

Suicide And Grief

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GRIEF AND LOSS: SUPPORTING OTHERS AND OURSELVES
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There is nothing that can replace the absence of someone dear to us, and one should not even attempt to do so. One must simply hold out and endure it.

At first that sounds very hard, but at the same time it is also a great comfort. For to the extent the emptiness truly remains unfilled one remains connected to the other person through it.

It is wrong to say that God fills the emptiness. God in no way fills it but much more leaves it precisely unfilled and thus helps us preserve—even in pain—the authentic relationship.

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Furthermore, the more beautiful and full the remembrances, the more difficult the separation.

But gratitude transforms the torment of memory into silent joy. One bears what was lovely in the past not as a thorn but as a precious gift deep within, a hidden treasure of which one can always be certain.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 8, Letters and Papers from Prison (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), letter no. 89, page 238.

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Suicide statistics- from AFSP

- ▶ Nearly one million people die by suicide globally each year.
- ▶ For each completed suicide, at least 6 or more loved ones are directly affected by the death.
- ▶ It is estimated that 85% of people in the United States will know someone personally who has died by suicide

AFSP

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Suicide Statistics

- ▶ Ninety percent of people who die by suicide have an underlying — and potentially treatable — mental health condition.
- ▶ Depression, bipolar disorder, and substance use are strongly linked to suicidal thinking and behavior.

AFSP

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Suicide Is Complex

- ▶ Causes – internal operating system which directs the choices an individual makes in response to a triggering event.
 - ▶ Multifaceted and complex
 - ▶ " Interwoven into the core fabric of what a person has come to learn about life, himself/herself and God"
 - ▶ Govern his/her capacity to choose
- ▶ Jackson, T. When you're left behind. Surviving the Aftermath of Suicide. 2007 RBC Ministries p 13-14

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Suicide is complex

- ▶ Triggers are precipitating events that push some people over the edge
- ▶ Predispositions are temperament and genetic vulnerabilities that make some individuals more susceptible to suicidal thoughts and behaviors
- ▶ Jackson, T. When you're left behind. Surviving the Aftermath of Suicide. 2007 RBC Ministries p 12-14

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Medical Research

- ▶ Suicide is related to brain functions that affect decision-making and behavioral control, making it difficult for people to find positive solutions.
- ▶ These psychiatric disorders or illnesses create emotional and physical pain

Psychologists Jack Jordan and Bob Baugher. After Suicide Loss: Coping with your Grief

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My Story

- ▶ My husband died by suicide in 2011
- ▶ He was a pediatrician and he loved children. We met our first week in medical school. We have a son and a daughter
- ▶ He was a bright, interesting man – a voracious reader and a great cook. (I was not a great cook)

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My Story

He had been struggling with alcohol – he drank alone at home

The man I knew was sliding downhill – and it was so difficult to watch.

I had talked with him about getting help but he said he could take care of it himself.

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My Story

▶ I was in Denver at a meeting and a friend called and said David had not showed up for work and they could not reach him. This was very unusual.

▶ She asked if she should check on him.

▶ I told her my sister would check as I was concerned that he had been drinking and passed out or fallen and he would have been embarrassed to be found that way

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My Story

▶ Mary called me and told me he had died by suicide

▶ I could hardly believe it –I would never have imagined he would die by suicide.

▶ I later found out he had received a DUI the day before which would have been such a shameful thing for him. He always told his kids never to drink and drive

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My Story

- ▶ My first response on hearing that was anger at him-you could have dealt with that; it would have forced you to seek help which you needed et.
- ▶ My second response was hurt – why did you not call and tell me and discuss it with me
- ▶ I believe it played a role in his suicide, but , of course, I will never know.
- ▶ Many suicides are impulsive especially when drugs or alcohol are involved

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Grief

- ▶ Grief is the universal, instinctual and adaptive reaction to the loss of a loved one.
- ▶ Acute grief is the initial painful response
- ▶ Integrated grief is the ongoing, attenuated adaptation to the death of a loved one
- ▶ Young, Iglewicz, A, Glorioso, D, et.al, Suicide bereavement and complicated grief, Dialogues Clin Neurosci, 2012;14:177-186

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Grief

- ▶ Complicated grief (CG) is acute grief that remains persistent and intense and does not transition into integrated grief.
- ▶ It is a bereavement reaction in which acute grief is prolonged causing distress and interfering with functioning.
- ▶ The person may have difficulty establishing a meaningful live without the person who died.

Young, Iglewicz, A, Glorioso, D, et.al, Suicide bereavement and complicated grief, Dialogues Clin Neurosci, 2012;14:177-186

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Grief

- ▶ Life may feel empty and the intense grief remains.
- ▶ It is associated with poor functional, psychological and physical outcomes.
- ▶ The person may be unable to return to work for a prolonged period, may isolate from their family and friends.

