

HOPE AND HEALING

A Practical
Guide for
Survivors of
Suicide



calgary health region

DRAFT



Hope and Healing: A Practical Guide for Survivors of Suicide

*This is a practical guide to help
you through...*

the first few moments

then the first few hours

then the first few days

then the first few years

*...after the suicide of someone
you love*

This guide has been written with the help of many suicide survivors and the health professionals who work with them. We hope it will help you through this difficult time. Please share it with others who may benefit from the information.

The guide focuses on the practical matters that survivors need to deal with after a suicide. For further help and information, see Other Resources on pages 35–38.

Table of Contents

When Someone You Love Dies by Suicide	5
<i>What Helps in the Short Term</i>	6
<i>Telling Others</i>	7
Emergency Response and Investigation	9
<i>Response to the Emergency Call</i>	9
<i>Investigation</i>	10
<i>Public Fatality Inquiry</i>	13
Practical Matters.....	15
Arranging a Funeral	16
Dealing With Legal and Financial Matters	18
<i>Disposition of Assets</i>	18
<i>Insurance</i>	18
<i>Financial Matters</i>	19
Working Through the Grief.....	27
<i>Your Grief is Unique</i>	28
<i>When Children Grieve</i>	29
What Helps Healing in the Long Term.....	30
<i>It Will Get Better</i>	30
<i>Later Reactions</i>	31
<i>Support Groups</i>	32
<i>Looking After Yourself</i>	32
<i>Important Phone Numbers</i>	34
Other Resources	35
<i>Organizations</i>	36
<i>Books</i>	37
<i>Bibliography</i>	37
Beyond Surviving.....	39
Acknowledgements	42



When
Someone
You Love
Dies by
Suicide



When Someone You Love Dies by Suicide

You will survive. Yes, the grief is overwhelming. It is hard to believe now, but one hour at a time, one day at a time, you will get through it. And then, as time goes on, the pain will lessen.

What Helps in the Short Term

Emotional reactions to a suicide are intense and overwhelming. Knowing what to expect will help you cope.

Know What to Expect

Most survivors find it hard to think clearly. It may seem as if your brain is numb, that you keep forgetting things. You may replay the suicide over and over in your mind, and find you cannot stop asking, “Why?”

You are not to blame for the choice made by another person.

It is not unusual to feel overwhelmed by sorrow, physically ill and angry. You may feel ashamed or guilty. It is important to remember that you are not to blame for the choice made by another person. Sometimes, survivors think about suicide themselves. If you are having suicidal thoughts, talk to a counsellor about how to cope with the situation and keep yourself safe.

These reactions are normal, as are other strong feelings you may have. You are not going crazy — you are mourning the loss in your own way.

Let others help you

The sense of confusion is so great that it can be very hard to cope at first so let other people help you. Look to your friends, family, place of worship, community and others for support. They can deal with people, make some decisions and help you remember what you need to know. Also, they can be there just to listen.

Telling Others

What to Say

One challenge you might face is telling others about the suicide. Although it is difficult to speak about suicide openly, it is important for family and friends to be told the truth. This allows them to help each other cope with their grief, and also helps you work through yours. In some situations, you might choose to say something as brief as, “She died by suicide and I just can’t talk about it yet.”

In addition to telling family and close friends, you will need to notify people with whom the deceased had regular contact. The list of people to inform might include clergy, school personnel, an employer and work colleagues, a doctor and a landlord. It is very hard to tell others what has happened and you may want to ask someone to help you make those phone calls.

Telling Children

Tell the Truth

Children need to be told that the death was a suicide. While they may not need to know all the details, especially if they are very young, they need to know how the person died. Children can sense when they are being lied to and this creates an atmosphere of mistrust, fear and loneliness. If you do not tell them the truth, eventually they will find out through someone else. That would be far more painful.

Try to make the explanation fit the age of the child. For example, a younger child can be told, “He chose to die. He was so very sad and confused that he forgot he could get help.” Children tend to ask about what they need to know, and often you need only to answer what they ask about.

Show Your Grief

It is okay for children to see your anger, helplessness and confusion. This helps them understand that their own feelings are normal and okay. Check in with them to make sure they do not take on responsibility for your feelings. They need to know it is not their job to make things better for the family. Reassure them that you and others will still be able to take care of them.

