Surviving a Suicide Loss:

Resource and Healing Guide

afsp.org/loss

American Foundation *for* Suicide Prevention

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Dear Friend,

We write to you as fellow suicide loss survivors, those who have lost loved ones or friends to suicide. Some of us are recent loss survivors; some of us lost loved ones a few years ago; and others have been suicide loss survivors for decades. Each of us has struggled in our own way with the pain and complexity of suicide loss.

We each met through the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) and are members of the AFSP Loss and Healing Committee, which works on behalf of suicide loss survivors throughout the country. Together, we have created this resource guide from research as well as our own experiences, hoping it will touch, inform, and guide you on your own journey of healing.

When survivors of suicide loss meet, there is often a painful embrace of shared understanding. Connecting with someone else who has been where you are now, and who may be further along in their journey of understanding, can be healing and provide hope. The burdens of loss and loneliness, pain and grief, anger and questions, sadness and guilt, belong to all of us.

When we stand together and express our emotions or experiences, we begin to heal. When we come together and talk, we are less lonely. We hear our own questions and concerns voiced aloud by others and feel a sense of comfort that someone understands. The overwhelming intensity of our painful thoughts and emotions are diminished when spoken and shared.

Healing is not a linear progression and our loss is not meant to be "overcome," but rather integrated into our lives. Throughout our lives, we may have challenging times and re-experience our grief emotions, though hopefully less intensely; that does not mean we are not healing and moving forward in our journey.

At some point when we take a look back, we might recall a hug we were too numb to feel, a book we were too scattered to absorb, a card that tear-dimmed eyes wouldn't allow us to read, or a story about our loved one that we listened to with both anguish and gratitude. Within those recollections, we may begin to see the many small wonders of progression that have since marked our path. Let those moments of reflection and recognition of your healing progress continue to lift you up and keep you moving forward with hope.

As fellow survivors of suicide loss, we urge you to remember these few but important things:

You are not alone.

There are resources and people to support you.

There is no universal time frame for healing, but you will move forward from the place where you are now.

We wish you strength and courage as you travel through your grieving, toward a place of healing.

Be well,

The AFSP Loss and Healing Committee

Coping with Suicide Loss

Where Do I Start?

If you have lost someone to suicide, the first thing you should know is that you are not alone.

Each year, nearly 50,000 people in the United States die by suicide – and the grieving family and friends they leave behind are known as suicide loss survivors. In fact, research shows that during the course of our lives, many of us will be touched by suicide. That means there are millions of suicide loss survivors who, like you, are trying to cope with this heartbreaking loss.

What kinds of emotions am I likely to feel in the days and weeks after losing someone to suicide?

Everyone experiences suicide loss in their own way, so there is no list of emotions that will exactly fit your experience.

However, many people who have lived through the suicide of a loved one experience some combination of the following feelings and grief responses:

- Shock
- Denial and disbelief
- Grief
- Rejection and abandonment
- Anger
- Guilt
- Blame and self-recrimination
- Confusion
- Relief
- Betrayal
- Shame and embarrassment

- Isolation
- Depression and sadness
- Suicidal feelings
- Yearning for the person

Why Did This Happen?

The majority of people who die by suicide have a diagnosable mental health condition at the time of their death.

Suicide is a complex health issue. Many individuals who die by suicide experienced symptoms of a mental health condition at the time of their death. The condition may not have been diagnosed, or may have been diagnosed and received treatment. However, treatment for mental health conditions often requires ongoing adjustments over time, and reaching full remission or recovery can be challenging even with good treatment. Access to treatment can also be challenging to no fault of the individual. Additionally, there are other risk factors that contribute to suicide. Therefore, even with solid psychiatric and therapeutic treatment for mental health conditions, individuals may still die by suicide.

It is also possible that you may not have seen any signs that your loved one was struggling with a mental health condition, or signs of suffering may not have been overt. Some people considering suicide do not share those thoughts with others, and many hide their distress. Even when there are signs, that doesn't mean that all suicides can be prevented. It is not uncommon for suicide loss survivors to wonder if there were signs that were missed, or if anything could have changed this as an outcome.

Many suicide loss survivors struggle to understand the reasons for the suicide, asking themselves "why?" repeatedly. Many replay

their loved one's last days or weeks, searching for clues, particularly if they didn't see any signs that suicide was imminent. Suicide is complex, and there is no one reason that someone ends their life.

