CSTS Uniformed Services University

Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress

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Supporting Survivors of Suicide Loss

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Culture, religious beliefs, personal experience, and life circumstances may play a substantial role in how a person processes a suicide loss.

What a Survivor May be Experiencing

Grief is a highly personal experience that can vary over time. The emotions and reactions below are common examples, but may not represent everything that a survivor goes through.

- Shock and disbelief - especially in the early days or weeks
- Guilt or self-blame - "Could I have prevented this?"
- Anger - toward the deceased, themselves, or others
- Shame or stigma - reluctance to acknowledge the loss as a suicide
- Intrusive thoughts - replaying events or imagining alternatives
- Isolation - feeling that others don't understand
- Relief - particularly after long struggles, often followed by guilt

Physical Symptoms of Grief After Suicide Loss

- Fatigue or low energy
- Sleep disturbances (trouble falling asleep or staying asleep, or excessive sleeping)
- Changes in appetite (eating more or less than usual)
- Headaches or body aches
- Tightness in the chest or shortness of breath
- Nausea or digestive issues
- Restlessness or difficulty concentrating

How to Help

When someone is hurting, you don't need to find the "perfect" words. Just being present helps a loss survivor feel less alone, which can be just as powerful as anything you might say.

- **Establish Safety and Calm**. Create a quiet, private space to reduce distractions so you can just be together. Consider taking a walk, going for a drive, or spending time in a shared activity to reduce pressure to talk.
- **Listen more than you speak.** Focus on listening with empathy and avoiding judgment, so the grieving person feels safe enough to share. Respect privacy and allow details to be shared at the survivor's pace.
- **Use caring language**. Use language that shows understanding, patience, and respect for the person and what they are going through.
- **Provide a supportive presence.** Even sitting in silence or acknowledging that you don't know what to say can be very comforting.
- **Acknowledge loss and grief openly**. Don't be afraid to use the name of the deceased or to share memories of them. Remembering them can be a source of comfort for the survivor.
- **Offer practical help**. Assisting with meals, errands, childcare, or other tasks can reduce burden on survivors.
- **Maintain support over time**. Grieving can be a long process. Stay connected and check in around important dates or anniversaries when presence may be especially meaningful.

Continued

Things to Avoid

- Trying to "fix" their grief. Acknowledge and accept all emotions without correcting, minimizing, or offering solutions.
- Asking invasive questions or making assumptions about the loss.
- Comparing experiences or saying "I know how you feel." Stay focused on the survivor's experience.
- Using faith-based statements without knowing the person's religious beliefs.
- Using clichés like "everything happens for a reason" or "they're in a better place" can feel dismissive.

Resources

Building strength after a suicide loss takes time. It is okay—and often necessary—for loss survivors to seek professional help. Below are some additional resources for survivors of loss.

- **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline** is a 24/7 hotline for mental health support.
  - » Press **1** for Veterans.
  - » Press **2** for Spanish speakers.
- **Suicide Awareness Voices of Education (SAVE)** offers community support and ways for suicide loss survivors to share their stories.
- **American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP)** provides a nationwide community and resources for those affected by suicide.

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