

# American Foundation *for* Suicide Prevention

## Other Websites and Organizations for Survivors

### Online Support Groups:

Many survivors who don't live near a live support group find online support groups to be helpful.

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### Other Websites:

[www.suicidreferencelibrary.com](http://www.suicidreferencelibrary.com). A resource list created and maintained by volunteers from several on-line survivor communities.

[www.beforetheirtime.org](http://www.beforetheirtime.org). *Before Their Time* is a three-volume, six-CD compilation of memorial songs for survivors. From Joan Baez to Cheryl Wheeler, 80 artists contributed songs they wrote after the death of someone they love. A perfect condolence gift that provides comfort through all the stages of grief that survivors encounter. All sales benefit AFSP.

[www.thegiftofkeith.org/info/main\\_navigation.html](http://www.thegiftofkeith.org/info/main_navigation.html). Created by a survivor family that contains information and resources about surviving suicide loss.

[www.siblingsurvivors.com](http://www.siblingsurvivors.com). Created by a survivor after she lost her sister to suicide.

[www.suicidememorialwall.com](http://www.suicidememorialwall.com). Created to remember some of the names of those who died by suicide and to encourage survivors to better understand the causes of suicide.

[www.survivorsofsuicide.com](http://www.survivorsofsuicide.com)

### Other Organizations:

**American Association of Suicidology**  
4201 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 408  
Washington, D.C. 20008  
(202)237-2280

[www.suicidology.org](http://www.suicidology.org)

Promotes public awareness, education, and training for professionals, and sponsors an annual "Healing After Suicide" conference for survivors.

**American Psychiatric Association**  
1000 Wilson Blvd.  
Suite 1825

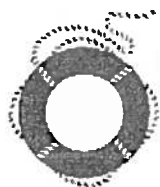
Arlington, VA 22209

1-888-357-7924

[www.psych.org](http://www.psych.org)

Resource for referrals to psychiatrists.

**American Psychological Association**  
750 First Street, NE



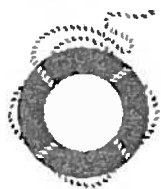
## American Foundation *for* Suicide Prevention

### Coping with Suicide Loss

- Some survivors struggle with what to tell other people. Although you should make whatever decision feels right to you, most survivors have found it best to simply acknowledge that their loved one died by suicide.
- You may find that it helps to reach out to family and friends. Because some people may not know what to say, you may need to take the initiative to talk about the suicide, share your feelings, and ask for their help.
- Even though it may seem difficult, maintaining contact with other people is especially important during the stress-filled months after a loved one's suicide.
- Keep in mind that each person grieves in his or her own way. Some people visit the cemetery weekly; others find it too painful to go at all.
- Each person also grieves at his or her own pace; there is no set rhythm or timeline for healing.
- Anniversaries, birthdays, and holidays may be especially difficult, so you might want to think about whether to continue old traditions or create some new ones. You may also experience unexpected waves of sadness; these are a normal part of the grieving process.
- Children experience many of the feelings of adult grief, and are particularly vulnerable to feeling abandoned and guilty. Reassure them that the death was not their fault. Listen to their questions, and try to offer honest, straightforward, age-appropriate answers.
- Some survivors find comfort in community, religious, or spiritual activities, including talking to a trusted member of the clergy.
- Be kind to yourself. When you feel ready, begin to go on with your life. Eventually starting to enjoy life again is not a betrayal of your loved one, but rather a sign that you've begun to heal.

**One learns to live with the loss, the tragedy, the waste, and the gaping hole in the fabric of one's life. There is no closure, nor would I want one. I want to remember him all my life, vividly: his laughter, the smell of his sneakers under his bed, his moments of joy, his humility, and his integrity."**

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# American Foundation *for* Suicide Prevention

## Coping with Suicide Loss

### Where Do I Start?

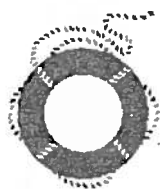
If you have lost someone to suicide, the first thing you should know is that you are not alone. Each year over 30,000 people in the United States die by suicide – the devastated family and friends they leave behind are known as "survivors." There are millions of survivors who, like you, are trying to cope with this heartbreaking loss.

Survivors often experience a wide range of grief reactions, including some or all of the following:

- Shock is a common immediate reaction. You may feel numb or disoriented, and may have trouble concentrating.
- Symptoms of depression, including disturbed sleep, loss of appetite, intense sadness, and lack of energy.
- Anger towards the deceased, another family member, a therapist, or yourself.
- Relief, particularly if the suicide followed a long and difficult mental illness.
- Guilt, including thinking, "If only I had..."
- These feelings usually diminish over time, as you develop your ability to cope and begin to heal.

