



## **GRIEF AFTER A DEATH BY SUICIDE.**

### **Grieving a death by suicide is a challenging process.**

The impact of any loss is always affected by the nature of your relationship with the person who died, other losses you have experienced, ways that you cope with difficult events, your personal beliefs, and family and cultural influences, among other things. Although several people may grieve the loss of the same person, it will be a different experience in many ways for each of them. Bill Palmer said, “All grief is the same. All grief is similar. All grief is unique. All three of those statements are true.” As Kevin Carter might say, “We grieve within context.”

### **Our Assumptive Worldview may be shattered.**

From an early age, we develop and incorporate a way of looking at the world and our life within a series of expectations. Drivers will stay within their lanes. Parents will die before their children. Friends will enjoy long lives and grow old together. When an event happens that is contrary to our assumptive worldview, it is a shattering experience. It can make us wonder what else is not true that we believed. It can create difficulty in trusting in anything or anyone, or being willing to sustain any kind of hope. It may help to remember that in these circumstances, we are “experiencing renovations” and will make adjustments and adaptations along the way. We do not need to know all of the answers right now. “I am in the *process* of gaining perspective and understanding.”

### **Compassion toward yourself is important right now.**

When someone has died by suicide, we often experience a great deal of retrospection. We think of conversations we had, signs we may have missed, things we might or might not have said or done. Such thoughts are commonplace. However, remember that you are now thinking about them in light of the suicide; before this you did not know that was going to happen. You can only know what you know at the time.

### **Feeling overwhelmed is a common experience.**

Our brains do a fairly good job of adapting to the demands of our constantly changing environment. However, when too many adaptations are demanded at once, the brain perceives this as a threat and shifts to a primitive system commonly called “fight or flight.” When this shift occurs, a number of physiological changes take place automatically.

- We have a diminished capacity for logic, analysis and reasoning. We may have trouble prioritizing tasks or even thinking about what we should do.
- We have a diminished capacity for working memory (i.e., walking into the next room to get something and forgetting what we were going to get).
- We have a diminished capacity for language. We may have trouble tracking a conversation, understanding a word we know, or being able to think of a specific word.
- We have a diminished sense of empathy. We may find ourselves becoming short or angry in situations where we normally would be patient and kind.
- We have an increased sense of agitation or restlessness.
- We have an increased level of physical and emotional sensitivity.

At these times, it can be helpful to spend 30 seconds calming our breath and focusing on our immediate surroundings. Feel the support of the chair if you are sitting. Feel the floor against your feet if you are standing. Exercise can help, even taking a walk. Movement – stomping or jumping in place, shaking like a wet dog drying off – can help metabolize the stress hormones that have flooded the system.

### **Strong is a matter of definition.**

It is a human and loving thing to do to grieve. Mourning is how we show we are grieving. Mourning can include wearing a black armband, crying, reaching out to others to give and receive support, talking about the person who died, and sharing our feelings. Being “strong” does not have to mean not demonstrating our feelings. On the contrary, it takes courage and strength to *express* our feelings, and it is a way we can model for others that they are safe to express theirs as well.

### **Grieve in a S.A.F.E. place.**

Grieving people are assured when they know they are Seen and Acknowledged. People know when they are being avoided. We may not know what to say or how to be of support, but we can express our availability to be present to those who grieve. The opportunity to express Feelings freely, without fear of judgment, is a gift we can offer. “If you want to share a story, rant or rave, weep, or question the universe, you are free to do that with me.” Grieving people need to be Esteemed. They are not there to be fixed or redirected, they are there to be respected. Especially after a death by suicide, they may be dealing with self-doubt. You don’t need to try to talk them out of their doubt, unless they specifically ask you to do that. But you can remind them that you love them, and you will support them now and in the future.

### **Grief has no clear steps or time limits.**

Grief is a meandering path over hills and valleys in all kinds of emotional weather. We realize things and forget them then realize them again. We “peel the onion down until we find the new onion underneath.” When we categorize grief, we edit it so it can fit in one container or another. While it is reasonable to understand the ways we are processing *elements* of the grief, grieving is not, in general, a tidy or simple process.

### **Meaning-making is part of the journey of grief.**

Everyday moments, future events, mementos, the time of year, a favorite piece of music, and other simple things may remind us of the person who died, what they meant and still mean to us, and what it means to live without their physical presence. This is an ongoing series of revelations, and many different and sometimes paradoxical emotions may accompany or follow them.

### **How do we talk about things?**

Some grieving people dislike the phrase, “I am sorry for your loss.” While this seems like an innocent statement, “sorry” can infer a sense of pity. Saying, “My heart goes out to you,” may be a better choice.

Even if you have had a similar experience, your loss is *your* loss. Avoid saying, “I know how you feel.” Instead, if you have had a similar experience, you may say, “I have also [*had this type*] of loss. I am available if you need someone to listen.”

“Call me if you need anything” assumes someone who is grieving can figure out what they need. Instead, make a list of things you are willing to do and give or email it to them, such as: “Please let me know if I can run any errands/pick things up at the grocery store/make a dessert/provide company for a walk/cut the lawn” or whatever you wish to offer.

Be honest. It is alright to say, “I don’t know what to say. I care about you.”

### **Resources are available.**

Yolo Hospice offers free bereavement support to anyone in our five-county service area (Yolo, Solano, Colusa, Sutter and Sacramento). Our programs are designed for all ages. Contact us at 530-758-5566 or email [ddeerfeeder@yolohospice.org](mailto:ddeerfeeder@yolohospice.org) for details.

Yolo Hospice is a member of the National Alliance for Grieving Children.

Other online resources include:

<http://www.suicidepreventionyolocounty.org/friends-families-of-suicide-loss-support-group/>

<https://www.dougy.org/grief-support-resources>

<https://allianceofhope.org/>

<https://suicidology.org/resources/suicide-loss-survivors/>

<https://aws-fetch.s3.amazonaws.com/flipbooks/childrenteenssuicideloss/index.html?page=6>

<https://friendsforsurvival.org/>

<https://childrengrieve.org/resources/griefftalk-resource-guides>