Young, Iglewicz, A., Glorioso, D. et.al, Suicide bereavement and complicated grief. Dialogues Clin Neurosci. 2012;14:177-186

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Complicated Grief (CG)

- ▶ Some studies suggest that as many as 10-20% of bereaved individuals develop CG.
- ▶ Survivors of suicide loss are at higher risk of developing CG- One study showed a rate of 43%
- ▶ Survivors of suicide loss may face unique challenges that are different than survivors of other types of death.

Mitchell AM, Kim Y, Prigerson HG, Mortimer-Stephens MK. Complicated grief in survivors of suicide. Crisis. 2004;25:12-18

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Why is grief after suicide different?

- ▶ In many ways it is not different.
- ▶ We miss the person we loved
- ▶ We are lonely
- ▶ Each of us grieves in our own way and there is not a right or wrong way to grieve
- ▶ We each work through our grief in different ways

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Challenges for survivors of suicide loss

- ▶ Guilt and a feeling of failure
- ▶ Confusion
- ▶ Rejection and Abandonment
- ▶ Shame
- ▶ Anger
- ▶ Stigma
- ▶ Trauma

Young, I, Iglewicz, A, Glorioso, D, et al. Suicide bereavement and complicated grief. Dialogues Clin Neurosci. 2012; 14:1770186

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Why these challenges

- ▶ Confusion - The need to understand – Why would they do this? Could they not see there was help? How could they leave us?
- ▶ Guilt-What did I miss? Was I not supportive enough? Could I have prevented the death? I should have been a better spouse.
- ▶ Rejection- Suicide is the ultimate form of rejection. The survivor feels as if their relationship with the loved one was not important enough as they chose to leave them behind.
- ▶ Jackson, T. When you're left behind. Surviving the Aftermath of Suicide. 2007 RBC Miniseries p 7-19

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Challenges

- ▶ Anger – At the person who died – why did they refuse to get help, why were you unwilling to deal with your issues, now I must deal with the aftermath. My daughter struggled for years as her father had told her he would never hurt himself.
- ▶ Anger at themselves – for feeling angry as they know their loved one was not well when they died by suicide
- ▶ Relief – may feel relief that they no longer have to deal with the person's issues whether it may be addiction, other mental illness etc

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Challenges

- ▶ The conflict between sadness, anger and relief causes turmoil
- ▶ Shame and Stigma – there is still considerable stigma around mental illness, including addiction and suicide. It has improved but often survivors feel the need to conceal the cause of death or they sense others are uncomfortable with the thought of suicide
- ▶ Trauma – may have found the body
- ▶ There may be personal or financial issues that are a shock to them – now they have to deal with those issues

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Shame and Stigma

- ▶ Lois and Sam Bloom whose son died by suicide said
- ▶ "What suicide wills survivors is a shawl of shame and a tangle of guilt, anger and disbelief, with few shelters where they can repair."
- ▶ These feelings often cause isolation and a fear of talking about their loved one

Kalf, June. Standing in the Shadow. Baker Books Grand Rapids, MI, 2002 p.19

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Shame and Stigma

- ▶ Often people have not been open when the cause of death is suicide. They are worried about how others will react
- ▶ I was amazed at how many people came to talk to me and acknowledge they had lost a loved one to suicide
- ▶ Many stated that their loved one had been reluctant to share their emotional pain and were afraid to seek help because of the stigma

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Isolation

- ▶ Went back to work – I could tell everyone was very careful around me. It felt like I could not even mention him
- ▶ I finally said his name out loud one day and said – I wish I could call him and ask what I should do about vaccinations in this young person
- ▶ It made others more comfortable – I am certain they were worried I would burst into tears

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Challenges

- ▶ Letting go of complete closure-must accept that we cannot find all of the answers. This is difficult as most of us want a final answer.
- ▶ Trusting again – many do not trust their own judgement anymore – especially about relationships as they feel ambushed

Jackson, T. When you're left behind. Surviving the Aftermath of Suicide. 2007 RBC Ministries p 23-25

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Answers

- ▶ Albert Hsu said – "Those of us left behind often find ourselves searching for a precise event that caused the suicide. We think that the act will cease to be incomprehensible if we can identify something as the cause. But we must make a distinction between causes and triggers."

Albert Y. Hsu, Grieving A Suicide (Downers Grove, IL:InterVarsity Press, 2002), p. 78

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Margaret Atwood – Survivors can't stop asking why

- ▶ "Curiosity is not our only motive: Love or grief or despair or hatred is what drives us on. We'll spy relentlessly on the dead: We'll open their letters; we'll go through their trash, hoping for a hint, a final word, an explanation, for those who have deserted us-who've left us holding the bag, which is often a good deal emptier than we'd supposed."