Listen and Reassure

Children will be confused when they are told the death was a suicide. They may ask a lot of questions to make sense of the news: “Didn’t he love us?” or “Why was she so sad?” Answer the questions that you can. Tell them that you do not have all of the answers but you can always listen.

Encourage them to talk about their feelings. You may find there are times when the children benefit from talking to someone else, such as a family friend or a counsellor.

Children will need plenty of reassurance that the suicide was not their fault, that they are still loved, and that other people they care about will not die too. Emphasize that there are always other solutions to problems.

Seek Help

It may be too difficult to support children or reassure them when you are in the early stages of grieving. If this is the case, call on someone you trust or seek the help of a professional counsellor.

*Children need to be reassured that you
and others will still be able to take
care of them.*



Emergency Response and Investigation

The events and procedures that take place after a suicide can cause great anxiety for survivors. It lessens the distress if you know what will happen.

Response to the Emergency Call

When a sudden death is discovered, Emergency Medical Services, the police and the fire department respond to the emergency call. When the police arrive, they will notify the Medical Examiner's Office.

Emergency Medical Services

Emergency Medical Services provides medical assistance and determines if death has taken place, or takes the person to a hospital for further care if death has not occurred. At this point the hospital takes over care of the person.

Police

The police help in a number of ways. They provide safety for emergency personnel and other people who are present. They secure the scene, investigate the death, and collect identification, valuables and other items related to the investigation, for safekeeping. Photographs may also be taken. The person who identified or reported the deceased may be asked to make a statement to the police. The same may be asked of those who found or spoke to the deceased. The police will attempt to notify the next of kin.

The police or Medical Examiner take control of the scene, which is considered a crime scene until the investigation is completed and the cause of death determined. This is done for your protection and the safety of others.

Victim Assistance

The police or Medical Examiner may request a victim assistance support team, (or you can request this) to provide support, information and referrals.

Fire Department

The fire department provides medical assistance to Emergency Medical Services, as well as extra help where needed.

Medical Examiner

The police notify the Medical Examiner's Office, who will investigate the circumstances around the death. In the case of a suicide, only the Medical Examiner can sign and issue a death certificate.

*For further help and information, see
'Other Resources' on pages 35–38*

Investigation

An investigation is done to find out the circumstances of the suicide. This includes the identity of the person, the date, time and place of death as well as the cause and manner of death. The investigation often includes a review of the past medical history, an examination of the scene of the death, and an examination of the body.

Medical Examiner

The Office of the Chief Medical Examiner investigates all unexplained and all violent deaths, including suicides, by authority of the Fatality Inquiries Act. The investigation is performed by Medical Examiners, who are physicians, with the assistance of Medical Examiner's Investigators. In Calgary and Edmonton, the Investigators are fulltime staff members specifically trained in the area of sudden death investigation. In other areas of Alberta, police officers assume the role of Medical Examiner's Investigators. The Office of the Chief Medical Examiner pays the cost to transport the body from the place of the death to the facility where the body is examined by a Medical Examiner.

Items Collected at the Scene

The Medical Examiner's Office holds on to items collected at the scene that are related to the death, including suicide notes. These items can be

returned to next of kin after the investigation, but must be requested. Suicide notes will be returned only to the person addressed in the note.

Police may collect and retain valuables, which will be returned to next of kin upon written request. If unclaimed by next of kin, items and valuables that are collected by police will be auctioned or destroyed. Items collected by the Medical Examiner and not requested by next of kin will be stored with the investigation reports at the Provincial Archives.

Autopsy

If there is some doubt about the cause or manner of death, an autopsy may be ordered by the Medical Examiner. Permission from next of kin is not required for a Medical Examiner's autopsy to be done. If there are any cultural sensitivities around the autopsy, notify the Medical Examiner. An autopsy may include complex laboratory tests and often results are not known for several weeks after the death. In cases where the cause of death is obvious, an autopsy is not done.

The Scene After the Investigation

If the death has taken place in the home, the next of kin are responsible for cleaning up the scene. Sometimes family members choose to clean the area themselves. However, when body fluids are present, it is wise to have a certified cleaning company perform the cleaning tasks. To identify a suitable firm, consult the telephone directory. Professional cleaning costs can be high but are often covered by household insurance. Contact your insurance provider for further information.

