

# Information and advice for people recently bereaved by suicide

When a loved one ends their life it can seem almost impossible to accept and comprehend. You may experience a desperate need to know why, and the search for answers can be all-consuming. While it may be impossible to imagine the overwhelming sadness lifting, getting support and sharing your grief will, little by little, help to move you along.

The grief journey is unique for everyone, there is no one right way to do it. But if you can find a way to make sense of what has happened, you will connect to the memory of your loved one's life and move away from focusing so much on how they died.

## How grief affects you

After a suicide the emotions you experience can feel overwhelming, in fact the first few days may seem like a blur. It might begin with shock, panic or confusion and then turn into anger, disbelief, numbness, denial and extreme sadness. You might also experience a sense of relief that your loved one's turmoil and distress has ended. You might feel a sense of shame as suicide has historically been stigmatised and not often talked about. The sudden death of someone close can also affect you physically. It can leave you feeling restless and agitated, fatigued to exhaustion and unable to concentrate, or feeling physically ill, with nausea and headaches.

For many people this experience also leads to a sense of guilt or a belief that they should have done more. Endless questions can arise as you try to make sense of what has happened and how you are going to live without them. You might be thinking, "I knew something might be wrong. Was there more I could have done?" or "Our lives have changed forever. Will we ever go back to how things were?"

The grief you experience after suicide is likely to be full of changing and often distressing emotions. The people around you will also experience a range of differing reactions. This is understandable; there is no right or wrong way to respond. Grieving takes time and it's important to be patient with yourself and allow yourself to heal.

## Talking about suicide

Telling people that someone you love has killed themselves is not easy. It can be hard to know what to say and how the person will react. There will be questions about how your loved one died and it is important to prepare yourself for this. Think about what information you want to share and with whom; you may want to share more with some people than others.

Conversations Matter has valuable resources for discussing suicide – especially after a suicide has occurred – available at [www.conversationsmatter.com.au](http://www.conversationsmatter.com.au)

## What do you want to tell other people?

Telling people that it was suicide might seem confronting but it can be an important step in your grieving. Being honest can help others to understand your experience and your need for support; there is no need to talk about the details. Concealing the cause of death might also become a burden over time.

How people will react to being told about the suicide will vary. Some people may respond with concern and offer their support, while others may end the conversation abruptly, unsure how to react or perhaps overwhelmed by the information. Talk to those willing and able to listen and support you. If you don't want to discuss it at that time, let them know.

Responding to children and answering their questions can also be challenging. Children's understanding of death and suicide will vary depending on their age and maturity. Children need to be told the truth about the death, explained in a way that makes sense to them. They also need reassurance that they are not responsible for what has happened and that they will feel better in time.

How you talk about your loved one's death more publicly, for example in the obituary or at the funeral, is a personal decision. Your friends and family will probably have different views on how to approach this but there are some good reasons for why you might choose to acknowledge suicide as a cause of death.

Acknowledging the death as a suicide can help to end any rumours, while also providing an opportunity for others with similar experiences to come forward and offer their support. Using the word 'suicide' can also help to begin the difficult grieving process. The pain of the loss can seem even greater when there is a reluctance to talk about it honestly; it can be hard to share your grief if what everyone is thinking is never spoken about. Talking about the suicide of your loved one with others can also help to raise awareness of suicide and reduce the stigma often associated with it.

### Writing the obituary

Some people might talk about the death in the obituary as "sudden" or "untimely", while others may take a more direct approach and outline that the person "took their own life" or "died by suicide".

Here are some possible phrases or wording you might want to use:

- "Samantha took her own life on May 21st."
- "On Tuesday 11 June Mark died by suicide after a long struggle with depression."
- "We lost Lucy to suicide on Saturday evening. She is forever in our hearts."
- "The battle with depression has been long and difficult for Eric. Unfortunately his pain was unbearable and he couldn't find a way to hold onto life. Eric took his own life on Monday and we will miss him terribly."

Alternatively you might share the information in a more subtle way by suggesting a donation be made to a suicide prevention, depression, mental health or community organisation. If you do not want to share the cause of death then it can sometimes be best to provide no explanation: simply acknowledge the date they died and then focus on how you want them remembered.

An obituary is a permanent record of your loved one's death so do what feels right for you, your loved one and your family.

### Planning the funeral/memorial

Funerals are a time to celebrate the lives of people you love. It is also an opportunity to help friends and family understand, heal and move forward as best they can. How you do this is a decision for you and your family, but talking about the suicide in a thoughtful and open way can help in the healing process.

If you decide to talk about the suicide at the funeral/memorial there are a few things to consider.

- Discuss how you would like to talk about your loved one's death with the person overseeing the funeral/memorial. They can help you to consider your options.
- Be open from the beginning about the cause of death and its effect on family and friends. For example, "We gather to honour the memory of David and to support one another in grieving a death that is one of the hardest deaths to grieve: when someone takes their own life."

