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## Suicide - family and friends

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### Summary

- Although many people are touched by suicide, it is still surrounded by stigma.
  - This often means that people bereaved by suicide feel stigmatised and isolated.
  - If someone you know has died by suicide, it is normal to feel grief, anger, guilt and betrayal.
  - Consider seeking professional bereavement counselling or joining a support group.
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The death of someone you care about is often painful, but the grief felt by family members and friends can be more complex when the cause of death is suicide. Around 3,000 Australians die from suicide every year. Even though many people are touched by suicide, the stigma surrounding the suicide can mean that family and friends feel stigmatised and isolated.

### Suicide – asking ‘why?’

Family and friends may struggle with the question of why the person chose to end their life. Suicide is complex, often with no single explanation for why they died.

Suicide may be associated with a number of risk factors, including:

- mental illness – such as major depression, psychotic illnesses and eating disorders
- chronic pain
- physical disability
- negative life events – such as abuse, significant loss or financial crisis
- drug or alcohol abuse
- bullying
- previous suicide attempt
- exposure to suicide behaviour in others.

People living in rural and remote areas, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people also have a higher rate of suicide.

### Grief after a suicide

Grief is a healthy part of the healing process, and shouldn't be viewed as poor coping. Usually the intensity of grief will rise and fall with small periods of relief between emotional times.

Family and friends describe the grief felt after a suicide as different to that felt after other bereavements. In addition to the powerful feelings of grief, people can struggle with anger, guilt and confusion.

Some of the initial feelings of grief after a suicide may include:

- shock, numbness and disbelief that there was no chance to say goodbye
  - strong feelings of anger or confusion
  - isolation and emotional withdrawal from others
  - feelings of depression, sadness, loneliness, and tearfulness
  - loss of interest in things you usually enjoy
  - helplessness
  - restlessness
  - difficulty with everyday routines
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- change in appetite
- sleeping, increased tiredness or insomnia
- tension headaches
- shame, guilt, failure and regret that you did not prevent the suicide
- regret about things you did or did not do while the person was alive.

In time:

- The strong feelings will start to reduce.
- The loss will not always be uppermost in your mind.
- You will be able to start finding meaning and purpose in your life again, and focus on your relationships, thoughts, hopes, beliefs and sense of future.

### **Guilt is a common feeling after a suicide**

Some people may feel guilt after a suicide. It is not unusual to feel guilty, and that you 'could have done more'. You may feel they should have picked up the warning signs, or blame yourself for things you did or didn't do in the period leading up to the suicide. Many people also feel anger and betrayal.

These are common and normal reactions. If these feelings significantly impact on your mood or functioning it is important to seek support.

### **Feelings of relief after a suicide**

Some people who end their own lives may have been affected by mental illness.

Family and friends who witnessed the distress caused by mental illness (especially if it was untreated) may feel a sense of relief that the person's distress is over. This relief can then cause the person to feel guilty they are relieved. This is a normal reaction and part of the grief process.

While these feelings can be confronting, they are nothing to feel guilty about. These emotions should lessen over time.

### **Negative reactions to suicide**

Sometimes people may express negative reactions towards family and friends after a suicide. 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 may 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 'facing their problems'.

### **Suggestions for family and friends affected by suicide**

The reasons behind each suicide are unique. So too are the reactions, grief and coping processes of those left behind. It's important to take care of yourself during this overwhelming and upsetting time. Suggestions include:

- Sometimes after losing someone to suicide people can feel suicidal themselves. If you notice signs of depression or suicidal thoughts in yourself or other family members it's important to get professional assistance.
- Be honest with children and explain the suicide in language appropriate to their age.
- Surround yourself with nurturing people, and take time for yourself when you need it.
- Friends and family may seem awkward or not know how to help. Speak with them about your needs. Some may not be able to offer the kind of support you need, which is okay.
- Try to eat well, sleep regularly, and keep active to maintain your overall wellbeing.
- 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.
- Remember that you are allowed to feel positive, happy, and hopeful for the future.
- How long you grieve is not a measure of how much you loved the person who died.
- Using rituals can help with grieving by marking significant occasions and commemorating the life of the person who has died. These can include lighting a candle, listening to special music or songs, reading poems, looking at photos, or creating a memory book or box.

**If at any time you are worried about your mental health or the mental health of a loved one, call Lifeline 13 11 14.**

### Where to get help

- **SANE Help Centre** Tel. **1800 18 SANE (7263)** (Monday – Friday, 10 am–10 pm AEST)
- Chat live with a **SANE Help Centre** counsellor (Monday – Friday, 10 am – 10 pm AEST)
- **SANE Forums** are full of people who want to talk to you and offer support.
- Your **GP (Doctor)**
- **Lifeline** Tel. **13 11 14** (24 hours)
- **Kids Help Line** Tel. **1800 551 800** (24 hours)
- **Suicide Call Back Service** Tel. 1300 659 467 (24 hours)
- **SuicideLine** Tel. **1300 651 251** (24 hours)
- **GriefLine** Tel. **1300 845 745** (midday to 3 am AEST, 7 days)

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