Tissue and Organ Donations

After a suicide, survivors may find some comfort in donating the tissues or organs of the deceased. If you wish to do this, notify the Medical Examiner. The police will tell the Medical Examiner if a donor card was found on the person. Tissues can be donated even when death occurs outside a hospital, within certain time limits (about 6 to 12 hours). Whether or not organs can be donated depends on a number of factors, including the condition of the body and whether the heart can be kept beating long enough to allow for organ transfer.

Autopsy Report and Proof of Death

You may obtain copies of the autopsy report as well as certificates to prove death has occurred.

Autopsy Report

If the Medical Examiner authorized an autopsy, you can request a summary and a detailed report. A small fee will apply and may be paid by cheque or money order to the Provincial Treasurer and mailed to the nearest Medical Examiner's Office (see page 13).

Proof of Death

You can obtain two types of documents as proof of death in order to settle an estate: a Certificate of Death and a Certificate of the Medical Examiner.

A Certificate of Death is the official government document and is accepted by most organizations as proof of death. This certificate includes the name of the person, date and place of death, marital status, regular place of residence, sex and age. It does not give the cause or manner of death. This certificate may be obtained from a Registry office for a small fee (see Licensing and Registry Services in the yellow pages). The certificate will be issued one to two weeks after you apply for it. Several copies may be needed.

A Certificate of the Medical Examiner is issued by the Medical Examiner's Office upon written consent by next of kin. It includes the medical cause and manner of death as well as a brief description of the circumstances. This certificate is issued in place of the "Proof of Death" forms required by most insurance companies in order to settle life insurance claims. A small fee applies.

Note: In cases investigated by the Medical Examiner's Office, including all suicides, only the Medical Examiner can sign and issue a death certificate. If a Medical Examiner has investigated a death, neither a family doctor nor a hospital may complete any documents as proof of death.

Public Fatality Inquiry

A Public Fatality Inquiry can be held in some deaths investigated by the Medical Examiner's Office. This is very rare in cases of suicide. However, if the person was in custody or was a ward of the court at the time of death, an Inquiry is mandatory. The Fatality Review Board determines which cases should go to Inquiry.

A provincial court judge conducts the Public Fatality Inquiry. The Inquiry will determine the identity of the deceased, and the date, time and place of death. The judge may make recommendations for the prevention of similar incidents. Findings of legal responsibility or any other conclusions of law are not permitted in the Public Fatality Inquiry.

Contact Information for The Medical Examiner

To contact the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner in Calgary and Edmonton, see below. For other locations in Alberta, contact the nearest of these two offices.

Edmonton

Office of the Chief Medical Examiner
7007 116 Street
Edmonton, Alberta Canada T6H 5R8
Tel: (780) 427-4987
Fax: (780) 422-1265

Calgary

Office of the Chief Medical Examiner
4070 Bowness Rd NW
Calgary, Alberta, Canada T3B 3R7
Tel: (403) 297-8123
Fax: (403) 297-3429

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Practical
Matters



Arranging a Funeral

A funeral is an important ritual that gives family and friends a chance to reflect and grieve while being supported by others who care. It allows them to say goodbye and begin accepting the reality of the loss.

Making Arrangements

Guidelines and customs of funeral services vary and different cultures and religions have special rituals to recognize a death. Friends, family, clergy or the funeral director can help you decide which arrangements to make. To choose a funeral home, ask for suggestions from family and friends or check local listings in a phone book.

Children should also be allowed to take part in the funeral because it helps them as their grief unfolds. It is wise to talk with the children ahead of time about what will happen at the funeral and what behaviour is expected of them. On the other hand, if a child does not want to attend the funeral, assure them that it is okay not to be there and help them grieve in their own way.

Funeral Service

In a traditional service, a ceremony is held in a place of worship or a funeral home chapel. You can decide whether the service will be public or private. A committal service is a brief service where final words of farewell are spoken. It happens at the end of the traditional service and may be done at the graveside, crematorium, or at the church/chapel.

A funeral allows family and friends to say goodbye and begin accepting the reality of the loss.

In a military service, the deceased is given military honours. This is available to any veteran or serving member of Canada's Armed Forces.

A memorial service is similar to a funeral service, except the body of the deceased is not present.

If you choose not to have a service, you can ask a funeral home to care for the body of your loved one.

