, but my friends and family seemed uncomfortable talking with me about Kathy's death. I felt alienated and alone. Finding a survivor support group helped me: at last it felt okay to talk about being angry at Kathy and missing her at the same time. Although my life will never be the same, I am beginning to find time to focus on other things.



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Introduction: The Loss of a Loved One by Suicide

Suicide takes the lives of about 34,000 people in the U.S. each year (CDC, 2007). Each of these deaths reverberates through our homes, workplaces, schools, religious organizations, and the other social networks. Those experiencing the suicide of a family member, friend, or colleague are referred to as “survivors.”

With suicide, survivors face not only the loss of someone close to them, but also the difficult feelings connected to the way the person died. Surviving a suicide can involve a range of feelings like shock, sadness, numbness, depression, guilt, anger, confusion, and relief. Some survivors may find they can't sleep or eat, or they may lack energy. Many survivors struggle to understand the reasons for the suicide, asking themselves “Why?” over and over again. They may replay their loved ones' last days, searching for answers. Survivors may also fear negative reactions from others, causing them to feel ashamed or isolated. They may find it challenging to talk with friends or acquaintances about the death.



What helps survivors to heal from suicide loss? Many survivors find it helpful to consider that events and circumstances leading up to a suicide are complicated, often involving a combination of painful suffering, hopelessness, and mental illness. In fact, most people who die by suicide have a diagnosable mental illness at the time of their death.

It helps survivors to know that they are not alone in their loss. Getting support from other survivors can help build understanding and reduce isolation. Some survivors have found or created resources that support their healing. These pages feature many of those resources.

Taking Care of Yourself

Extra attention to self care is important, especially in the days and weeks immediately following the loss of a friend or loved one to suicide. Survivors have suggested the following ways to care for yourself if you have lost someone to suicide:

- Try to focus on what you need to do to heal, rather than replaying actions or events from the past.
- Understand that intense feelings of grief, anger, rejection, guilt, and regret are normal, as are confusion and forgetfulness.
- Keep in mind that family and friends may experience a feeling of relief when someone who may have been difficult for them dies by suicide. But relief may also be followed by guilt.
- Explain the situation to other people in the manner most comfortable to you. Many survivors find it best to simply acknowledge that the death was a suicide.
- In the days and weeks following a suicide loss, delay major decisions that can wait.
- Remember that people grieve in different ways. There is no one “right” way to mourn the death of a loved one.
- Spend time outdoors, listening to music, playing with a pet, or in other ways that bring comfort.
- Recognize that you will heal in time.

It can be helpful to find someone to talk with as you struggle with the loss. You might choose to talk with a friend, relative, religious or spiritual advisor, or mental health professional.

Survivor support groups can also be helpful. These groups offer an opportunity to share your feelings and experiences with others who have lost someone to suicide. Interacting with other survivors who are further along with grieving can bring hope. Information on locating survivor support groups in your area is included under the Resources (If necessary, add “for Survivors” to the link here since that is now the name of that section) section below.

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Seeking Professional Support

Some survivors seek the support of a mental health professional to facilitate their bereavement. If your loved one died while under the care of a mental health professional you may find it difficult to accept that counseling can help you. But it often can, especially if you locate a mental health professional who is knowledgeable about bereavement after suicide.

To locate mental health professionals in your area, contact your health insurance carrier, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (800-273-TALK (8255)), local crisis and information hotlines, community mental health organizations, or the Mental Health Services Locator, a national online directory of mental health services by location.



Supporting Survivors

When a loved one has died by suicide, survivors of suicide loss will experience feelings that are powerful and wide-ranging. What is the best way to help a survivor? Friends and family close to survivors can offer support in different ways, whether or not they themselves have survived a suicide loss. Survivors may be hesitant reach out to friends or acquaintances because a great deal of stigma still surrounds suicide. If you are close to a survivor, this section describes different ways friends and family can help in the days, weeks, and months following a suicide.

Sometimes survivors find it particularly helpful to talk with other survivors. Survivors have formed organizations to support each other and to educate the public about suicide prevention. Many of these organizations hold regularly scheduled support groups and can provide information about local resources. Information on how to locate survivor support groups in your area is included under Resources (If necessary, add “for Survivors” to the link here since that is now the name of that section) section below.