*Excerpted from Surviving Suicide Loss: A Resource and Healing Guide.*

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# American Foundation *for* Suicide Prevention

## Coping with Suicide Loss

### Why Did This Happen?

Many survivors struggle to understand the reasons for the suicide, asking themselves over and over again: "Why?" Many replay their loved ones' last days, searching for clues, particularly if they didn't see any signs that suicide was imminent.

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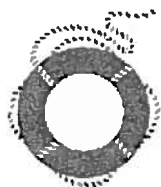
Because suicide is often poorly understood, some survivors feel unfairly victimized by stigma. They may feel the suicide is somehow shameful, or that they or their family are somehow to blame them for this tragedy.

But you should know that 90 percent of all people who die by suicide have a diagnosable psychiatric disorder at the time of their death (most often depression or bipolar disorder). Just as people can die of heart disease or cancer, people can die as a consequence of mental illness. Try to bear in mind that suicide is almost always complicated, resulting from a combination of painful suffering, desperate hopelessness and underlying psychiatric illness.

*Excerpted from Surviving Suicide Loss: A Resource and Healing Guide.*

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# American Foundation *for* Suicide Prevention

## Coping with Suicide Loss

### Handling the Holidays

Do what you think will be comfortable for you. Remember, you can always choose to do things differently next time.

- Think about your family's holiday traditions. Consider whether you want to continue them or create some new ones.
- Remember that family members may feel differently about continuing to do things the way they've been done in the past. Try to talk openly with each other about your expectations.
- Consider whether you want to be with your family and friends for the holiday, or whether it would be more healing for you to be by yourself or go away (this year).
- Keep in mind that sometimes the anticipation of an event can be more difficult than the event itself.
- If you find it comforting to talk about your loved one, let your family and friends know that; tell them not to be afraid to mention your loved one's name.
- Some survivors find it comforting to acknowledge the birthday of their loved ones by gathering with his/her friends and family; others prefer to spend it privately.
- Some survivors have found the following ritual helpful for a variety of occasions:  
*Light two candles, and then blow one out. Explain that the extinguished candle represents those we've lost, while the one that continues to burn represents those of us who go on despite our loss and pain. Simply leave the one candle burning (you can put it off to one side) for the duration of the holiday meal or event. The glowing flame acts as a quiet reminder of those who are missing.*
- Above all, bear in mind that there is no "right" way to handle holidays, anniversaries, or birthdays. You and your family may decide to try several different approaches before finding one that feels best for you.

*Excerpted from Surviving Suicide Loss: A Resource and Healing Guide.*

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# American Foundation *for* Suicide Prevention

## Coping with Suicide Loss

### Helping Children Cope

Children are particularly vulnerable to feeling abandoned and guilty. Listen to their questions, and try to offer honest, straightforward, age-appropriate answers.

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Survivors frequently seek advice about how to explain suicide to children. Here are some suggestions:

- When you have a choice, tell them as soon as you have the news, in a place where both you and they will feel comfortable.
- Reassure them that the death was not their fault.
- Explain that their loved one died of an illness – a brain illness. For example: "Daddy had something like a heart attack except it was a 'brain attack.'"
- Resist the urge to keep the suicide a secret out of fear that the child will copy the behavior of the deceased. Just as families with hypertension, diabetes or heart disease are educated about early warning signs and prevention, relatives of suicide victims need to understand the early warning signs of depression and other mental illnesses so they can obtain proper treatment.
- Reassure them that you, together with other appropriate adults will take care of them.
- Let them know they can approach you at any time if they want to talk about it.
- Children may express their feelings by crying, withdrawing, laughing, or expressing anger at you or others. Or, they may not. Simply let them know you are available for whatever they need – now or at some later time.
- Resume and maintain the child's regular routine as much as possible.
- The greatest gift you can give children is your assurance of love and support. Allow them to express their feelings, answer their questions and provide them with affection.

Adapted from *Child Survivors of Suicide: A Guidebook for Those Who Care for Them*, by Rebecca Parkin and Karen Dunne-Maxim (see [Bibliography](#)).

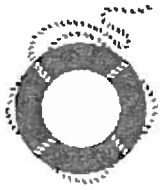
- "[Talking to Children about Suicide](#)"

Reprinted with permission from *Grief Digest*, Centering Corp., Omaha, NE, (402) 553-1200.

The [bibliography](#) lists books for children. You might also want to contact The Dougy Center, the National Center for Grieving Children & Families. (See [Other Organizations](#)).

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# American Foundation *for* Suicide Prevention

## Coping with Suicide Loss

### For Friends and Family

When friends and family ask how they can help, you might want to give them a copy of this section.