Funeral Costs

The average cost of a traditional funeral in Alberta is between four and five thousand dollars; although this amount can be much less if a family plans accordingly. The more elaborate the plans for the funeral, the more expense you will incur. Many families rely on the deceased's life insurance to help cover costs. Other sources of financial help include: Canada Pension Plan – Lump Sum Death Benefit, Veterans Affairs (for war veterans or members of the National Defense of Canada), and Alberta Widow's Pension (for women who qualify). Financial assistance for people already receiving assistance or for others who are unable to pay funeral costs may be available from Alberta Family and Social Services. For further information, see 'Items to Apply For' starting on page 23.

Talking About Suicide

It is okay to talk about the suicide at the funeral service. Make sure any mention of suicide in the service is done without judgment or reference to blasphemy. It may be appropriate to acknowledge the pain the deceased was feeling.

Celebrate the life of your loved one and talk about memories. Some survivors have found it helpful to place an open notebook on a table at the funeral and encourage others to write down their memories of the deceased. Allow yourself to grieve the relationship you shared.



Disposition of Assets

Disposing of a deceased person's assets is usually done through a will. A will is a written record that details how a person's belongings, or estate, will be divided upon death. The executors are responsible for taking care of the estate and should be notified as soon as possible after the death.

If there is a Will

Probating a will occurs when the will is proved valid by a court of law. If the estate is small or held jointly, there may be no need for probate. Any property held jointly (real estate, bank accounts, bonds) can be easily transferred to the surviving spouse or individual named. A bank may require probate if there is a large amount of money that is not held jointly, or for other reasons.

If there is a Handwritten Note

Sometimes a signed, handwritten note that distributes a person's property and possessions may be used as a will. This includes suicide notes. You should be aware that this type of note might be challenged in a court of law on the grounds of mental incapacitation. In Alberta, any will that does not provide sufficiently for family can be challenged under the Family Relief Act. Contact your lawyer or the Government of Alberta for more information.

If there is no Will or Your Situation is Complicated

If there is no will, or if no will is found, the deceased died 'intestate' and you may need advice from the Public Trustee (a senior lawyer employed by the Alberta Government) to settle the estate. Look in the blue pages of your phone book or call 310-0000 for more information on how to contact this person.

If your situation is complicated for other reasons, such as marital separation or common-law relationships, you may need to contact a lawyer.

Insurance

You will need to notify all insurance companies (house, car, life) of the death. In Canada, generally life insurance policies must have been held for at least 24 months to be valid if the death is by suicide (there may be exclusions so check your policy). However, there may be special circumstances where a policy held for less than 24 months may be challenged in court by the family of someone who died by suicide. Consult your lawyer or insurance provider for more information.

Financial Matters

A number of financial matters need to be dealt with after a death. You may want to ask other family members or close friends to help you deal with some of these matters during this difficult time.

*You may want to ask family members
or friends to help you deal with
financial matters.*

It is strongly recommended that you seek the advice of a professional before making any major decisions that may affect your financial or personal situation.

First: Gather Documents

The first step in dealing with financial matters is to gather the documents of the deceased. This must be done before you (or your financial advisor or the executor of the will) can take care of matters related to the estate. Set up a folder to keep all the personal documents and records of legal and financial matters.

Personal Documents

Death Certificate

You must have the death certificate before you can cancel, transfer and apply for benefits and obligations.

Birth Certificate

Driver's License

Marriage Certificate

Passport

Personal Will

Social Insurance Number

Banking and Financial Documents

- Bank Account Numbers, Passbooks, Statements
(chequing and saving)
 - Bank and Credit Cards
 - Investment Records (stocks, bonds, RRSPs, GICs)
 - Lease and/or Rental Contracts
 - Loan Agreements (monies owed or owing)
 - Mortgage Papers
 - Safety Deposit Box Number
-

Health Documents

- Alberta Blue Cross Number
 - Alberta Health Care Number
-

Property Documents

- Land Title(s)
 - Personal Possessions (art work, jewelry)
 - Vehicle Registration(s)
-

Other Documents

- Employee Benefit Booklets
 - Insurance Policies (life, medical, home, car, business, mortgage)
 - Membership Cards (sport/recreation clubs, professional associations, libraries)
 - Pension Information
 - Previous Tax Returns
 - Utility Account Numbers (phone, gas, water, electricity)
-

Then: Cancel, Transfer and Apply for Benefits and Obligations

Once all documents have been gathered, you will have to cancel, transfer and apply for various financial benefits or obligations. Be aware that there are fees associated with some of these matters.

