

Helping Yourself
Heal After a
LOVED ONE
Dies by **SUICIDE**

By Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.



When someone you love takes his or her own life, your grief is profound. Yet as a result of fear and misunderstanding, suicide survivors are often left alone and in silence at a time when they desperately need compassion and unconditional support.

When a loved one dies by suicide, overwhelming emotions can leave you reeling. Your grief might be heart wrenching. At the same time, you might be consumed by guilt — wondering if you could have done something to prevent your loved one's death.

The wilderness of your grief is your wilderness. The death of someone from suicide feels unlike any other loss you may have experienced. The traumatic nature of the death may leave you feeling turned inside out and upside down. Your wilderness may be rockier or more level than others. Your path may be revealed in a straight line, or, more likely, it may be full of twists and turns. In the wilderness of your journey, you will experience the topography in your own unique way.

When suicide impacts our lives, we all need to grieve and to mourn. But our grief journeys are never exactly the same. Despite what you may hear, you will do the work of mourning in your own unique way. Do not adopt assumptions about how long your grief should last. Just consider taking a “one-day-at-a-time” approach. Doing so allows you to mourn at your own pace. One of my personal affirmations is “No reward for speed!”



This article invites you to explore some of the unique reasons your grief is what it is—the “whys” of your journey through the wilderness. The whys that follow are not all of the whys in the world, of course, just some of the more common.

Why #1: The circumstances of the suicide

Obviously, the circumstances of suicide impact the terrain of your journey. I have outlined below many specific features surrounding potential aspects of your experience. As you explore these, I encourage you to reflect on those that apply to you.

Nature of the death is traumatic

A suicide death is often very traumatic. You have come to grief before you are prepared to mourn. By its very nature, your grief is naturally complicated in that the death is premature, usually unexpected, and calamitous. The combination of sudden shock and the stigma and taboo associated with suicide result in a kind of psychic numbing to your spirit.

Potential “why?” questions

The nature of the death can lead to natural “why?” questions. You may instinctively feel the death was preventable and should not have happened.

Potential self-blame

As you mourn the death of someone to suicide, you may judge your own actions, attitudes, and any sense of responsibility related to the death.

Potential investigation by law enforcement

Often, suicide deaths initially have to be investigated as if a crime may have taken place. At a time when your heart is broken, you may have felt you were under suspicion and experienced being interrogated surrounding the circumstances of the death.

Potential focus on the act itself

Some people around you may put more focus on the act of suicide itself than on the importance of supporting you. Sometimes the first question people ask is, “How did he do it?”

Multiple losses

You may not only be mourning the death, but loss of support from some insensitive friends and family.

Support may be lacking

Some people do not know what to say or do, therefore they say or do nothing. The result for you is an experience of abandonment at the very time you need unconditional love.

Potential relationship cut-offs

You may find some people who literally go away and let it be known they have no desire to talk to you or support you in any way. Again, this creates more hurt on top of your overwhelming grief.

Potential discovery of or witnessing the suicide

You may have discovered the body of the person you loved or even witnessed the act of suicide. This may result in you having additional special needs and may require an experienced trauma or grief counselor. This is not in any way to imply that something is wrong with you, but rather that your experience was so horrific that you may need special help to support you in your grief.





Potential autopsy

Often, a coroner will request an autopsy as standard procedure. Some people have strong emotional and spiritual reservations surrounding an autopsy being carried out. If this decision is out of your hands, it can become very painful.

Potential life insurance problems

Many life insurance policies contain a suicide clause that prohibits any claims for a suicide for a set period of time (often two years) from the life of the policy. Some families have difficulty collecting on these policies, resulting in additional grief on top of grief. Consult a qualified attorney if this is your circumstance.

Potential media coverage

Some print and television media seem to take some perverse joy in covering suicide deaths. This can be an additional source of anguish for suicide survivors. The public realm may have laid claim to this death, but it is still first and foremost your personal loss.

As you can see, the list of potential circumstances surrounding suicide grief are multiple and complex. I imagine there are some additional influences you can think of. Whatever the circumstances, you will be well served to explore them and see how they shape the terrain of your journey.