When there has been a death of a loved one by suicide, survivors will experience a depth and range of feelings. It is important to honor and respect the needs of the survivors in the days, weeks and months following the suicide. Often you may feel helpless. These guidelines help you understand what may be comforting to the family. However, before you assume responsibilities, we believe it's important to ask survivors whether they need your help. Some survivors gain added strength from performing many of the responsibilities below, while others may want to rely on friends or family for support and guidance.

- Respond honestly to questions asked by the family. You don't need to answer more than asked. If they want to know more, they will ask later.
- Surround them with as much love and understanding as you can.
- Give them some private time. Be there, but don't smother them.
- Show love, not control.
- Let them talk. Most of the time they just need to hear out loud what is going on inside their heads. They usually aren't seeking advice.
- Encourage the idea that decisions be made by the family together.
- Expect that they will become tired easily. Grieving is hard work.
- Let them decide what they are ready for. Offer your ideas but let them decide themselves.
- Keep a list of phone calls, visitors and people who bring food and gifts.
- Offer to make calls to people they wish to notify.
- Keep the mail straight. Keep track of bills, cards, newspaper notices, etc.
- Help with errands.
- Keep a list of medication administered.
- Offer to help with documentation needed by the insurance company, such as a copy of the death certificate.
- Give special attention to members of the family – at the funeral and in the months to come.
- Allow them to express as much grief as they are feeling at the moment and are willing to share.
- Allow them to talk about the special endearing qualities of the loved one they have lost.

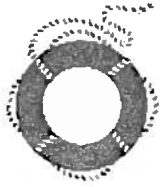
Reprinted with permission, The Link Counseling Center's National Resource Center for Suicide Prevention and Aftercare (see [Other Organizations](#)).

Here are two other thoughts:

- Write down a story about their loved one (especially one that they might not know about) and give it to them to read when they feel ready.
- Don't be afraid to say their loved one's name. Don't worry about making me them; it hurts so much more when no one talks about the person they lost.

Excerpted from *Surviving Suicide Loss: A Resource and Healing Guide*.

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# American Foundation *for* Suicide Prevention

## Resource and Healing Guide

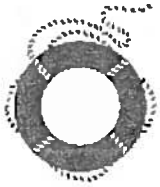
The Resource and Healing Guide is designed to help survivors navigate the experience of losing a loved one to suicide. It includes practical information about coping with suicide loss, personal survivor stories, articles on bereavement, resource listings and an extensive bibliography. This resource guide was designed and printed with grants from the Paul R. Blattberg Memorial Fund; Lisa Sallow, family and friends, in loving memory of her son, Josh Sallow; and Beverly Wool, family and friends, in loving memory of her daughter, Deborah Wool.

The guide is available as a free [download \(746 KB\)](#). You may also email [survivingsuicideloss@afsp.org](mailto:survivingsuicideloss@afsp.org) with your mailing address for a complimentary copy. Purchase multiple copies from the [AFSP Store](#), or by calling 1-888-333-AFSP Ext. 10.



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# American Foundation *for* Suicide Prevention

## Personal Survivor Stories

Knowing that others share the same experience can bring hope and healing.

Many survivors find it helpful to hear others tell their stories. Each issue of AFSP's *Lifesavers* newsletter includes a "Survivor Story," where survivors who are active in the work of suicide prevention can both honor their loved one and share how they have coped. These stories, some of which are very briefly excerpted below, can be read in full at the bottom of this page.

"... There is a litany of feelings that all survivors of suicide know too well. The flippant use of 'I could just kill myself'; the incessant wondering of Why? Why? Why?; the anniversary of the death and its importance (no matter how long it has been); someone remembering that this is the day your world stopped and then started differently; the fear of memories yellowing and becoming harder to recall; and the instant connection that many survivors have with one another..." (Tinka).

"Have I reached acceptance? Resignation perhaps. When the front door creaks open, I no longer expect to see [my wife] come in. For the longest time I did slip occasionally. I would find myself starting to clip an article to bring home to her. At book sales I still sometimes reach for a book that I think she'd like... I never was a macho type, but I am of the 'Men don't cry' generation. Grief has permanently loosened my tear ducts, and today it doesn't take much to get me teary and choked up... In addition to crying more easily, I think I've developed a greater empathy. I'm more likely to try to understand, and make allowances for why people act the way they do." (William).

"... During the first couple of months after my sister's suicide, we talked about her incessantly. We reminisced about how she acted and looked. We had an insatiable desire to reconstruct the weeks before she died. We recounted the last conversations, moods, phone calls, photographs and meals, hoping that somehow our memories would explain the answer to why she'd killed herself. That question still gnawed at our guts, creating a big, black, empty hole..." (Debbie).