The following suggestions will help you understand what other survivors have found comforting. Before you assume any responsibilities, it's important to ask survivors whether they need your help. Some survivors gain strength from performing responsibilities, while others prefer to rely on friends or family. It may be reassuring to know that much of the recommended support is what you would offer a friend grieving any death. To support survivors:

- Surround them with as much love and understanding as you can.
- Give them some private time. Be there, and let them know you are available, but allow them time on their own.
- Let them talk, and show you understand. Withhold advice unless they ask for it.
- Encourage the family to make decisions together.
- Expect that they will become tired easily, and arrange rest time for them.
- Let them decide what they are ready for. Offer your ideas but let them decide themselves. It might be helpful for you to:
 - Keep a list of phone calls, visitors and people who bring food and gifts.
 - Offer to make calls to people they wish to notify.
 - Keep the mail organized. Keep track of bills, cards, newspaper notices, etc.
 - Help with errands and routine household chores.
 - Offer to help with documentation needed by the insurance company, such as a copy of the death certificate.
 - Offer to help with the deceased's belongings by doing inventory, moving items to storage, distributing among family members, or donating items.
- Give special attention to members of the family -- at the funeral and in the months to come. Some survivors appreciate support on holidays or recognition of dates such as the deceased's birthday.
- Allow them to express as much grief as they are willing to share.

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- Allow them to talk about the special qualities of the loved one they have lost.
- Write down a story about their loved one (especially one that they might not know about) and give it to them to read when they feel ready.
- Don't be afraid to say their loved one's name. Don't worry about making them sad; it hurts more when no one talks about the person they lost.
- Let them know it's alright to ask for help and encourage them to seek specialized support if they need it.

Helping Young People Cope with Suicide

Understanding and coming to terms with a suicide loss can be difficult for all of us, but young people may find it especially hard. Though deeply affected by a suicide loss, children and adolescents may not have developed the same coping skills as adults and it may be many years before they are able to fully process the loss. Young people need help and guidance from trusted adults to mourn the loss of a loved one and cope with the range of feelings brought about by a suicide.



How do young people react to suicide loss? Children often lack a firm concept of death as being irreversible. Both children and adolescents personalize the behavior of others, which can create feelings of responsibility for actions over which they have no influence. They may feel grief, anger, confusion, and, often, abandonment. Some strive to become “perfect,” believing that it was their bad behavior that caused the deceased to “leave.” Others may act out and behave badly as a way to express their anger or confusion.

To support a young person who has lost someone one to suicide, keep the following suggestions in mind:

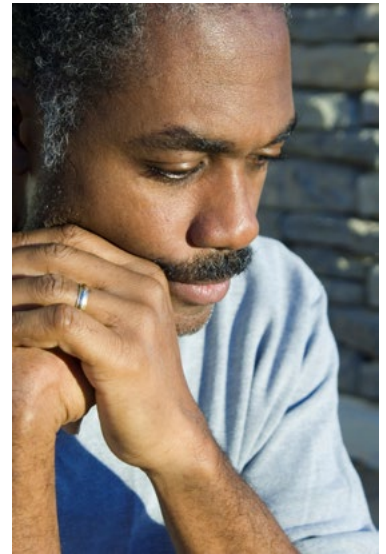
- Offer simple statements, such as, “he/she died by suicide.” Use words like “died” rather than “gone away” so there will be no misunderstanding.
- If mental illness was a factor, explain that the person died of an illness. For example, “many people who die by suicide suffer from an illness called depression.” You may also want to reassure him or her that most people with depression do not die by suicide.
- Reassure him or her that that the death was not his or her fault.
- Return to normal routines when possible. Encourage him or her to continue seeing friends and engaging in social and recreational activities.
- Make sure that a trusted adult is always available.
- Get professional help if he or she behaves in a way that concerns you, especially if the behavior lasts for an extended period of time.
- Let his or her school know about the suicide so that teachers and counselors can be supportive.
- Don't hide your grief: children and youth learn to grieve by watching adults.
- Consider the resources below or the advice of a professional for specific ways to talk to a young person and support the healing process following a suicide loss.
- The suicide of someone in the community or media reports about suicide may influence vulnerable young people to think about suicide. Adults should be sensitive to young people and familiar with the Warning Signs (This link is not working in the online version. Is that because the actual title of the section is “Recognizing Warning Signs and Risk Factors”?) listed below.