This chart lists the most common items to address. (Phone numbers for Alberta and Canadian contacts are listed here. For regional information, check your telephone book.)

Items to Cancel

- Alberta Blue Cross** 1-800-661-6995
Alberta Health Care usually notifies Alberta Blue Cross but you can also contact them directly. Alberta Blue Cross requires the name and Alberta Health Care number of the deceased, the name and address of the executor, and the name and address of the person providing this information.

- Alberta Health Care** Toll free 310-0000, ask for 780-427-1432
Alberta Health Care requires the name, address, and personal health number of the deceased.

- Alberta Senior's Benefit** 1-800-642-3853
This income-based benefit fully or partially subsidizes Alberta Health Care premiums for low-income seniors. You will need to provide Alberta Health Care with the deceased's name and health care number.

- Bank Cards**
Contact the issuing bank to cancel bank cards held by the deceased.

- Canada Pension Plan** 1-800-277-9914
Cheques can be cancelled by telephone. You will be asked to provide the name, address and social insurance number of the deceased. The estate is entitled to the pension cheque in the month in which the death occurred.

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- ❑ **Credit Cards**
Contact the issuing bank to cancel credit cards held by the deceased.

 - ❑ **Disability Benefit** 1-800-277-9914
You will need to cancel disability payments, both federal and provincial. Provincial disability payments may include AISH (Assured Income for Severely Handicapped).

 - ❑ **Insurance Policies**
Notify all insurance companies with whom the deceased had policies (e.g., car, home, business, or life insurance). You may also need to contact the person's employer to cancel workplace insurance policies.

 - ❑ **Leases/Rentals**
Cancel any lease or rental contracts in the name of the deceased, or transfer them to another name.

 - ❑ **Memberships** (sport/recreation clubs, professional associations, libraries)
Cancel memberships, or transfer them to another name as appropriate.

 - ❑ **Passport**
If the deceased held a valid passport at the time of death, return it to the nearest passport centre or mail it to the processing centre. Include a copy of the death certificate or a letter stating why you are returning the passport.

 - ❑ **Veterans Benefit** 1-866-522-2122
Pension or compensation benefits continue for one year after death. There may be other Veterans Affairs benefits available (e.g., assistance with funeral expenses and burial in a veteran's grave). Contact Veterans Affairs for further information.
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Items to Transfer

Joint Bank Accounts, RRSPs, GICs

Any accounts held in common can be transferred to the survivor. You will need to contact your financial advisor or the bank holding these accounts for specific information on how to transfer the accounts.

Land Titles Toll free 310-0000, ask for Land Titles

If real estate was held in the deceased's name, a land transfer must be made. Contact an Alberta Registries office for details.

Stocks/Bonds

Ask your financial advisor or bank for information on how to transfer these assets.

Utility Accounts (phone, gas, water and electricity)

If your household utility accounts were in the name of the deceased, transfer them to a new name. Contact each utility for information on how to do this.

Vehicle Registration

If the deceased had vehicles registered in his or her name, the ownership of these vehicles will need to be transferred. A probate registry agent can help you do this.

Items to Apply For

Allowance for the Survivor 1-800-277-9914

This benefit for widows and widowers is based on income qualifications. Proof of marriage is required (common-law relationships will be considered). **This benefit is not retroactive and must be applied for immediately.**

❑ Children's Benefit 1-800-277-9914

There may be benefits available for children under the age of 18 or for children between 18 and 25 who are full-time students. If you are the caregiver of children of the deceased who are under age 18, you should apply for this benefit on their behalf. However, if any of these children are living on their own, they can apply themselves. Dependent children between 18 and 25 and in full-time studies should apply for this benefit themselves.

❑ CPP Lump Sum Death Benefit 1-800-277-9914

This benefit is based on the CPP contributions of the deceased. You will need to provide a copy of the death certificate or statement of death, your birth certificate, and social insurance number.

❑ CPP Survivor's Benefit 1-800-277-9914

This benefit is based on the CPP contributions of the deceased. The amount of the benefit awarded will depend on the age of the surviving spouse or common-law partner and other dependency factors. Benefits for children may also be available.

❑ Guaranteed Income Supplement

Surviving widows/widowers over the age of 65 may be entitled to this benefit. This benefit is based on income qualifications.