Because many do not know how to respond to a death by suicide, some suicide loss survivors may experience a lack of understanding or support from those around them. They also might not be sure how to feel about the loss, or what they should say when someone asks about how their loved one died. It is important to recognize that you are not alone, these feelings are understandable, and it is up to you how much you wish to share with others about your loved one's death.

We hope the information included here helps you decide what is best for your family. We do know that talking openly about suicide can be helpful and healing to you and those around you. Despite its complexity, we continue to learn more every day from science about what influences suicide as an outcome. Mental health conditions as well as life and environmental stressors can all play a role in suicide risk.

Just as people can die of heart disease or cancer, people can die as a consequence of having a mental health concern. It is also important to know that many people with mental health concerns do not go on to die by suicide, and that the interaction between life stress, biology, and mental health is a dynamic and individual one.

You may never know exactly why your loved one ended their life, but over time, learning more about suicide can help you to understand what may have contributed to their death. It is important to note that you do not have to have all the answers to begin to heal, and many suicide loss survivors find that learning about what contributes to suicide can be helpful.

Suicide Bereavement 101

Suicide loss survivors often wonder how bereavement after suicide compares to bereavement after other kinds of death.

There are several features that make suicide grief different from bereavement after other kinds of death.

Understanding why the person died can be a challenge and a greater focus for people bereaved by suicide. In some instances, suicide loss survivors may focus so much on what factors led to their loved one's death that it can feel consuming and can become a challenge to the process of grief. On the other hand, many loss survivors who take the time to learn about the complexity of suicide through research-informed education may have newfound insights as well as ability to hold the ultimate uncertainty of why their loved one died. In this way, learning about suicide as a complex health issue can help with healing.

Suicide prevention can be a difficult concept to understand, especially when it comes to suicide loss. When people hear the term "suicide prevention," they may assume it means every suicide can be stopped, which is not the case. Instead, the term "prevention" is used from a public health perspective to indicate societal investments in research, education, support services and new interventions that can help communities reduce the overall number of suicide deaths across the population, even if not every individual suicide can be prevented.

Suicide loss survivors may experience guilt, blame, and even sense of responsibility for the death much more than other kinds of grief. Occasionally, survivors may feel that they or others caused the death through mistreatment or abandonment of the deceased.

More frequently, they blame themselves for not anticipating and preventing the actual act of suicide. Additionally, suicide loss survivors may experience heightened feelings of rejection or abandonment by the loved one, along with anger toward the deceased ("How could they do this to me?").

It is important to note that whatever you are feeling during this time is a human reaction to an extremely stressful loss. You may have feelings of anger, sadness, confusion, or fear, among others. Your thoughts and feelings may also be informed by what you know about suicide and what you've heard or learned about suicide over the course of your life, as well as your previous experiences with sudden loss. We also know that cultural and religious beliefs may play a role in how you experience suicide grief, and it is important to note that different traditions may have different rituals that are part of your grief.

There is no one way to grieve a suicide loss, and you may find that those around you are grieving in different ways. It is important to allow space for yourself and those around you to grieve in the way that they need to. Some may want to talk about the person that died, and the death, while others may feel less of a need to talk about what happened. Many suicide loss survivors find that talking to others who have experienced a suicide loss (such as in a support group) can be helpful as they process the many feelings associated with suicide loss.

What Do I Do Now?

It's important to remember that you can survive the pain.

Here is some guidance from fellow suicide loss survivors.

Some suicide loss survivors struggle with what to tell other people. Although you should make whatever decision feels right to you, most survivors have found it best to simply acknowledge that their loved one died by suicide.

- You may find that it helps to reach out to family and friends
- Because some people may not know what to say, you may need to take the initiative to talk about the suicide, share your feelings, and ask for their help
- Even though it may seem difficult, maintaining contact with other people is especially important during the stress-filled months after a loved one's suicide

Keep in mind that each person grieves in his or her own way; for example, some people visit the cemetery weekly, while others find it too painful to go at all. Each person also grieves at their own pace; there is no set rhythm or timeline for healing. You may experience unexpected waves of sadness – these are a normal part of the grieving process.

