

# Helping Suicide Survivors Heal

by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

Historian Arnold Toynbee once wrote, "There are always two parties to a death; the person who dies and the survivors who are bereaved." Unfortunately, many survivors of suicide suffer alone and in silence. The silence that surrounds them often complicates the healing that comes from being encouraged to mourn.

Because of the social stigma surrounding suicide, survivors feel the pain of the loss, yet may not know how, or where, or if, they should express it. Yet, the only way to heal is to mourn. Just like other bereaved persons grieving the loss of someone loved, suicide survivors need to talk, to cry, sometimes to scream, in order to heal.

As a result of fear and misunderstanding, survivors of suicide deaths are often left with a feeling of abandonment at a time when they desperately need unconditional support and understanding. Without a doubt, suicide survivors suffer in a variety of ways; one, because they need to mourn the loss of someone who has died; two, because they have experienced a sudden, typically unexpected traumatic death; and three, because they are often shunned by a society unwilling to enter into the pain of their grief.

## How Can You Help?

If you want to help a friend or family member who has experienced the death of someone loved from suicide, this article will guide you in ways to turn your cares and concerns into positive action.

### Accept the Intensity of the Grief

Grief following a suicide is always complex. Survivors don't "get over it." Instead, with support and understanding, they can come to reconcile themselves to its reality. Don't be surprised by the intensity of their feelings. Sometimes, when they least suspect it, they may be overwhelmed by feelings of grief. Accept that survivors may be struggling with explosive emotions, guilt, fear and shame—all well beyond the limits experienced in other types of death. Be patient, compassionate and understanding.

### Listen with Your Heart

Assisting suicide survivors means you must break down the terribly costly silence. Helping begins with your ability to be an active listener. Your physical presence and desire to listen without judgment are critical helping tools. Willingness to listen is the best way to offer help to someone who needs to talk.


Thoughts and feelings inside the survivor may be frightening and difficult to acknowledge. Don't worry so much about what you will say. Just concentrate on the words that are being shared with you.

Your friend may relate the same story about the death over and over again. Listen attentively each time. Realize this repetition is part of your friend's healing process. Simply listen and understand. And, remember, you don't have to have the answers to his or her questions. Simply listening is enough.

### Avoid Simplistic Explanations and Clichés

Words, particularly clichés, can be extremely painful for a suicide survivor. Clichés are trite comments often intended to diminish the loss by providing simple solutions to difficult realities. Comments like, "You are holding up so well," "Time will heal all wounds," "Think of what you still have to be thankful for" or "You have to be strong for others" are not constructive. Instead, they hurt and make a friend's journey through grief more difficult.





Be certain to avoid passing judgment or providing simplistic explanations of the suicide. Don't make the mistake of saying the person who suicided was "out of his or her mind." Informing a survivor that someone they loved was "crazy or insane" typically only complicates the situation. Suicide survivors need help in coming to their own search for understanding of what has happened. In the end, their personal search for meaning and understanding of the death is what is really important.

### **Be Compassionate**

Give your friend permission to express his or her feelings without fear of criticism. Learn from your friend. Don't instruct or set explanations about how he or she should respond. Never say, "I know just how you feel." You don't. Think about your helping role as someone who "walks with," not "behind" or "in front of" the one who is bereaved.

Familiarize yourself with the wide spectrum of emotions that many survivors of suicide experience. Allow your friend to experience all the hurt, sorrow and pain that he or she is feeling at the time. And recognize tears are a natural and appropriate expression of the pain associated with the loss.

### **Respect the Need to Grieve**

Often ignored in their grief are the parents, brothers, sisters, grandparents, aunts, uncles, spouses and children of persons who have suicided. Why? Because of the nature of the death, it is sometimes kept a secret. If the death cannot be talked about openly, the wounds of grief will go unhealed.

As a caring friend, you may be the only one willing to be with the survivors. Your physical presence and permissive listening create a foundation for the healing process. Allow the survivors to talk, but don't push them. Sometimes, you may get a cue to back off and wait. If you get a signal that this is what is needed, let them know you are ready to listen if, and when, they want to share their thoughts and feelings.

### **Understand the Uniqueness of Suicide Grief**

Keep in mind that the grief of suicide survivors is unique. No one will respond to the death of someone loved in exactly the same way. While it may be possible to talk about similar phases shared by survivors, everyone is different and shaped by experiences in his or her life.

Because the grief experience is unique, be patient. The process of grief takes a long time, so allow your friend to proceed at his or her own pace. Don't criticize what is inappropriate behavior. Remember that the death of someone to suicide is a shattering experience. As a result of this death, your friend's life is under reconstruction.

### **Be Aware of Holidays and Anniversaries**

Survivors of suicide may have a difficult time during special occasions like holidays and anniversaries. These events emphasize the absence of the person who has died. Respect this pain as a natural expression of the grief process. Learn from it. And, most importantly, never try to take the hurt away.

Use the name of the person who has died when talking to survivors. Hearing the name can be comforting and it confirms that you have not forgotten this important person who was so much a part of their lives.

### **Be Aware of Support Groups**

Support groups are one of the best ways to help survivors of suicide. In a group, survivors can connect with other people who share the commonality of the experience. They are allowed and encouraged to tell their stories as much, and as often, as they like. You may be able to help survivors locate such a group. This practical effort on your part will be appreciated.





## Respect Faith and Spirituality

If you allow them, a survivor of suicide will "teach you" about their feelings regarding faith and spirituality. If faith is a part of their lives, let them express it in ways that seem appropriate. If they are mad at God, encourage them to talk about it. Remember, having anger at God speaks of having a relationship with God. Don't be a judge, be a loving friend.

Survivors may also need to explore how religion may have complicated their grief. They may have been taught that persons who take their own lives are doomed to hell. Your task is not to explain theology, but to listen and learn. Whatever the situation, your presence and desire to listen without judging are critical helping tools.

## Work Together as Helpers

Friends and family who experience the death of someone to suicide must no longer suffer alone and in silence. As helpers, you need to join with other caring persons to provide support and acceptance for survivors who need to grieve in healthy ways.

To experience grief is the result of having loved. Suicide survivors must be guaranteed this necessity. While the above guidelines will be helpful, it is important to recognize that helping a suicide survivor heal will not be an easy task. You may have to give more concern, time and love than you ever knew you had. But this effort will be more than worth it.

## About the Author

Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D., C.T. is an internationally noted author, educator and grief counselor. He serves as Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and is on the faculty at the University of Colorado Medical School's Department of Family Medicine.

Past recipient of the Association of Death Education and Counseling's Death Educator Award, Dr. Wolfelt is an educational consultant to hospices, hospitals, schools, universities, funeral homes and a variety of community agencies across North America. Perhaps best known for his model of "companioning" versus treating the bereaved, Alan is committed to helping people mourn well so they can live well and love well.

Also a respected author, Dr. Wolfelt writes the "Children and Grief" column for *Bereavement* magazine. His many bestselling books on grief are listed under *Bookstore* on his Website. He has appeared on, and is a frequent resource for the media. Appearances include *Oprah Winfrey*, *The Larry King Show*, *The NBC Today Show* and *Nick News*.

For additional resources, please visit the Center for Loss & Life Transition website at [www.centerforloss.com](http://www.centerforloss.com).

