



Suicide Bereavement

Suicide bereavement can be an overwhelming and confusing time. When people experience a loss, their natural emotional response is grief. Additionally, with suicide bereavement, the sudden nature can mean individuals experience the effects of trauma.

Common Responses to Suicide Bereavement

Grief and trauma can have a profound impact on our emotions, thoughts, behaviours, physical functioning and existential understanding. Reactions may relate to the person no longer physically being there, however, some may relate to the fact that the death was by suicide. Common responses can include:

Emotional: e.g., shock, disbelief, numbness, sadness, detachment, anxiety, fear, hurt, despair, regret, anger, irritability, guilt, shame, isolation, or loneliness.

Cognitive: e.g., confusion, forgetfulness, racing thoughts, indecision, distractibility, overthinking, intrusive memories, distressing dreams, taking responsibility for the suicide, or preoccupation with what happened to try to understand 'why?'.

Behavioural: e.g., withdrawal from social activities, crying, being jumpy, restlessness, avoidance of reminders of the loved one, recklessness, or changes in sleep patterns, sex drive, or appetite.

Physical: e.g., sweating, trembling, breathing difficulties, hypervigilance, nausea, aches, tension, heaviness, tightness, tiredness, or digestive issues.

Existential: e.g., loss of meaning or direction, questioning faith or beliefs, or searching for understanding.

In many communities, there is still a stigma around death and suicide. Many people feel unsure of what to say or do when someone has been bereaved, especially when that bereavement was by suicide. This can leave the bereaved feeling worried about what people might think, and reluctant to tell people about their loss, which can be stressful or isolating.

It is important to acknowledge all reactions openly and honestly; suppressing or ignoring feelings does not make them go away. It is also important to remember that although everyone will experience grief in their lives, the experience of grief is unique to each of us. It is a time of learning what life looks like without the presence of our loved ones.

Supporting Yourself

This can be a painful process, and people must engage with self-care in many ways. The following are some tips on taking care of yourself after the loss of a loved one by suicide.

Taking Care of the Basics

Doing what you can to nourish and rest your body is essential. Drink water, eat several light meals if you don't have an appetite for larger meals, engage in light exercise like a gentle walk, and try to sleep around your usual schedule.



Taking Time Out

It's okay to give yourself time out from the pain you are experiencing by doing something you enjoy. Allow yourself time to "just be" without expectations of achieving anything or feeling a particular way. Just as it is not wrong to cry or feel sad, it is not wrong to laugh or enjoy yourself.

Connecting with Others

Reach out to your support network who understand you and your circumstances. If family or friends are unavailable or don't have the skills you need at this time, consider seeking additional support.

Taking Things at Your Own Pace

Allowing yourself time and space to grieve is essential, both in the day-to-day and the long term. Where possible, it can be helpful to defer major decisions for several months to ensure you have the time you need to process the loss of your loved one.

Remembering Your Loved One

Finding ways to honour the person who has died is an important part of learning how to live with their absence. Creating rituals for the day-to-day and significant dates can be comforting. You can do this by lighting a candle, writing, talking and sharing stories about them, visiting a special place, and keeping treasured mementos and photos.

Telling People

Initially, it can be difficult even to say the word suicide. However, being as open and honest as you feel able can ensure you have the support you need. Sometimes people ask intrusive and insensitive questions like "Why did they do it?".

Preparing responses can help you feel more able to cope if these do arise. You can share as much or as little as you choose to, depending on how you are feeling and with whom you are speaking.

Challenging Stigma

Hearing others reinforce stigma about suicide can be upsetting. It's okay to distance yourself if you need to. Eventually, if you feel comfortable, you may choose to explain that suicide is not about selfishness or weakness. Most people who complete suicide do not want to die; they are in pain and they want the pain to stop. Understanding this can change how people think about suicide and make it easier to talk about and support people.

Asking for Help

There can be several practical tasks that need to be completed after a suicide. If you do not feel up to it, reach out to others for assistance. It is normal if you cannot function the way you usually do, and it can be beneficial to take that pressure off yourself.

Over time, most people gradually find ways to live with their loss. However, you may consider seeking professional help if your relationships or job are seriously affected or you feel unable to find your way through your response to the loss of your loved one. Remember that you can receive support 24/7 through Acacia EAP, or through one of the following:

Australia

[GriefLine](#): 1300 845 745
or [Website](#).

[Thirriili](#): Call 1800 805 801
or [Website](#).

Aotearoa New Zealand

[Skylight](#): 0800 299 100 or
[Website](#).

[Manaaki Tangata Victim Support](#): 0800 842 84 or [website](#)