- Some loss survivors find comfort in community, religious, or spiritual activities, including talking to a trusted peer or leader
- Many loss survivors use the arts to help them heal, by keeping a journal or writing poetry or music
- Try to take care of your own well-being; consider visiting your doctor for a checkup
- Be kind to yourself; When you feel ready, begin to go on with your life; eventually starting to enjoy life again is not a betrayal of your loved one, but rather a sign that you've begun to heal

Additional resources are available:

afsp.org/taking-care-of-yourself
afsp.org/after-a-loss-practical-information

If you find yourself so consumed with yearning for your loved one and other painful emotions that you're unable to gradually regain functioning in your roles with family or at work, feel disconnected from your life or other people for many months to years following your loss, consider having a professional evaluation for depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or complicated or "prolonged grief," which actually interfere with healthy grieving. Receiving specific treatment for these conditions can help your healing and your ability to make meaning and honor your loved one for the life they lived.

To learn more about treatments for these health conditions that can arise during grief and which can disrupt your grieving and healing journey visit **afsp.org/therapies**.

Complicated or "Prolonged" Grief

Most suicide loss experiences have a degree of complexity due to the very nature of suicide and the complexity of human relationships. What we know about suicide grief is that there is not a set timetable or "schedule" for how you experience grief-related emotions. However, we do know that the intensity of those emotions, i.e., how strongly they are felt, does tend to change over time. As we integrate the loss into our daily living, we naturally begin to think of, and connect to, aspects of the person's life other than how they died. We form a connection to the person we have lost, beyond their suicide death, and begin to recall memories associated with their life and the connection we had to them while they lived. This process can take considerable time. As time passes, many loss survivors find that while they never forget about the suicide loss, they are able to resume a connection to life (albeit changed) and connect to positive memories of the deceased. Many suicide loss survivors are able to integrate the loss with some support from peers, family, friends, and their communities.

However, some suicide loss survivors experience a type of grief that may benefit from more direct mental health support. The term complicated or prolonged grief refers to a grief reaction in which the individual seems "stuck" at the same level of intensity of emotions (or one specific emotion) related to the loss, and this is unchanging over a long period of time — at least six months or more. This is not to suggest that grieving is complete in six months, but that the intensity of the grief is unchanged for a six-month period or more.

Individuals experiencing complicated or prolonged grief find it very difficult to integrate the loss into their overall life and may find themselves unable to focus on any other aspect of their lives other than the suicide loss. They may find themselves organizing their lives around the loss. Others experiencing a complicated grief reaction may find that they are going to great lengths to avoid reminders of the loss, and that it is difficult to engage with others or their daily activities.[1] Some individuals who have complex trauma histories or previous challenges with coping can be at higher risk for a complicated prolonged grief reaction in response to suicide loss.[2] Suicide loss survivors who have a complicated grief reaction may also notice that they have intense yearning to be with their loved one that does not change over time, and overwhelming thoughts about the person who died.[3] If you feel that you or someone you know may be experiencing a complicated or prolonged grief reaction, it is important to know that mental health treatment, such as counseling, can help. There are specific treatments for complicated grief and you do not need to cope with it alone.[4]

You can learn more about complicated grief at the Center for Prolonged Grief at Columbia University at **prolongedgrief.columbia.edu**.

Handling the Holidays

Anniversaries, birthdays, and holidays may be especially difficult, so you might want to think about whether to continue old traditions or create new ones.

Do what you think will be comfortable for you. Remember, you can always choose to do things differently next time. Keep in mind that sometimes the anticipation of an event can be more difficult than the event itself.

Below are some considerations and guidance for the holidays:

- Think about your family's holiday traditions and consider whether you want to continue them or create something new
- Remember that family members may feel differently about continuing to do things the way they have in the past; try to talk openly with each other about your expectations
- If you find it comforting to talk about your loved one, let your family and friends know that; tell them not to be afraid to mention your loved one's name
- Some loss survivors find it comforting to acknowledge the birthday of their loved one by gathering with the loved one's friends and family; others prefer to spend it privately
- Some loss survivors have found the following ritual helpful for a variety of occasions
  - Light two candles and then blow one out; explain that the extinguished candle represents those we've lost, while the one that continues to burn represents those of us who go on despite our loss and pain
  - Simply leave the one candle burning (you can put it off to one

side) for the duration of the holiday meal or event; the glowing flame acts as a quiet reminder of those who are missing

Above all, bear in mind that there is no "right" way to handle holidays, anniversaries, or birthdays. You and your family may decide to try several different approaches before finding one that feels best for you.

For Your Friends

When friends ask how they can help, you might want to share some of the examples in this section. You can download a list of ways your friends can help show support at **afsp.org/FriendSupportAfterLoss**.