Recognizing Warning Signs and Risk Factors

Experiencing a suicide loss can make maintaining health, including mental health, difficult. In addition, for some survivors losing a friend or loved one to suicide may elevate the risk for thinking about, attempting, or even dying by suicide. Survivors, friends or family of survivors, and other people in support roles should be familiar with the warning signs, risk factors, and protective factors listed below and know how to help.

Warning Signs for Suicide Prevention

The warning signs below identify a person who may be at high risk for suicide. The risk is greater if a behavior is new or has increased and if it seems related to a painful event, loss, or change. Recognizing the warning signs and getting help for someone at risk may save his or her life.



- Talking about wanting to die or kill oneself
- Looking for a way to kill oneself, such as searching online or buying a gun
- Talking about feeling hopeless or having no reason to live
- Talking about feeling trapped or in unbearable pain
- Talking about being a burden to others
- Increasing the use of alcohol or drugs
- Acting anxious or agitated; behaving recklessly
- Sleeping too little or too much
- Withdrawing or feeling isolated
- Showing rage or talking about seeking revenge
- Displaying extreme mood swings

These signs are especially critical if the individual has attempted suicide in the past or has a history of or current problem with depression, alcohol, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

In addition to these warning signs, events that trigger shame, despair, or humiliation can play a role in suicide risk. In particular, losses can elevate suicide risk. Losses—which can seem more profound to vulnerable people—can include loss of relationships, financial security, or status, or a decline in health. Some people anticipate losses and negative outcomes before they actually occur—such as when a job layoff is impending or a relationship is threatened—and experience the full distress of a loss. These people may become extremely distressed before a loss and need help urgently.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline provides immediate 24-hour assistance at no charge to individuals in suicidal crisis by connecting them to the nearest available suicide prevention and mental health service provider through a toll-free telephone number: (800) 273-TALK (8255). Information can also be found on their website at <http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org>.

Risk Factors

Risk factors are characteristics and conditions that could be associated with higher a risk of suicide. The presence of risk factors does not mean a survivor will automatically develop suicidal thoughts or behaviors. However, because survivors may be vulnerable, it is important to consider risk factors in addition to the warning signs (see above).

- Previous suicide attempt or multiple attempts
- Mental illness, substance abuse, or co-occurring mental illness and substance abuse
- History of trauma and abuse
- Family history of suicide
- Stigma associated with help-seeking
- Barriers to accessing health care
- Major loss (job, financial, social)
- Local clusters of suicide that have a contagious influence
- Access to lethal means, especially firearms

To explain a bit about the last point, if a person has access to lethal means, making them less available reduces the person's risk for suicide. Because firearms are the most lethal among suicide methods, it is important that you remove them, or, second best, lock them and store the ammunition separately. For more information on reducing lethal means, see Means Matter in the Resources (If necessary, add "for Survivors" to the link here since that is now the name of that section) section below.

If you are concerned about someone, contact a mental health professional or other care provider. They can help determine the level of risk and how best to respond.

Protective Factors

Protective factors are characteristics and conditions that reduce the likelihood of suicide and can counterbalance risk factors. The protective factors listed below are those that can be influenced by survivors and people supporting them.

- Strong family relationships
- Connections to community support
- Effective clinical care if a person has mental, physical, or substance use disorders
- Support for help-seeking behavior
- Reduced access to lethal means of suicide
- Problem-solving and conflict resolution skills



Relationships are key to many of the protective factors listed above, helping people to cope with loss and build resilience.

Survivors: Getting Involved

Grieving the loss of a friend, colleague, or loved one to suicide is a different process for each individual survivor. For most, the deceased is never forgotten but with time the intensity of feelings related to the loss diminishes. For some survivors, getting involved in suicide prevention efforts is a way to bring some meaning to their loss.

