

Working through the grief

An excerpt from *Hope and Healing After Suicide*

Grief is more complicated when a death is sudden. There is no chance to say goodbye. Strong emotions arise as a result of the suicide: extreme sadness, anger, shame and guilt are normal responses to a sudden death. But you are not to blame. The search to find out why someone decided to end his or her life is a painful yet important part of working through the grief—even when there are no answers.

Your grief is unique

The grieving process is different for each person. Reactions to death vary according to one's personality, age, gender, culture, religious or spiritual beliefs, family background, role in the family, coping skills, relationship with the deceased, the number of losses the person has already experienced, and the circumstances of the death.

Some aspects of grief are predictable. But grief does not involve stages or phases that one passes through in a linear fashion. Rather, grief is like a roller coaster ride: it tends to ebb and flow daily and you may feel many emotions at the same time.

The hardest time can be after the most immediate or critical issues have been attended to, when there are fewer distractions, and others have returned to their daily lives. It is important for you and those who care about you to recognize that you need ongoing support.

Numbness and shock

Survivors usually feel numb and in shock when they first find out about the suicide, and for several weeks after or even longer. This feeling is like sitting on the side of a play about your life, but not really taking part in life itself. Nothing seems real. The feeling of shock has a purpose—it cushions you from the pain of what has happened. Over time, the numbness fades and you will proceed with your grieving.

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Other responses

The following are some of the ways people react to the suicide of a family member or friend.

This resource is adapted from the “Hope and healing after suicide: A practical guide for people who have lost someone to suicide in Ontario.” Download the full guide at www.camh.ca/hopeandhealing.

If you are experiencing thoughts of suicide, you are deserving of help. Please explore resources at www.camh.ca/gethelp. If you feel safe in the moment, follow up with your family physician or care team. If you require immediate, in-person emergency care, call 911, or go to your nearest emergency department.

Changes in behaviours

You may find yourself acting in ways that are different from how you behaved before, such as:

- disturbances in your sleeping patterns
- crying—sometimes uncontrollably and for a long time
- visiting places or carrying treasured objects associated with the person who has died
- restless overactivity
- withdrawing socially (for example, by avoiding friends and phone calls)
- lack of interest in the world
- overuse of alcohol and other drugs or overdoing activities to numb the pain
- eating more or less than you usually do
- generally doing things out of character
- discovering that your usual coping mechanisms are not working for you now.

Emotional responses

Some of the emotional reactions you may experience as you grieve include:

- anger
- sadness
- guilt
- anxiety
- shock
- denial
- helplessness
- hopelessness
- apathy
- despair
- numbness
- relief (sometimes, if the person was ill for a long time)
- yearning or pining for the person
- frustration
- irritability
- loneliness or isolation
- feeling overwhelmed.

Spiritual responses

Your world view may shift as a result of the death. You could find yourself, for example:

- questioning your spiritual or religious beliefs, and other values
- searching for meaning to understand why the death occurred
- reconstructing how you understand death
- losing a fear of death
- feeling you are being punished
- visiting mediums to communicate with the deceased
- performing rituals to keep alive your connection with the deceased
- feeling an increased sense of helplessness due to the sudden and traumatic death.

Cognitive or mental responses

Your thoughts, perceptions, reasoning skills and intuition may change. For example, you may find yourself:

- being preoccupied, and even obsessed, with thoughts of the deceased
- sensing the dead person's presence
- disbelieving or denying what has happened
- feeling disconnected from reality
- being distracted
- being unable to concentrate
- being forgetful
- being unable to think straight
- lacking the ability to make decisions
- looking for signs that the person is there.

Physical responses

You may find that your body works differently or that you experience physical symptoms that are not normal for you. This could include:

- being clumsy and uncoordinated
- lacking energy or feeling extremely tired
- being hyper-alert and unable to rest
- muscle weakness
- difficulty breathing
- tightness in the chest or chest pain
- dry mouth or problems swallowing
- feeling emptiness in the stomach
- nausea or digestive upsets
- irregular heartbeat
- sensitivity to noise
- startling easily
- changes in appetite
- frequent colds and other illnesses.

Grieving takes time

How long people grieve varies. Occasionally survivors get stuck as they work through their grief. If this happens, a therapist can help. You need people in your life who can support you.

Clinical depression is different from normal grief in that it is more intense and prolonged. If you are concerned about depression, please contact your doctor.