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Caring for oneself

- ▶ Stress – try to deal with it in a healthy way.
- ▶ After David's death I found myself being frantically busy- I realize now that it was to avoid thinking about his death
- ▶ Exercise
- ▶ Time with friends
- ▶ Silent time
- ▶ Journaling
- ▶ Good Nutrition

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Caring for oneself

- ▶ Support groups
 - ▶ Survivors realize they are not alone
 - ▶ They can say anything and be understood
- ▶ American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) and American Association of Suicidology (AAS) have support groups and many resources for loss survivors
- ▶ International Survivor's Day – held the Saturday before Thanksgiving

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Caring for oneself

- ▶ Family and Friends
- ▶ Counseling – I found it helpful to have someone to talk to who did not know David. They were objective and listened to me. Helped me to deal with the guilt and other emotions.
- ▶ Clergy
- ▶ Journaling

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Caring for oneself

- ▶ International Survivor's Day –
- ▶ Loss Survivor's conference

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4 Tasks of Grief

- ▶ Tell the story – this helps it to be real
- ▶ Express the Emotions – grief comes in waves. Express what you feel
- ▶ Make Meaning from the Loss – Nothing can make what happened "okay". Life is turned upside down and changed forever. But nothing can take away the good things your loved one accomplished
- ▶ Transition from the Physical Presence of the Person to the New Relationship – may be good memories

Author unknown – Link Counseling Center, Sandy Springs, GA

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Remembering with Honor

- ▶ Life after the suicide of a loved one never returns to normal. There will be a new normal – questions may never be answered.
- ▶ We grieve deeply because we love deeply

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Walter Wangerin Jr.

- ▶ Wangerin was an American author, educator, theologian and pastor
- ▶ In *Comfort for Those Who Grieve a Suicide* he wrote
- ▶ There are 2 griefs of suicide
 1. Grief is that which caused the suicide
 2. The grief which is caused by the suicide

Walter Wangerin, Jr. *Comfort for those who grieve a suicide*. February 17, 2005

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Walter Wangerin, Jr

- ▶ The second grief resists our more general comfortings. "How do we return to life again when the death seems to have been a willful act of our beloved? – as though the heart had chosen to cut itself out of the body."
- ▶ "Suicide is different from all such other deaths in this, that she/ he consciously participated in the extremes of human weakness."

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Walter Wangerin, Jr.

- ▶ "But before God there never was a sharper cry of craving than this, nor a more dramatic motive for faith. She who has cried, "I can't" with such tremendous failure, might better than others hear the Lord Jesus murmur, "But I can."

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Suicide Survivor's Bill of Rights

- I have the right to be free of guilt.
- I have the right not to feel responsible for the suicide death.
- I have the right to express my feelings and emotions, even if they do not seem acceptable, as long as they do not interfere with the rights of others.
- I have the right to have my questions answered honestly by authorities and family members.

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Suicide Survivor's Bill of Rights

- ▶ I have the right not to be deceived because others feel they can spare me further grief.
- ▶ I have the right to maintain a sense of hopefulness.
- ▶ I have a right to peace and dignity.
- ▶ I have the right to positive feelings about the one I lost through suicide, regardless of the events prior to or at the time of the death.

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Suicide Survivor's Bill of Rights

- ▶ I have the right to retain my individuality and not be judged because of the suicide death.
- ▶ I have the right to seek counseling and a support group to enable me to honestly explore my feelings to further the acceptance process.
- ▶ I have the right to reach acceptance.
- ▶ I have the right to a new beginning.
- ▶ I have the right to be.

▶ E. Betsy Ross, "Life After Suicide: A Ray of Hope for Those Left Behind"

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David's Story

- ▶ David was a good father and husband. He loved children and was a voracious reader. He gave many of his patients reading lists at different times in their lives- usually hand written.
- ▶ People have come to me and told me how important those reading lists were to them – most recently a student at UND who was his patient when we lived in Minot. After his funeral one person sent me one of the lists – I still have it.
- ▶ A final thought which I have rarely shared – I read the police report from his DUI – in it the officer said that at the end of the investigation David thanked him for stopping him so that he would not hurt anyone

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Remember ME

- ▶ At the rising of the sun and at it's going down,
- ▶ WE REMEMBER THEM.
- ▶ At the blowing of the wind and in the chill of Winter,
- ▶ WE REMEMBER THEM.
- ▶ At the opening of buds in the rebirth of spring,
- ▶ WE REMEMBER THEM.
- ▶ At the blueness of skies and in the warmth of Summer,
- ▶ WE REMEMBER THEM.
- ▶ At the rustling of leaves and the beauty of Autumn,
- ▶ WE REMEMBER THEM.

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Remember

- ▶ At the beginning of the year and when it ends,
- ▶ WE REMEMBER THEM.
- ▶ When we are weary and in need of strength,
- ▶ WE REMEMBER THEM.
- ▶ When we are lost and sick at heart,
- ▶ WE REMEMBER THEM.
- ▶ When we have joys we yearn to share,
- ▶ WE REMEMBER THEM.
- ▶ When we have decisions that are difficult to make,
- ▶ WE REMEMBER THEM.

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Remember Me

- ▶ When we have achievements that
- ▶ Are based on theirs,
- ▶ WE REMEMBER THEM.
- ▶ As long as we live, they too shall live;
- ▶ For they are a part of us
- ▶ AS WE REMEMBER THEM

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