- Talk about the suicide without judgment. Do not describe details of the suicidal act itself.
- Provide a context for the suicide to help people understand more about the circumstances. You could talk about your loved one's personal pain or struggles with mental health problems, or alternatively, outline the factors commonly associated with suicide without mentioning the particular issues faced by your loved one (e.g., psychological pain, hopelessness, a mental health condition, impulsivity).
- Take care in expressing relief that they are no longer suffering. It is important that others who are vulnerable do not now see suicide as a possible option to manage their suffering.
- Provide a realistic picture of suicide, explaining that suicide is often complex and hard to understand, with no one cause, but also that it is not a character flaw or weakness.
- Try to respect and find a balance between differing opinions about how things should be done.
- Share a sense of hope. Remind people that we can support each other through these difficult times.

Another important part of a funeral/memorial is the opportunity to reflect on your loved one's achievements and the memories of times you shared. Some people bereaved by suicide have found it helpful to place an open notebook on a table at the funeral/memorial encouraging others to write down and share their memories too.

### Looking after yourself

The pain of suicide cannot be taken away and everyone copes in different ways. It is important to try and make sense of what has happened and try to accept it, allowing yourself to grieve and learn how to live with your loss as best you can.

### Share your grief

- Understand that grief is a normal response to loss. It is a process that is likely to take you through a range of difficult emotions; don't hesitate to express how you feel. There is no time limit on grieving.
- Talk openly with those affected by the suicide. Work to support each other as best you can.
- Learn more about grief, suicide and suicide prevention.
- Honour and celebrate the life of your loved one – talk about them, keep a journal of your thoughts and memories, share memories and photos. There was so much more to their lives than how they died.
- Find a way to say goodbye that expresses your love for them. You might plant a tree in their memory, write them a letter to include when they are buried, or write a poem or song about them.

## Get support

- Let others help you. They might help with simple practical things like preparing meals or helping around the house, or they might offer emotional support and a listening ear.
- Join a suicide bereavement support group. You are not alone and the support of others can help you through your grief.
- Ask for help when you need it. If feelings of grief remain unchanged for months, leaving you exhausted and unable to find relief, talk to a health professional or a helpline like the *beyondblue* Support Service or Lifeline, to find comfort, support and ways to cope.
- If you are thinking about suicide, get help. To talk to someone now call Lifeline – 13 11 14.

## Take one day at a time

- Take time out for yourself when you need it.
- Seek answers to understand more about the suicide but try not to dwell on the 'why'. At some point you will need to accept that you may never fully understand why it happened and that it wasn't your fault.
- Spend time with people who care and understand. Remember you are not alone.
- Do things that you enjoy; old or new pastimes that provide a sense of achievement, relief or fun. It is OK and important to enjoy yourself and laugh when you are grieving.
- Stay healthy. Eat well, exercise, try to get a good night's sleep and avoid drugs and alcohol.
- Set yourself something to do each day but be realistic about how much you can achieve.
- Think about when you can return to work or other commitments. For some people work provides a focus and a routine which is helpful. For others, the impact of the bereavement significantly affects their capacity to return to work. Talk with your doctor and employer about how you can approach your return to work.
- Consider what is right for you but, where you can, avoid making major decisions until you can think more clearly.

The loss of someone you love affects every part of your life, and sometimes in ways that you do not expect. Over time the intense pain and sadness will lessen and your focus will move from their death, to the life and love you shared. Be kind to yourself as you find your way through your grief; talk openly about how you feel with those you trust and allow them to support you.

## Where to get support

### *beyondblue*

[www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

Learn more about anxiety and depression, or talk it through with our Support Service.

☎ 1300 22 4636

✉ Email or 💬 chat to us online at [www.beyondblue.org.au/getsupport](http://www.beyondblue.org.au/getsupport)

### Lifeline

[www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)

13 11 14

Access to information and to crisis support and mental health support services. Lifeline produces Survivors of Suicide, a resource for coping with the suicide of a loved one, written by people bereaved by suicide.

### Support After Suicide

[www.supportaftersuicide.org.au](http://www.supportaftersuicide.org.au)

Information and resources relating to bereavement after suicide.

### StandBy Response Service

[www.unitedsynergies.com.au](http://www.unitedsynergies.com.au)

Provides a 24-hour coordinated community response to families, friends and communities who have been bereaved through suicide.

### Living Is For Everyone (LIFE)

[www.livingisforeveryone.com.au](http://www.livingisforeveryone.com.au)

Information and resources including support packs for those bereaved by suicide or other sudden death, available for each state and territory within Australia.

### Conversations Matter

[www.conversationsmatter.com.au](http://www.conversationsmatter.com.au)

A range of practical resources with tips on how to talk about suicide, including talking with someone bereaved by suicide.

### Head to Health

[headtohealth.gov.au](http://headtohealth.gov.au)

Head to Health can help you find free and low-cost, trusted online and phone mental health resources.



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