❑ Mortgage Life Insurance

Mortgage life insurance is not the same as mortgage insurance. If the deceased held mortgage life insurance, the mortgage will be paid upon death. The mortgage company will require a copy of the death certificate. **Some policies will not cover deaths by suicide if they occur within two years of the start of coverage. Review the policy or consult with the bank for specific information.**

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- ❑ **Veterans Benefits** 1-866-522-2122

If the deceased was a veteran, you may be eligible for benefits including funeral expenses and burial in a veteran's grave. Contact Veterans Affairs for details.

Other Financial and Legal Matters

Other financial matters that need to be addressed include loans and personal debt, income taxes, GST credit and lawsuits.

Loans and Personal Debt

- ❑ Loans (individual or co-signed) from a bank, company, or other institution. These may or may not be insured.
 - ❑ Personal loans, either owed to the deceased or owing to others.
-

Income Taxes

- ❑ A final tax return must be filed. If the death occurred between January 1st and October 31st, the final return is due by April 30th of the next year. If the death occurred between November 1st and December 31st, the final return is due six months after the death. If tax returns from previous years have not been completed, they must also be filed.

You may want to get a clearance certificate before you distribute any property under your control. A clearance certificate certifies that all amounts for which the deceased is liable to Canada Revenue Agency have been paid, or that security has been accepted for the payment. If you do not get a certificate, you can be liable for any amount the deceased owes. Contact Canada Revenue Agency (1-800-959-8281) for more information.

Employer

- Contact the employer to collect a final paycheque and discuss where to send the T4 slip. Employee benefits may apply.
-

GST Credit

- Contact Canada Revenue Agency (1-800-959-8281) for information on GST credit.
-

Lawsuits

- Judgments either for or against the deceased may need to be settled by the estate.
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Working
Through
the Grief



Working Through the Grief

Grief is more complicated when a death is sudden. There was no chance to say goodbye. Very strong emotions arise as a result of the suicide, such as extreme sadness, anger and shame, and this complicates your grieving. Survivors often feel guilt, and so you must remember that you are not to blame for the choice made by another person. The search to find out “why” is a painful yet important part of working through the grief. Often, there are no answers.

Your Grief is Unique

The grief process is different for each person. While some aspects of grief are predictable, grief does not happen in neat, orderly stages, but rather as a chaotic process that varies from person to person. The aspects of grief that everyone has in common are explained below.

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.

The grief process is different for each person.

Loss and Disorganization

As you grieve, you will experience a range of thoughts and very strong emotions. Survivors commonly feel intense anger, sorrow, loneliness and guilt. At times you might feel as if the suicide never really happened. There can be times when everything in life seems meaningless. You might be obsessed with the thought that you could have prevented the death. It is common to have trouble sleeping and eating during these times.

Reorganization and Acceptance

As time goes on, your thoughts and feelings will change. Instead of feeling pain all the time, you will feel it some of the time. “From a sadness that is with us frequently to a sadness that is always a part of us but no longer gets in our way. We can begin to be happy and move on in our lives.”*

Grieving Takes Time

Grieving takes time, and the amount of time is different for each person. Occasionally survivors get stuck as they work through their grief. If this happens, a counsellor can help. 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.

When Children Grieve

Children do not show their feelings in the same way adults do. Sometimes they look as though they have not been affected by the death. They may cry for a while and then return to play, not because they are not upset, but because their words and behaviour do not always reflect how they feel inside. You may see their grief expressed in their play. They may talk about their feelings with other children rather than with adults.

It is common for children, as they grow, to grieve the loss of their loved one at a later time. They may have new feelings and new responses to the death, even years after the suicide. They often ask different questions as they go through their development and try to understand what happened from a more mature point of view. Be available to talk about it with them or have them talk to someone else they trust.

* Mertick, E. (1991). *Yours, Mine and Our Children's Grief: A Parent's Guide*, Alberta: Alberta Funeral Service Association.



What Helps Healing in the Long Term

It is important to know that you will heal and the pain will lessen.

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. As you heal, you can make a promise to remember the deceased and make a commitment to the survival of the family or group of friends.

*When you are open about the suicide,
you give others permission to talk
about it too.*

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 it is vital to 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 burden 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 children, have found comfort in holding on to items that remind them of their loved one, such as furniture, clothing, jewelry 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 about making people 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.