Some survivors become involved by participating in local events or community or statewide suicide prevention coalitions. Others participate in or lead survivor support groups. Some survivors support national suicide prevention or mental health organizations, or advocate for policies that advance suicide prevention.

The following list of resources may be helpful to survivors who are considering becoming involved in suicide prevention efforts:

- “When You are Ready” Survivor Web Page, American Foundation of Suicide Prevention
- “Survivors of Suicide Pioneers” Presentation, American Association of Suicidology
- Out of the Darkness Community and Overnight Walks
- “What You Can Do” Webpage, Suicide Prevention Action Network

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Resources for Survivors

National Suicide Prevention Organizations – Survivor Information

American Association of Suicidology (AAS) (<http://www.suicidology.org/>)

Is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the understanding and prevention of suicide. The focus of their suicide loss survivors section is to understand the issues of survivors of suicide and incorporate them into suicide prevention efforts. Resources on the AAS website include articles from the Surviving Suicide newsletter, fact sheets, and personal stories. AAS also has a clinician survivor task force. Survivor information can be found at <http://www.suicidology.org/web/guest/suicide-loss-survivors>. AAS also organizes a one-day “Healing After Suicide” Conference in conjunction with its annual conference. Designed for survivors, survivor support group leaders, and caregivers, the purpose of the Healing Conference is to provide survivors with educational tools and resources to help deal with their personal grief; assist mental health providers and other caregivers in understanding the unique grief and needs of survivors; and provide assistance to leaders of existing support groups and to participants who want to establish new support.

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) (<http://www.afsp.org/>)

Offers information for survivors, including how to help children cope and how to find a suicide survivor support group. AFSP sponsors National Survivors of Suicide Day (<http://www.afsp.org/survivorday>), a day of healing for those who have lost someone to suicide. Every year, AFSP sponsors an event to provide an opportunity for the survivor community to come together for support, healing, information and empowerment. Other AFSP survivor programs include the Survivor E-Network, and survivor support group facilitator training program. AFSP also publishes an extensive bibliography, a support group directory, information about suicide and mental illness, and handbooks on surviving suicide loss. Survivor information is available at <http://www.afsp.org/survivingsuicideloss>.

Means Matter (<http://www.meansmatter.org>)

The Means Matter website of the Harvard School of Public Health provides information to help reduce a suicidal person’s access to lethal means of suicide. The site offers recommendations for families (<http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/means-matter/recommendations/families/index.html>)

Suicide Prevention Action Network USA (<http://www.spanusa.org>)

Is a division of AFSP dedicated to advancing public policies that help prevent suicide. Some survivors use advocacy as a way to move forward in the process of surviving their loss.

Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC) (<http://www.sprc.org/>)

Is a national center that provides prevention support, training, and materials to strengthen suicide prevention efforts. The section of its online library titled Survivor Resources is a comprehensive listing of survivor support materials, resources on coping with grief, books, and additional resources, including all of those listed in this document.

Survivor Support Groups

Suicide Survivor Support Group Directories

The American Association of Suicidology (AAS) and the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) offer online directories of suicide survivor support groups. The AAS directory is located at <http://www.suicidology.org/web/guest/support-group-directory>. The AFSP directory can be found at http://www.afsp.org/index.cfm?page_id=FEE33687-BD31-F739-D66C210657168295.

Heartbeat: Grief Support Following Suicide

Heartbeat was one of the first organizations to host a support group for those bereaved by suicide. Their website at <http://heartbeatsurvivorsaftersuicide.org/index.shtml> provides information about supporting the bereaved.

Surviving Suicide: A Website for Healing after the Loss of a Loved One by Suicide

(<http://www.survivingsuicide.com>)

Is a comprehensive website created by a suicide survivor, who now facilitates support groups. Resources available on this site include reading lists and information on coping with the loss of a loved one, reducing stress, and surviving the holidays. Valuable material for helping children cope with suicide can be found on this site at <http://www.survivingsuicide.com/children.htm>.