A SURVIVOR SPEAKS: "I have experienced other deaths in my life, but never one like this. So many things came together in ways that make this so hard. There seems to be so many things around the circumstance of suicide that make this so overwhelming. It's too much for any one person to cope with."

Why #2: Your relationship with the person who completed suicide

Obviously, the relationship you had with the person who completed suicide will have a major influence on your grief experience. At one end of the spectrum, maybe you were very close and considered yourselves soul mates. Or, maybe you were "best friends" as well as husband or wife. Or, if your child completed suicide, you may be struggling with the loss of all the various aspects of the parent child relationship. Perhaps your parent completed suicide and you were always "daddy's little girl."

At the other end of the spectrum, perhaps you had a very difficult relationship with this person. Maybe the person had an alcohol or drug problem or was in and out of trouble with the law. Perhaps you were abused or neglected by this person. Maybe there were some mental health problems that naturally made your relationship complicated. Or, you might have had a very ambivalent relationship that was full of ongoing conflict. In some situations, it is very normal to feel a sense of relief or release after the death. Sometimes you mourn for what you wish you could have had in your relationship with the person.

Whatever the circumstances, you are the best person to describe and work toward understanding your relationship with the person who died.

A SURVIVOR SPEAKS: "I had been trying to help my son for years. I always loved him, but he wasn't easy to like. I know I will always have some sadness around what I wish we could have had in our relationship."

Why #3: The people in your life

Mourning the death of someone to suicide requires the outside support of other human beings. Because suicide is a topic where many people don't know how to support you, some people in your world will probably pull away. This potential lack of support can be painful and agonizing.

To integrate suicide grief into your life demands an environment of empathy, caring, non-judgment, and gentle encouragement. The good news is that even one compassionate, supportive person can be a real difference-maker for you. Find a trusted family member, friend, fellow survivor, or sensitive counselor to companion you through the terrain of your grief. This person can and will help you survive at a time you are not sure you can.

Yes, I recognize that asking for support can be more challenging than it may sound. Early in grief it is a major accomplishment to get your feet out of bed and take a shower, let alone have the capacity to reach out for help. Yet, you need and deserve unconditional love and support.

Sometimes other people will assume you have a support system when you don't. For example, you may have family members and friends who live near you, but you discover they have little, if any, compassion or patience for you and your grief. Sadly, some people (in an effort to protect their own emotions) like to assume you should be "over it" and "put the past in the past." In addition, some people, fearing they will be insensitive, tend to create an environment of mutual pretense. This is where they know it was a suicide death, you know it was a suicide death, yet the unstated rule is: Don't talk about it! When this happens, a vital ingredient to

your eventual healing is missing. At the other end of the spectrum, do look for people who are more willing to patiently help you by listening without criticism or judgment. Those people know you are the expert of your own experience and gently allow you to teach them where you are in the terrain. They know to use your loved one's name and realize you may need to re-tell your story over and over. They often offer, when you are ready, to locate a support group or a sensitive counselor to help you on your path. In my experience, these people have often been impacted by suicide at some point in their own lives.

Even when you're fortunate enough to have a solid support system in place, do you find that you are willing and able to accept support? If you project a need to "be strong", "carry on" and "keep your chin up," you may end up isolating yourself from the very people who would most like to walk with you in your journey through the wilderness of your grief.

A SURVIVOR SPEAKS: "Many of my friends think they are helping me by not talking to me about my husband. But I have come to realize I need to talk about him and what happened. People don't think they should use the word suicide, but

I need to hear it."



Why #4: Your unique personality

What words would you use to describe yourself? What words would people use to describe you? Are you a serious person? Light-hearted? Quiet and deeply reflective? Are you a nurturer? A fixer? Are you openly expressive or do you tend to naturally inhibit your emotions? In other words, what is your personality like?

The point is that whatever your unique personality, rest assured it will be reflected in your grief. For example, if you are quiet by nature, you may express your grief quietly. If you tend to be expressive, you may openly express how you feel about your grief. How you have responded to other changes, losses, or crises in your life may be consistent with how you respond to this death. If you tend to run away from stressful aspects of life, you may have an instinct to do the same thing now. If, however, you have always confronted crisis head on and openly, you may walk right into the centre of the wilderness. Keep in mind there is no one right and only way to mourn. Part of your experience will be to accept that you are mourning in ways that reflect your unique personality.