What helps healing: It will get better

Healing does not mean forgetting. It means that the sadness and other feelings do not get in the way of your life as much as they did in the beginning. You will heal and the pain will lessen.

Keep on talking

Some survivors seek out information about suicide and grieving; others choose not to do so. Many survivors say they talked their way through their grief. As you heal, talk about your memories of the person who died by suicide. Find a safe person, or several people, who will let you talk and are comfortable hearing about your pain. The people you choose to talk to may or may not have experienced the suicide with you.

When you are open about the suicide, you give others permission to talk about it too. Keeping the suicide a secret adds to the feeling of shame. A lot more people than you realize have been touched by suicide.

At times you may need to be distracted from your grieving. That is okay. Do not feel guilty about losing yourself in something else for a while.

Hold on to your memories

Often survivors, both adults and young people, have found comfort in holding on to items that remind them of the person, such as furniture, clothing, jewellery or favourite objects. You might like to put together an album with photos of the deceased. You can also build a collection of memories by asking other people to tell you their stories of the deceased and recording them in a notebook.

Do what works for you

Sometimes friends and family want to help but they do not know what to do. They may feel uncomfortable talking about suicide because of the stigma attached to it. They may be worried that you or others will cry when they bring up the subject.

They might act strangely and not mention the suicide at all. Do not let this get in the way of your talking about it when you need to. Tell people it is okay to mention the suicide and let them know they can help you by simply listening. Most people really do care.

Choose to do what feels right for you, not what pleases other people. It is okay to say “No” when invited to do something you do not feel ready to do.

Types of support

Support groups

The healing power of a shared experience is strong and talking to others who have lost someone to suicide can help you work through your own grief. Sharing your experience can help break your sense of isolation and give you a sense that you are not alone in your journey.

Professional therapists

Grieving is a normal, healthy response to a significant loss in your life. Seeking help from a therapist can provide guidance and offer some understanding of your difficult journey. A professional can also dispel some of the myths associated with grieving and help you assess the need for medication.

Self-care

Grieving takes energy, so forgive yourself when you simply can't do the things you think you "should" do. In the beginning, your grief journey may use up all the energy you need just to get through the day, especially if you have to care for others or deal with some of the practical matters discussed earlier. Here are some suggestions that may help:

- Make time for you. Use your alone time to think, plan, meditate, pray, journal, remember and mourn.
- Surround yourself with safe people and safe places to support you on this difficult journey.
- Accept help. Do not be afraid to tell people what you need. Often, people may not know what to say or how to help unless they are told directly. For example, you could suggest tasks (such as mowing the grass, shopping for groceries or going for a walk with you) to friends and family who want to help. You could create a venue, such as a blog, where you could tell people how they can help.

Whatever you do, make sure it feels right to you

Information supplémentaire

Cette série de fiches d'information comprend :

- Le deuil chez les enfants
www.camh.ca/-/media/files/Hope_and_Healing-when_children_grieve-FR.pdf
- Le deuil chez les adolescents
www.camh.ca/-/media/files/Hope_and_Healing-When_teens_grieve-FR.pdf
- La perte d'un proche à la suite d'un suicide
www.camh.ca/-/media/files/Hope_and_Healing-Someone_close-FR.pdf
- Vivre un deuil
www.camh.ca/-/media/files/Hope_and_Healing-Working_through_grief-FR.pdf

Où puis-je obtenir de l'aide en cas de détresse?

- Ressources en situation de crise de CAMH
www.camh.ca/fr/ressourcesensituationdecrise
- Le service des urgences de CAMH à Toronto est ouvert jour et nuit
www.camh.ca/fr/ED

Où puis-je trouver un traitement ou un soutien?

- L'Association canadienne pour la prévention du suicide propose des liens vers des services de soutien partout au Canada : <https://suicideprevention.ca/Need-Help>
- Bereaved Families of Ontario est présente dans diverses villes en Ontario : <https://bereavedfamilies.net>

Quelles sont les publications de CAMH sur le suicide?

- Si un membre de votre famille a des idées de suicide
www.camh.ca/fr/info-sante/guides-et-publications/si-un-membre-de-votre-famille-a-des-idees-de-suicide
- L'espoir et la guérison après un suicide (Cyberboutique de CAMH)
www.camh.ca/lespoiretlagerison
- Ce que les enfants veulent savoir... lorsqu'un de leurs parents se suicide
www.camh.ca/fr/info-sante/guides-et-publications/de-leurs-parents-se-suicide