When there has been a death of a loved one by suicide, loss survivors will likely experience a depth and range of feelings. It is important to honor and respect the needs of the loss survivors in the days, weeks, and months following the suicide. Often you may feel helpless. These guidelines help you understand what may be comforting to the family. However, before you assume responsibilities, it's important to ask suicide loss survivors whether they need your help.

Some loss survivors gain added strength from performing many of the responsibilities noted below, while others may want to rely on friends or family for support and guidance.

Since recently bereaved people may have trouble concentrating or making decisions, instead of simply asking "How can I help?", you might try asking if you can help with specific tasks, like babysitting, dog walking, grocery shopping, cleaning the house, watering the lawn, or organizing paperwork.

- 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 straight; keep track of bills, cards, newspaper notices, etc.
- Help with errands
- Keep a list of medication administered
- Offer to help with documentation needed by the insurance company, such as a copy of the death certificate

Surround them with as much love and understanding as you can. Give them some private time – be there, but don't smother them. Show love, not control.

- Let them talk – most of the time they just need to hear out loud what is going on inside their heads; they usually aren't seeking advice
- Encourage the idea that decisions be made by the family together
- Expect that they will become tired easily – grieving is hard work
- Let them decide what they are ready for – offer your ideas but let them decide

Give special attention to members of the family, both at the funeral and in the months to come.

- Allow them to express as much grief as they are feeling at the moment and are willing to share
- Allow them to talk about the special, endearing qualities of the loved one they have lost
- Write down a story about their loved one (especially one that they might not know themselves) and give it to them, so that they can read it when they're ready

- Don't be afraid to say their loved one's name, and don't worry about making them cry; it hurts so much more when no one talks about the person they lost

Adapted with permission from The Link Counseling Center's National Resource Center for Suicide Prevention and Aftercare.

The Survivor Community

Loss Survivor Stories

Knowing that others share the same experience can bring hope and healing.

Each survivor of suicide loss grieves in their own way, and on their own timeline. Connecting with others who have lost a loved one to suicide, and hearing how they have navigated the pain of that loss, is a fundamental step toward hope and healing. The videos found at **afsp.org/LivingWithSuicideLoss** can serve as a resource for those who want to learn how best to support loss survivors as they process their grief.

Helping Children Cope

Suicide loss survivors frequently seek advice about how to discuss suicide with children.

Children may express their feelings by crying, withdrawing, laughing, or expressing anger at you or others. Risky behavior, or fighting with siblings, are also common reactions. Be aware that these emotions and behaviors may be a response to the loss, and seek the right support for your child or teen.

Here are some suggestions for helping children cope:

- Tell the truth in simple, age-appropriate language; explain that their loved one died of an illness – a brain illness (as an example for an elementary-age child –"I have something I need to tell you that is really hard. Mommy died this morning when you were away at school. Mommy's brain was not working.")
- Listen to their questions, and try to offer honest, straightforward, developmentally appropriate, and age-appropriate responses
- When you have a choice, tell them as soon as you have the news, in a place where both you and they will feel comfortable; often, not telling the truth can lead a child/ teen to create a story that may be worse than what actually happened
- Reassure them that the death was not their fault
- Resist the urge to keep the suicide a secret out of fear that the child will copy the behavior of the deceased – that is not what research shows will happen; just as families with hypertension, diabetes, or heart disease are educated about early warning signs and prevention, relatives of suicide loss need to understand the early warning signs of suicide, or depression and other mental illnesses, so they can engage in support and treatment
- Reassure them that you, together with other trusted adults, will take care of them
- Let them know they can approach you at any time if they want to talk about it; communication with your child/teen is very important; understand that you are all grieving, and use this as an opportunity to ask questions and share together
- Resume and maintain the child's regular routine as much as possible; encourage them to stay engaged with activities that make them feel successful; these routines and activities are usually the first things to disappear after a loss

- Allow them to express their feelings, answer their questions, and provide them with affection
- Play! Kids grieve in spurts; they may not always be sad or crying, and may want to engage in play; play is an important part of healing for children, and allowing them the space to play will help them heal and grow

The greatest gift you can give children is your assurance of love and support, and taking care of yourself so that your presence remains stabilizing for the child.

AFSP partnered with The Dougy Center: The National Center for Grieving Children and Families to create a booklet of information on talking with children and teens about suicide. The booklet can be found at **afsp.org/ChildrenTeensAndSuicideLoss**.

Support Groups

Being in the presence of other suicide loss survivors can play a crucial part in the healing process.