A SURVIVOR SPEAKS: “I have always been a person who thinks better than I feel. Yet, now I realize I have no choice but to stop thinking in my head, and really feel with my heart. It is so scary, but I’m doing the best I can.”

Why #5: The unique personality of the person who completed suicide

Just as your own personality is reflected in your grief journey, so, too, is the unique personality of the person who completed suicide. What was this person like? What did he or she bring to the dance of your life? You, in part, have known who you were

based on having this person in your life. Now you have and essentially lost a “mirror” that helped you know who you were. The world feels different without him or her in it.

In part, personality is the sum total of all the characteristics that made this person who he or she was. The way she talked, the way he smiled, the way she ate her food, the way he worked, the way she related to the world around her—all these and so many more little things go into creating personality. It’s no wonder there’s so much to miss and that grief is so naturally complex when all these little things are gone all at once. Also, depending on the relationship you had, there may be things about the person that you don’t miss.

So ask yourself: What do I miss about this person? What, if anything, do I not miss? Is there anything I wish I could have changed (but realize I couldn’t) about his or her personality?

Whatever your feelings are about the personality of the person who completed suicide, find someone who will encourage you to talk about him or her openly and honestly. The key is finding someone you can trust who will listen to you without sitting in judgment of you. Yes, authentic mourning requires you be open about what you miss and what you don’t miss about this person’s personality. If you don’t have someone who can listen to you, at the very least write about it in a journal.

A SURVIVOR SPEAKS: “He struggled with depression for years, but when he told a joke, he got this huge smile on his face. Yep, that is what I miss so very much, that big smile that could make me so happy to be around him.”

Why #6: Your gender

Your gender may not only influence your grief, but also the way others relate to you. While this is not always true, men are often encouraged and expected to “be strong” and restrained. Men tend to grieve more privately, making them at risk for putting their mourning on hold. And when men do mourn, they often do so with fewer people than women do.

I have also observed that women are more likely to seek the support of a counselor or attend a support group. Men often return to work more quickly than women do, seeming to find some support in the structure and demands that are inherent to the tasks at hand.

At bottom, here is an obvious truth. Men and women are different! Based on that reality, we are going to be influenced by our gender when it comes to mourning. This also relates to the “pressure-cooker phenomenon”. After a suicide death, everyone in a family has a high need to feel understood and little capacity to be understanding. Combine this with gender differences and you are set up to feel distant from each other. This can be particularly true for any of you as parents who are mourning the suicide death of your precious child.

I cannot emphasize enough that to take pressure off the pressure-cooker, you must, one, be respectful of how you will mourn differently than each other (that doesn't

mean you don't love each other) and two, you must seek support outside of each other to release some of the pressure you feel in your relationship. Actually, by seeking outside support, you will ultimately have more to give each other.

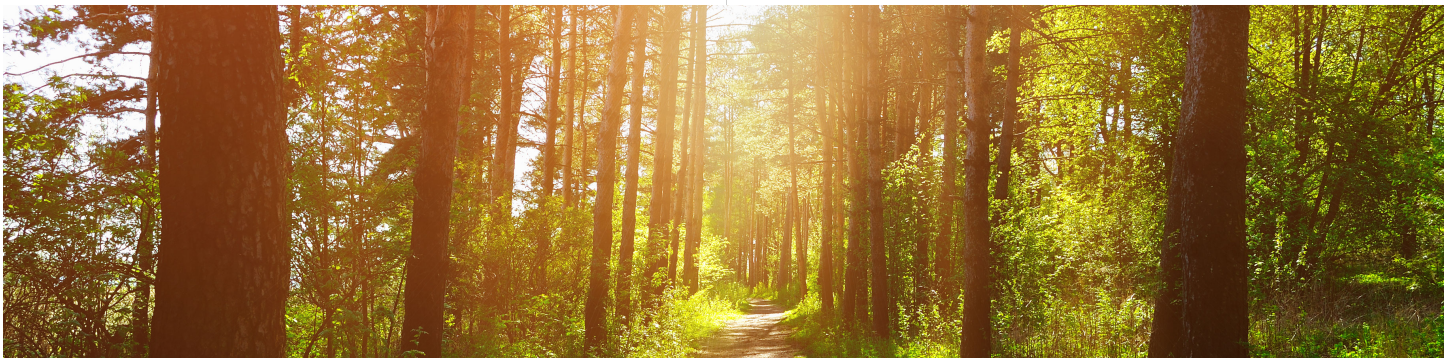
Obviously, we must be careful when it comes to generalizations about gender differences. Sometimes too much is made of the difference between gender and not enough is made of the organic capacity to grieve and mourn. Once you welcome mourning into your heart, willingness and capacity to mourn often transcend gender.