Books to Help Child Survivors

After a Parent's Suicide: Helping Children Heal

Margo Requarth, Healing Hearts Press, 2006. Written by a bereavement counselor who lost her own mother to suicide when she was just under four years old, this book offers constructive, compassionate and clear suggestions for helping children.

After a Suicide: A Workbook for Grieving Kids

Available through the Dougy Center. Developed for use with children, this workbook combines explanations of mental illness and suicide, creative exercises, practical advice, and quotations from child survivors.

But I Didn't Say Goodbye: For Parents and Professionals Helping Child Survivors

Barbara Rubel, Griefwork Center, Inc., 2000. Told from the point of view of a child, this book is intended for adults to read and then share with children.

Child Survivors of Suicide: A Guidebook for Those Who Care for Them

Rebecca Parkin and Karen Dunne-Maxim, 1995. Available through the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. This practical guide offers guidance for family members, educators, and others who deal with young survivors.

My Uncle Keith Died

Carol Ann Loehr, Trafford Publishing, 2006. Written in clear simple language easily understood by children, this book offers hope and practical ways to explain suicide to children. It explains the difference between sadness and depression, and describes how chemical imbalances in the brain cause illness that can result in suicide.

Someone I Love Died by Suicide: A Story for Child Survivors and Those Who Care for Them

Doreen Cammarata, Grief Guidance, Inc., 2000. An illustrated book that explains depression and suicide in child-friendly language.

Outreach Programs

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) Survivor Outreach Program

(<http://www.afsp.org/outreachprogram>)

Is a non-profit outreach program designed to facilitate volunteer “veteran” survivors to listen, show support, and provide information about local resources to newly bereaved survivors. More information can be found on the AFSP website under the “surviving suicide loss” tab.

Friends for Survival, Inc. (<http://www.friendsforsurvival.org>)

Is a national non-profit outreach organization, based in California, open to those who have lost family or friends by suicide, and also to professionals who work with those who have been touched by a suicide tragedy. Friends for Survival, organized by and for survivors, has been offering services since 1983. All staff and volunteers have been directly impacted by a suicide death.

Lifeline Gallery: Stories of Hope and Recovery (<http://lifeline-gallery.org>)

Hosted by the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, is an online opportunity to raise awareness about the effects of suicide, reduce stigma, connect people to emotional support and offer help. The Lifeline Gallery provides a safe space for survivors of suicide, suicide attempt survivors, those who struggled with suicidal thoughts, and those in the suicide prevention field to share their stories of hope and recovery.

Support Group Facilitation Training (<http://www.afsp.org/facilitatortraining>)

Facilitating suicide bereavement support groups: AFSP self-study package and hands-on training options

A self-study package is described including a comprehensive 95-page guide to effective support group facilitation and a 90-minute companion DVD. You can also find information about a two-day training on creating and facilitating a support group for survivors. The training is offered throughout the year at different US cities.

Research

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Publications

After a suicide: Recommendations for religious services and other public memorial observances

Suicide Prevention Resource Center. (2004). Newton, MA: Education Development Center.

This guide is to help community and faith leaders plan memorial observances and provide support to survivors.

Child Survivors of Suicide

Centre for Suicide Prevention. (2008). Canada.

Young people are often the forgotten mourners after a suicide. This Alert examines the epidemiological data on child survivors, the rationale for supporting bereaved children, the risk of suicide and suicidal behaviors in this population, and practical suggestions for providing support.

SOS: A handbook for survivors of suicide.

Jackson, J. (2003). Washington, DC: American Association of Suicidology.

This booklet about surviving the suicide of a loved one was written by a suicide survivor and is highly recommended by other survivors. It contains useful information on taking care of yourself after the suicide of a loved one, how other people may respond to your situation, and helping children survive the suicide of a loved one.

Surviving a suicide loss: A financial guide

National Endowment for Financial Education. (2004). New York: American Foundation for Suicide Prevention.

This booklet was created by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention's Survivor Council and the National Endowment for Financial Education to help suicide survivors negotiate the short- and long-term financial consequences of the suicide of a family member.

For national organizations and federal agencies with general resources on suicide prevention, go to <http://www.sprc.org/basics/national-organizations>.

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