Remember to 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.

Later Reactions

Some survivors feel even more pain and emptiness several months after the death. The tasks of planning the funeral and dealing with financial and legal matters are complete. Friends and family have offered their sympathy and then needed to get back to their lives. Be prepared for this and reach out for help when you need it.

Difficult Days

There will be many times through the years when coping with the loss becomes more difficult, such as the anniversary of the death, birthdays and holidays. You may feel more on edge in the weeks leading up to them. It will help you to plan ahead and talk to other family members about how they want to spend the day. This gives everyone a chance to support each other and talk about their grief. Some ideas are to write a card to the deceased and place it in a significant place or remember the deceased by going to a place that has some connection with them.

Finding the Answers

You may never know the answer to, “Why?” Many times survivors mistake a “triggering event”, such as a relationship breakup, for the “cause” when, in most cases, the person was in extreme emotional or physical pain for a long time. As you work through your grief you will gradually learn to live with questions that cannot be answered.

Support Groups

As time goes on, you may find it helpful to talk to other survivors of suicide. The healing power of a shared experience is very strong and talking to others who have lost someone to suicide can help you work through your own grief. If you would like more information on support groups in your area, see *Other Resources* on page 35-38. This section also lists books that other survivors have found worthwhile.

For further help and information, see Other Resources on pages 35–38.

Looking After Yourself

In the short-term

In the beginning, your grief journey may take all your energy just to get through the day, especially if you have to care for others or deal with practical matters. During this time you may find it difficult to make healthy decisions. Grieving takes energy so forgive yourself when you simply can't do the things you 'should' do. The more you take care of yourself the better you will be able to get through each day.

- Make time for you. Use your alone time to think, plan, meditate, pray, 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.

In the long-term

As time passes, you will find the courage and resources to keep going and have the energy to be more purposeful about taking care of yourself.

- Manage your health. Eat a balanced diet and get physical exercise, try to drink plenty of water and avoid or limit intake of alcohol, caffeine and tobacco. Check out www.canadian-health-network.ca for more information on all aspects of your health.
- Keep a journal. Record your thoughts and feelings, hopes and dreams. Writing them down may help make them more real.

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- Talk things out. Confide in a trusted friend, family member, colleague, member of the clergy, or professional counsellor.
 - Practice relaxation techniques. Try relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, music or art therapy and visualization.
 - Read. Read about suicide, grief and the ways in which people have used their spirituality to cope in times of tragedy. Sources of information include your local library, book stores, the Internet, funeral homes, community agencies and places of worship.
 - Create a list of resources. Include the people and organizations that can help you and your family when things are not going well.
 - Take a break from your grief. See a movie, visit a museum or art gallery, pursue a hobby or walk with a friend.
 - Re-establish a routine in your life. Survivors often find the structure and distraction of returning to work or getting a new routine helpful.
 - Give back to your community. Many survivors have found a sense of peace and fulfillment in shared compassion and using their experiences to help others.
 - Take small steps. Recognize each step forward and reward yourself in some way.

Whatever you do, make sure it feels right to you.

Important Phone Numbers

Emergency **9-1-1**

**Information and Referral to
Community and Social Services** **2-1-1**

Health Link Alberta

Calgary 943-LINK (5465)

Edmonton 408-LINK (5465)

Or call toll free 1-866-408-LINK (5465)

AMHB Help Line **1-877-303-2642**

Family Doctor

Community Health Centre

Child Care

People and places I can call for support:

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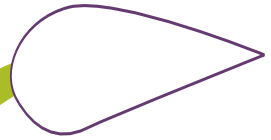
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Other
Resources



Other Resources

Suicide survivors have found these organizations, websites and books to be especially helpful. For other resources, ask at your public library, local mental health organizations and regional health authority.