A SURVIVOR SPEAKS: “I was always told that to be a man, you shouldn't cry. But now I have no choice but to cry. If I don't, I will come apart at the seams.”

Why #7: Your cultural/ethnic/religious/spiritual background

Your cultural and ethnic background as well as your personal belief system can have a tremendous impact on your journey into grief. When I say culture, I mean the values, rules (spoken and unspoken), and traditions that guide you and your family. Often these values, rules, and traditions have been handed down generation after generation and are shaped by the countries or areas of the world your family originally came from.

For example, some cultures are more expressive of feelings (Italian, Irish),



whereas others may be more stoic (English, German). Again, while we want to avoid the trap of over-generalizing, ask yourself how the culture that has been passed down to you influences your grief.

Your religious or spiritual life might be deepened, challenged, renewed, or changed as part of your grief experience. Suicide grief can naturally disrupt the spiritual terrain of your life, and you may well find yourself questioning your beliefs as part of your work of mourning.

As you are probably aware, suicide has a long and complex history with religion. It wasn't all that long ago that suicide was thought to be a sin by almost all major faiths. Thank God that in contemporary times and surrounded by much information and education, suicide is no longer considered a sin by the majority of world religions. Many, but not all, communities of faith offer compassion and support to survivors. If you are part of a faith community, I certainly hope and pray that is your experience. If not, be assured that there are many faith communities that can and will support you in your grief.

Let me be very direct with you—if you turn to a clergy person for support and he or she tells you that suicide is an unpardonable sin, go someplace else to get the support and non-judgment you both need and deserve. And remember what someone wise once said: “The God I have come to believe in is not in the judging business.” Find someone to support you who is a good fit for your spiritual needs right now. Also, if you are not a person of religion, don't allow people to force you to “find God” or seek out religious answers that do not speak to you. Your journey through the terrain of your healing is yours alone, and the paths you take to do that are up to you.



Yes, when someone you are connected to completes suicide, you may feel very close to God or a Higher Power, or you may feel distant, perhaps even hostile. You may find yourself asking questions such as, “Why has this happened to me?” or “Where is God in this?” When you are faced with a suicide, you are faced with mystery. No, you may not discover answers to your questions about faith or spirituality, but that doesn't mean you should not ask them. After all, the greatest religious figures in history have done this very same thing. As I mentioned earlier in this book, mystery is actually the ancient name for God, and God can handle your questions.

Faith means to believe in something for which there is no proof. For some people, faith means believing in and following a set of religious rules. For others, faith is a belief in God, a spiritual presence, or a force that is greater than we are. Whatever your beliefs, in befriending the mystery surrounding the suicide of someone you love, there is an acknowledgment that certain things cannot be changed. Yet, even as the reality of the death cannot be altered, you and I can have hope for our healing.

I would be remiss if I didn't warn you to be alert to folks who project to you that if you “have faith,” you can bypass the need to mourn. If you internalize this misconception, you will set yourself up to grieve internally but not mourn externally. Having faith does not mean you do not need to mourn. Having faith does mean having the courage to allow yourself to mourn!

With the death of someone to suicide comes a natural “search for meaning.” You have probably found yourself re-evaluating your life based on this loss. You will need

someone who is willing and able to honour your need to explore your religious or spiritual values, question your attitude toward life, and support you unconditionally as you renew your resources for living. This part of the terrain of your grief takes time, and it may well lead to some changes in your values, beliefs, and lifestyle.

A SURVIVOR SPEAKS: *“I have to change some of what I call my ‘faith friends.’ Some people have had the nerve to tell me my wife is now in hell. That is not my God. So I have had to be careful whom I spend time with. My best friends are now what I call my ‘nonjudgmental friends.’”*

Why #8: Other changes, crisis, or stresses in your life right now

There is often a ripple effect of additional losses that impacts you following a suicide death. Although we think it shouldn't, the world does keep turning after the tragic death of people in our lives. The normal demands of going to work can be overwhelming.

