Suicide - family and friends
Some estimates suggest that around one in four people knew 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. 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.

**Summary**

- Some estimates suggest that around one in four people knew 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.

**Common responses to suicide**

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, bipolar disorder or schizophrenia
- chronic pain
- physical disability
- stress of certain life events.

**Grief after a suicide**

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 feelings 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 after a suicide

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, bipolar disorder, 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.

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 Australia Tel. 1800 18 SANE (7263)
- Need Help? Chat live with a SANE Helpline Advisor (Available Monday-Friday, 9am-5pm AEST).
- Your doctor
- Lifeline Tel. 13 11 14
- Kids Help Line Tel. 1800 551 800
- Your local community health centre

Things to remember

- Some estimates suggest that around one in four people knew 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.

References


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- ⭐️ Average

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Mental illness

The following content is displayed as Tabs. Once you have activated a link navigate to the end of the list to view its associated content. The activated link is defined as Active Tab

- Mental illness explained
- Types of mental illness
- Eating disorders
- Support, services and treatment

betterhealth.vic.gov.au
Living with mental illness
Suicide prevention

Mental illness explained

- Early signs and intervention with mental illness
  Getting help early can reduce the severity of symptoms and the impact on people’s daily lives...

- Forensic mental health
  Forensic mental health services provide assessment and treatment of people with a mental disorder and a history of criminal offending, or those who are at risk of offending...

- Let’s talk about depression in men
  Depression affects men of all ages, however men continue to seek help for mental health issues at significantly lower rates than women. Jonathan experienced depression and anxiety throughout his...

- Mental health first aid
  We all see friends and loved ones going through rough times, but sometimes what we’re witnessing is a developing mental health problem, or a mental health crisis. In preparation for these...

- Mental health laws and compulsory patients
  If you are a compulsory patient under the Mental Health Act, you have rights and there are people who can help you...

- Mental illness explained
  The relationship between stress and mental illness is complex, but it is known that stress can worsen an episode of mental illness...

- Mental illness treatments
  The correct treatment for mental illness can help a person’s condition to improve or help a person to live well, despite the presence of some ongoing symptoms...

Types of mental illness

- Anxiety disorders
  Anxiety disorders are common mental health problems that affect many people...

- Bipolar disorder
  Bipolar disorder is a type of psychosis, which means the person’s perception of reality is altered. It is characterised by extreme mood swings...

- Body dysmorphic disorder (BDD)
  People with body dysmorphic disorder constantly worry about the way they look...

- Borderline personality disorder
  People with borderline personality disorder may exhibit extreme behaviour, such as repeated self-mutilation or taking overdoses of medication...

- Depression explained
  The most important thing is to recognise the signs and symptoms and seek support...

- Dissociation and dissociative disorders
  Dissociation is a mental process where a person disconnects from their thoughts, feelings, memories or sense of identity...

- Eating disorders
  Eating disorders are a mental illness and can affect women and men of all age groups...

- Heart disease and mental health
  Did you know that your mental health can affect your heart health and your heart health can affect your mental health? Depression can also affect how well people with heart disease recover, and...

- Munchausen syndrome
  Munchausen syndrome is a mental disorder in which the patient fake illness to gain attention and sympathy...

- Obsessive compulsive disorder
  Obsessive compulsive disorder can have a profound effect on a person's life...

- Panic attack
Without treatment, frequent and prolonged panic attacks can be severely disabling.

- **Paranoia**
  Paranoia is the irrational and persistent feeling that people are 'out to get you' or that you are the subject of persistent, intrusive attention by others.

- **Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)**
  People with post-traumatic stress disorder often experience feelings of panic or extreme fear, which may resemble what was felt during the traumatic event.

- **Peychosis**
  In psychosis, the everyday thoughts that enable us to lead our daily lives become confused.

- **Schizoaffective disorder**
  Diagnosis of schizoaffective disorder may be difficult because the symptoms are similar to bipolar disorder and schizophrenia.

- **Schizophrenia**
  People with schizophrenia do not have 'split personalities' and they are not intellectually disabled.

- **Substance abuse and mental illness – dual diagnosis**
  Dual diagnosis means someone has both a mental illness and a substance use problem.

### Eating disorders

- **Anorexia nervosa**
  A common misconception is that anorexia nervosa only affects young women, but it affects males and females of all ages.

- **Binge eating disorder**
  You can recover from binge eating disorder with the right help and commitment.

- **Bulimia nervosa**
  Understanding the warning signs of bulimia nervosa and seeking help as soon as possible will help your recovery.

- **Eating disorders**
  Eating disorders are a mental illness and can affect women and men of all age groups.

- **Eating disorders and adolescents**
  Often, an eating disorder develops as a way for an adolescent to feel in control about what's happening in their life.

- **Eating disorders - support for families**
  You have the potential to be a great support to your family member if they are diagnosed with an eating disorder.

- **Other specified feeding or eating disorders (OSFED)**
  OSFED is now one of the most common eating disorders.

### Support, services and treatment

- **Antipsychotic medications**
  Antipsychotic medications don't cure mental illnesses, but they can reduce, or even eliminate, symptoms.

- **Cognitive behaviour therapy**
  Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) can help you change unhelpful or unhealthy habits of thinking, feeling and behaving.

- **Counsellors**
  Anyone who is struggling with a personal concern can seek help from a counsellor.

- **Early signs and intervention with mental illness**
  Getting help early can reduce the severity of symptoms and the impact on people's daily lives.

- **Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT)**
  ECT can be an effective treatment for some types of mental illness.

- **Mental health care plans**
  A mental health care plan explains the support provided by each member of a person's healthcare team.
Mental health first aid
We all see friends and loved ones going through rough times, but sometimes what we’re witnessing is a developing mental health problem, or a mental health crisis. In preparation for these...

Mental health problems - early care helps
If emotional or behavioural problems are disrupting your life, it's important to seek professional help early...

Psychoanalysis
Psychoanalysis is a treatment based on the theory that our present is shaped by our past...

Living with mental illness

10 tips for living with depression
Try to do some activity every day ... 10 tips for living with depression...

10 tips to improve your mental fitness
The brain is like a muscle – if you don’t give it a regular workout, it loses tone. Here are some tips to help you improve your mental fitness: Exercise for 30 minutes every day. Physical...

About mental health services in Victoria (video)
Victorian mental health services provide expert advice and support for people of all ages...

Alzheimer's disease - Early signs (video)
Family and friends of people with Alzheimer's disease discuss their experiences and how to recognise the early signs...

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Mental illness and violence
People with a mental illness who are receiving effective treatment are no more violent than anyone else in the community...

Mental illness - family and friends
You can do a lot to help your friend or relative with a mental illness, but you need to look after yourself too...

Strong relationships, strong health
Throughout your life, the number and strength of your relationships affect your mental and physical wellbeing. The benefits of social connections and good mental health are numerous. Proven links...

Suicide prevention

Early signs and intervention with mental illness
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- Suicide and mental illness
  
  A suicide attempt may be an early warning sign that a person is developing a mental illness...

- Suicide - family and friends
  
  The grief felt by family and friends can be deeper when the cause of death is suicide...

- Youth suicide – the warning signs
  
  All suicide threats are serious. You don't have to be a trained professional to help a person contemplating suicide...

Related Information

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Related information on other websites

- GriefLink.
- headspace.org.au
- LIFE: Suicide Prevention in Australia.
- Lifeline.

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