"... The incredible emotional pain of the loss of my son was ever present. Recurrent tears, heaviness in my chest, frequent sighing, and the inability to sleep became commonplace. Although the structure and routine of my office was somewhat comforting, I found it difficult to concentrate or focus on tasks - at work or at home. It was as though my brain was rebelling against this experience. Or possibly this was my brain's way of forcing me to be gentle with myself in my grief..." (Linda).

Several of the books listed in the [bibliography](#) also contain survivor stories, including *No Time to Say Goodbye; Surviving the Suicide of a Loved One*, in which author/survivor Carla Fine writes:

"... Since [my husband's] suicide, I felt increasingly isolated from my friends and family. They had no idea what I was going through, all their well-intentioned advice and words of comfort seeming ignorant at best and tinged with cruelty at worst... I thought about the singular bond suicide survivors share with one another. Even though each of our situations is unique, we all experience similar stages in our grieving. When we meet someone else who has been there, it makes our personal chaos and isolated secrecy -- seem a little less frightening."

**If telling my story can comfort another survivor, then I will continue to tell it. If I can get information into the hands of someone who can save a life, then I am doing something incredible. I may never know for sure that my work has saved a life. I can live with that; I don't want to live with the 'what if' questions of never having tried."**

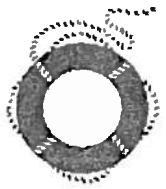
-- Laurell Reussow, survivor

Hearing how others have struggled through and survived the pain, confusion, questions and stigma of suicide loss is an important part of the healing process for many survivors.

[Click here](#) for a list of stories reprinted from the AFSP's quarterly newsletter, *Lifesavers*.

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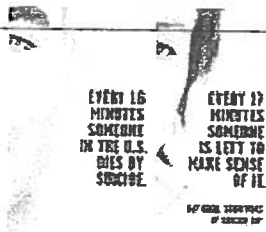
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# American Foundation *for* Suicide Prevention

## 11th Annual National Survivors of Suicide Day

### A Day of Healing for Survivors of Suicide Loss Around the U.S. and the World



On Saturday, November 21, 2009,

simultaneous conferences for survivors of suicide loss will take place throughout the U.S. and internationally. This unique network of healing conferences helps survivors connect with others who have survived the tragedy of suicide loss, and express and understand the powerful emotions they experience.

Each conference site is organized locally, but they're all connected in spirit as participants across the globe watch a special 90-minute AFSP broadcast together on that day. In the U.S., conference sites will show the broadcast together from 1-2:30 p.m. Eastern Standard Time and international sites will show it from 1-2:30 p.m. local time. Many conference sites plan their own local programs around the broadcast, including panels and breakout groups, all aimed at helping survivors heal. [Click here to find a conference site near you.](#) (This list is continually being updated as new cities sign up.)

For those survivors of suicide loss who don't live near a conference site or who find it difficult to attend in person, the 90-minute broadcast will also be available live on the AFSP website from 1-2:30 pm, Eastern Standard Time, with a live online chat immediately following the program. It will then be saved on the website so that survivors can watch it again throughout the year at anytime. [Click here to register to watch from your own computer.](#)

#### Participating from Outside of the United States

The problem of suicide knows no national or cultural boundaries, so we invite survivors from around the world to join with us in mutual support and healing on National Survivors of Suicide Day. [Please click here to learn how.](#)

*If you have questions please email [survivingsuicideloss@afsp.org](mailto:survivingsuicideloss@afsp.org).  
If you would like to organize a local conference site, please visit [www.afsp.org/survivorconference](http://www.afsp.org/survivorconference).*

#### What is National Survivors of Suicide Day?

National Survivors of Suicide Day is a day of healing for those who have lost someone to suicide. It was created by U.S. Senate resolution in 1999 through the efforts of Sen. Harry Reid of Nevada, who lost his father to suicide. Every year, AFSP sponsors an event to provide an opportunity for the survivor community to come together for support, healing, information and empowerment.

#### When is National Survivors of Suicide Day?

It's always the Saturday before Thanksgiving. This year it is November 21, 2009.

#### Which cities participate?

A continually updated list of participating cities can be found [here](#). If there isn't a site in your area, please consider organizing one. All of the information you need to get started is right [here](#). If there is already a site in your community, just send an email to the contact person listed – they can always use more help.

#### I don't live near a local conference site. Can I watch the 2009 broadcast on my home computer?

Yes. The 90-minute broadcast will be available as a free live webcast from 1-2:30 p.m. Eastern Standard Time on Nov. 21, 2009, with a live online chat immediately following. [Click here to register to watch from your home computer.](#)

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**How can I watch broadcasts from previous years?**

The 2007 and 2008 broadcasts are available as free webcasts that can be viewed at anytime up until November 20, 2009. [Click here to watch.](#) You may also purchase them on DVD from the [AFSP Store](#) for \$19.95.