

Suicide - family and friends

The death of someone you care for is always a painful event, but the grief felt by family members and friends can be deeper when the cause of death is suicide.

Around 2,000 Australians die from suicide every year. Some estimates suggest that around one in four people knew someone who took their own life.

Even though suicide is, unfortunately, something many people are touched by, the social taboo surrounding this issue often means that family and friends may feel stigmatised and isolated.

Common responses

Common responses to the suicide of a family member or friend include:

- Remorse over lost opportunities
- Anger at the person who took their own life
- Guilt over failed responsibilities, real or imagined
- Isolation caused by a sense of self-imposed shame
- Loneliness when others keep their distance
- Anger toward those perceived to have contributed to the suicide
- Awkwardness when others don't know how to respond
- Shock associated with facing the traumatic and sometimes unexpected nature of death
- Difficulty accepting that the death was by suicide
- Fear that powerful grief reactions may not be normal
- Difficulty making sense of the suicide.

The question 'why'

Family and friends often grapple with the question of why the person chose to end their own life. In many cases, the question is complicated and remains open-ended. Suicide may be associated with:

- Mental illness, such as depression or schizophrenia
- Chronic pain
- Physical disability
- Stress of certain life events.

The stages of grief

Family and friends often say that the bereavement felt after a suicide is different to that felt after other bereavements. In addition to the powerful feelings of grief, people also grapple with anger, relief and guilt.

Different people grieve in different ways. Family members need to give each other space and understanding so that everyone can grieve in their individual ways. Some of the initial stages of grief may include:

- Shock or numbness
- Strong feelings of anger or confusion
- Emotional withdrawal from others
- Feelings of depression and loneliness
- Difficulties with everyday routines, such as eating and sleeping
- Guilt.

In time:

- The strong feelings start to reduce.

- The loss isn't always uppermost in the person's mind.
- The person can start finding meaning and purpose in their life.

Guilt is a common feeling

It is common to feel guilty: that you 'could have done more'. People may feel they should have picked up the warning signs, or blame themselves for things they did or didn't do in the period leading up to the suicide. Many feel anger and betrayal. These are common and normal reactions.

Feelings of relief

Some people who end their own lives were affected by mental illness, such as depression, schizophrenia or other conditions. Family and friends who witnessed the distress caused by mental illness (especially when untreated) may feel a sense of relief that the person's torment is over. This is a normal reaction and people should not feel guilty about it.

Negative reactions

Family and friends may come across people who have negative reactions towards them. For example, some may see suicide as a mark of failure. Others may not know how to respond because suicide is seen as a socially unacceptable cause of death. Some people simply avoid the issue out of embarrassment.

The guilt, pain and confusion felt by many family members and friends can be compounded by these attitudes, and they may mistakenly feel that the person ended their life instead of simply 'facing their problems'.

Suggestions for family and friends

Suggestions to help you cope with the suicide of someone you care for include:

- Give yourself time to come to terms with your loss.
- Try not to deny your feelings.
- Remember that grief is a normal reaction, even when your feelings seem too intense to be normal.
- Work through your feelings, alone and with others.
- Support other family members.
- Be vigilant about signs of depression or suicidal thoughts in yourself and other family members and seek help from a doctor if these occur.
- Be honest with children and explain the suicide in language appropriate to their age.
- If friends seem awkward or don't know what to say, tell them what you need.
- Accept that some friends won't be able to give you the kind of emotional support you need. Consider joining a support group in your area.
- Anticipate that important events, such as birthdays and Christmas, will provoke strong feelings.
- Seek professional bereavement counselling.

Where to get help

- SANE Australia Tel. 1800 18 SANE (7263)
- Your doctor
- Lifeline Tel. 131 114
- Kids Help Line Tel. 1800 551 800
- Your local community health centre

Things to remember

- Some estimates suggest that around one in four people know someone who has taken their own life.
- Despite the prevalence of suicide, the social taboo surrounding this issue often means that survivors may feel stigmatised and isolated.
- Feelings of grief, anger, guilt, betrayal and relief are normal reactions.
- Seek professional bereavement counselling and consider joining a support group.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

SANE Australia

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