The support and sense of connection felt through sharing grief and experiences with other loss survivors can help break the isolation suicide loss often brings. The most common way this sharing and connection occurs is through suicide loss survivor support groups. These groups provide a safe place where loss survivors can share their experiences and support each other.

Some suicide loss survivors attend a support group almost immediately, while some wait years. Others attend for a year or two and then go only occasionally on anniversaries, holidays, or particularly difficult days. You may find that it takes a few meetings before you begin to feel comfortable.

You may also find that the group setting isn't quite right for you. Whatever you feel works for you, the hope is to find fellow loss survivors who may become additional support or friends, and who come together based on the common bond of understanding the pain and tragedy of suicide loss.

AFSP lists United States and international suicide bereavement support groups as a public service to loss survivors. AFSP does not run, recommend, endorse, or fund any of the groups listed. If there is not a local support group in your area, there are several online groups available. Find local or online groups at **afsp.org/SupportGroups**.

International Survivors of Suicide Loss Day (ISOSLD)

ISOSLD is an event in which survivors of suicide loss come together to find connection, understanding, and hope through their shared experience.

In 1999, Senator Harry Reid, who lost his father to suicide, introduced a resolution to the United States Senate, leading to the creation of International Survivors of Suicide Loss Day in the United States and around the world. Also known as Survivor Day, the day was designated by the U.S. Congress as a day on which those affected by suicide can join together for healing and support. It was determined that Survivor Day would always fall on the Saturday before American Thanksgiving, as the holidays are often a difficult time for suicide loss survivors.

AFSP supports hundreds of Survivor Day events around the world each year. These informative and caring events provide suicide loss survivors with an opportunity to come together to

find connection, understanding, and hope through their shared experience. While each event is unique, all feature an AFSP-produced documentary which offers a message of growth, resilience, and connection. Virtual options are also available. To learn more, visit **afsp.org/SurvivorDay** or (in the United States) reach out to your local AFSP chapter at **afsp.org/chapters**.

Healing Conversations Program

Personal support for suicide loss *Healing Conversations* welcomes survivors of suicide loss as they are, wherever they are in their grief, for a meaningful moment of connection.

Different than a support group, *Healing Conversations* is a one-time visit that connects those who have lost a loved one to suicide with trained volunteers who are also survivors of suicide loss. These volunteers know what it's like to lose someone to suicide, and they help others navigate this challenging journey by offering support, connection, and resources. Whether you've lost a partner, family member, friend, co-worker, or anyone else to whom you were close, *Healing Conversations* can provide perspective and understanding. To learn more, visit **afsp.org/HealingConversations**.

When You're Ready

Little by little, healing, hope, and growth will take place. For many, volunteering can be a part of that journey.

When you feel you are ready, you may find it helpful to get involved in the work of suicide prevention and/or supporting other survivors of suicide loss. AFSP offers many opportunities

for people to make a difference in achieving our mission of saving lives and bringing hope to those affected by suicide. To learn more, reach out to your local chapter (**afsp.org/chapters**).

Memorials

The AFSP Memorial Fund is a meaningful and lasting way to honor a loved one while helping others.

Thoughtful gifts made to Memorial Funds help AFSP continue to pursue this important mission of saving lives and bringing hope to those affected by suicide. Family and friends can visit, leave notes of support, share stories, and donate to your Memorial Fund webpage at **afsp.org/MemorialFund**.

Memorials can take various forms other than financial contributions. Many survivors of suicide loss find participation in the arts, nature, or events dedicated to the memory of their beloved to be meaningful. Volunteering for a specific cause that was of personal interest to your loved one also carries meaning.

Do whatever means the most to you. Whether symbolic or tangible, these memorials can have a positive effect on the donor and one's environment and can sometimes help in providing closure.

For memorialization of youth/students, please refer to the guidance in *After A Suicide: Toolkit for Schools* at **afsp.org/AfterASuicideToolkit**.

Crisis Resources Available 24/7

Call or text 988 (Suicide and Crisis Lifeline)

Connects individuals to immediate crisis care through a national network of over 180 independently operated state and local crisis call centers. The Lifeline provides services in English and Spanish and uses Language Line Solutions to provide caller translation services in over 240 additional languages. Learn more at **988lifeline.org**.

Text TALK to 741-741 (Crisis Text Line)

Provides free, text-based mental health support and crisis intervention by empowering a community of trained volunteer counselors to support people in their moments of need. Learn more at **crisistextline.org**.

Citations

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