Maybe you or someone in your family has an illness that demands your attention. You may have people who are dependent on you to care for them. You may have a number of commitments yet little time and energy for all the demands you are experiencing.

Whatever your specific situation, I imagine your grief is not the only stress in your life right now. And the more intense and numerous the stresses in your life, the more drained and empty you may feel at times.

You may well feel like your life is in total chaos right now. That is why you will want to pay special attention to the importance of nurturing yourself and reaching out for and accepting help. Yes you are overwhelmed right now, and it may be difficult to believe you will survive this death. Allow me to

gently remind you to be patient and self-nurturing during this time of overwhelming grief in your life.

Why #9: Your experience with loss and death in the past

One way to think about yourself is that you are the sum total of all that you have experienced in your life so far. One “why?” of your response to this death is your past loss history. Perhaps this is your very first experience with death, particularly a sudden, traumatic death. In contrast, some people experience a series of deaths and are overwhelmed by these multiple losses. What about you? Also, what other non-death-related losses have you experienced in the past?

Regardless of your prior loss experiences, there is little that can prepare you for the wilderness you are now in. However, I have found that it is helpful to invite you to reflect on your history of losses and consider how they influence, if at all, your current journey into grief.

A SURVIVOR SPEAKS: *“I have had three deaths in the last sixteen months, this last one being a suicide. I have had to get help because I’m not just mourning one death. I have discovered each death is so unique.”*

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Grief comes in waves

and grief from suicide

comes in tsunami waves.

Why #10: Your physical health

How you feel physically has a significant effect on your grief. We know that your immune system is compromised when you experience death loss, particularly a sudden, traumatic death.

Perhaps you have an existing illness that was already impacting your life. If you are physically ill, your body symptoms may actually inhibit some of your capacity to mourn at emotional and spiritual levels. Please consider that taking care of yourself physically is one of the best things you can do to lay the foundation for your need to mourn well, so you can eventually go on to live well. Yes, despite what you believe right now, you can and will go on to experience the miracle of healing and discover renewed purpose in your life.

Know when to seek professional help

If you experience intense or unrelenting anguish or physical problems, ask your doctor or mental health provider for help. Seeking professional help is especially important if you think you might be depressed or you have recurring thoughts of suicide. Unresolved grief can turn into complicated grief, where painful emotions are so long lasting and severe that you have trouble resuming your own life.

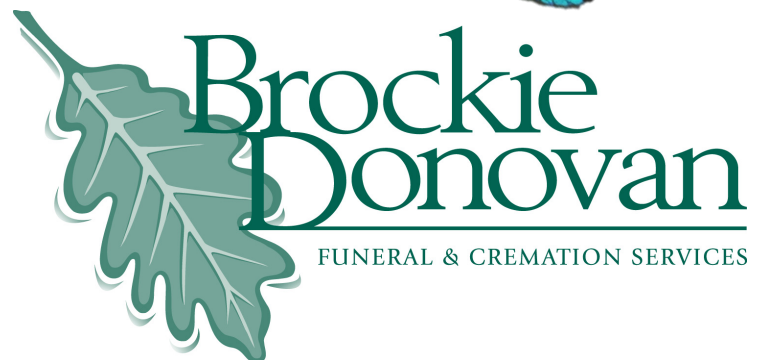
Depending on the circumstances, you might benefit from individual or family therapy — either to get you through the worst of the crisis or to help you adjust to life after suicide. Short-term medication can be helpful in some cases, too.

Face the future with a sense of peace

In the aftermath of a loved one's suicide, you might feel like you can't go on or that you'll never enjoy life again.

In truth, you might always wonder why it happened — and reminders might trigger painful feelings even years later. Eventually, however, the raw intensity of your grief will fade. The tragedy of the suicide won't dominate your days and nights.

Understanding the complicated legacy of suicide and how to cope with palpable grief can help you find peace and healing, while still honouring the memory of your loved one.



For more information on our Grief Services, please visit our website at www.brockiedonovan.com or call (204) 727-0694