Organizations

Suicide Information and Education Collection (Centre for Suicide Prevention)

An extensive library and resource centre providing information on suicide and suicidal behaviour (not a crisis centre).

www.suicideinfo.ca

The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

Contains numerous resources on suicide prevention, surviving suicide, grief and bereavement, research and grant awards.

www.afsp.org/index-1.htm

National Center for Grieving Children and Families

This site contains specific sections for age groups with activities to help cope with death. It is sponsored by the Dougy Center, the first centre in the United States to provide peer support groups for grieving children,

www.dougy.org/

Grief and Loss

A collection of resources and a Community of Care. This site contains access to numerous resources.

www.aarp.org/griefandloss/home.html

1000 deaths

This page contains links to numerous other resources on suicide, grief and loss, and mental health.

www.1000deaths.com/library/links.html

Metanoia

This site provides information and resources addressing suicide as well as grief and loss.

www.metanoia.org/suicide/

Books

Bolton, I. & Mitchell, C. (1983). *My Son - My Son: a Guide to Healing After a Suicide in the Family*. Atlanta, GA: Bolton Press.

Fine, C. (1997). *No Time to Say Goodbye: Surviving the Suicide of a Loved One*. New York, NY: Doubleday.

Fitzgerald, H. (2000). *The Grieving Teen: a Guide for Teenagers and Their Friends*. New York, NY: Fireside Books.

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Linn-Gust, M. (2001). *Do They Have Bad Days in Heaven? Surviving the Suicide Loss of a Sibling*. Atlanta, GA: Bolton Press.

Neeld, Elizabeth Harper (2003). *Seven Choices: Finding Daylight After Loss Shatters Your World*. NY, Warner Books.

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- Paraclete Press. (2000). *Journey Through the Shadows. Hope for Healing After Someone You Love Has Completed Suicide*. [videotape]. Massachusetts: Paraclete Press.
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Beyond
Surviving



Beyond Surviving

- Know you can survive. You may not think so, but you can.
- Struggle with why it happened until you no longer need to know why or until you are satisfied with partial answers.
- Know you may feel overwhelmed by the intensity of your feelings but all your feelings are normal.
- Anger, guilt, confusion and forgetfulness are common responses. You are not crazy; you are in mourning.
- Be aware you may feel appropriate anger at the person, at the world, at God, at yourself. It's okay to express it.
- You may feel guilty for what you think you did or did not do. Guilt can turn to regret, through forgiveness.
- Having suicidal thoughts is common. It does not mean you will act on those thoughts.
- Remember to take one moment or one day at a time.
- Find a good listener with whom to share. Call someone if you need to talk.
- Don't be afraid to cry. Tears are healing.
- Give yourself time to heal.
- Remember, the choice was not yours. No one is the sole influence in another's life.
- Expect setbacks. If emotions return like a tidal wave, you may only be experiencing a remnant of grief, an unfinished piece.
- Try to put off major decisions.
- Give yourself permission to get professional help.

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- Be aware of the pain of your family and friends.
 - Be patient with yourself and with others who may not understand.
 - Set your own limits and learn to say no.
 - Steer clear of people who want to tell you what or how to feel.
 - Know that there are support groups that can be helpful, such as Compassionate Friends or Survivors of Suicide groups. If not, ask a professional to help start one.
 - Call on your personal faith to help you through.
 - It is common to experience physical reactions to your grief, e.g., headaches, loss of appetite, inability to sleep.
 - The willingness to laugh with others and at yourself is healing.
 - Wear out your questions, anger, guilt or other feelings until you can let them go. Letting go doesn't mean forgetting.
 - Know that you will never be the same again, but you can survive and even go beyond just surviving.

Reprinted from Beyond Surviving – Suggestions for Survivors, with permission from Iris Bolton and the National Resource Center for Suicide Prevention and Aftercare, A Project of the Link Counseling Center.



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For further information or additional copies, contact:

Calgary Health Region
Mental Health Promotion and Illness Prevention
(403) 943-8131

The complete booklet can be downloaded from the Calgary Health Region website. Go to:

<http://www.calgaryhealth.ca/hecomm/mental/Suicidepostvention.htm>

DRAFT

By using *Hope and Healing: A Practical Guide for Survivors of Suicide* (“Service”) you acknowledge and agree that any information contained on or provided through the service is provided on an “as is” basis. While every effort has been made to ensure accuracy, we do not provide any express or implied warranties on the accuracy of the information. By using this Service you acknowledge that there may be errors and that such errors, once known, will only be corrected through later editions of the Service.

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Nothing contained in Service is intended to be or is to be used for medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Nothing contained in Service is intended to be or is to be used for legal advice.



Hope and Healing: A Practical Guide for Survivors of Suicide is dedicated to the survivors of suicide who openly shared their experiences and told us about the need for this booklet. Your ideas and insights are woven throughout the pages.



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