



Surviving after a loved one's suicide is often more difficult, complicated, and intense than for any other loss. Bereavement after the loss of a loved one is a complex and a very personal experience. Everyone mourns at their own pace and in their own way. The following grief reactions are common to all types of losses, and includes reactions specific to coping after a loved one's suicide.

### Common Grief Reactions

Feelings, thoughts and emotions – that may feel overwhelming at times:

<i>Denial</i>	<i>Restlessness</i>	<i>Isolation</i>	<i>Resentment</i>	<i>Sense of failure</i>
<i>Anger</i>	<i>Irritability</i>	<i>Deep sadness</i>	<i>Loneliness</i>	<i>Hopelessness</i>
<i>Guilt</i>	<i>Depression</i>	<i>Disbelief</i>	<i>Confusion</i>	<i>Forgetfulness</i>
<i>Crying</i>	<i>Mood swings</i>	<i>Short attention span</i>	<i>Inability to make decisions</i>	

Physical reactions:

<i>Lack of energy</i>	<i>Heart palpitations</i>	<i>Changes in appetite</i>	<i>Weakness</i>
<i>Blurred vision</i>	<i>Shortness of breath</i>	<i>Sleep problems</i>	<i>Fatigue</i>
<i>Dry mouth</i>	<i>Muscle weakness</i>	<i>Blurred vision</i>	<i>Body aches</i>

Behavioral changes:

<i>Absenteeism at work</i>	<i>Keeping busy to avoid feelings</i>
<i>New or increased use of alcohol or substances</i>	<i>Conflict</i>

### Reactions Experienced by Survivors of Suicide Loss

Anger - Anger may be directed towards the deceased, other family members, a therapist, or towards oneself.

Relief - Particularly if the suicide followed a long and difficult illness.

Guilt - Survivors often take responsibility for the actions of the victim, thinking, "If only I had..." They may have regrets about the past, over things done or not done, over not being able to say "good bye."

Shame - Feeling avoided, judged or blamed by society or even by other family members.

Signs of depression - These include disturbed sleep, loss of appetite, intense sadness, lack of energy, and low self-esteem.

Asking "Why?" - Searching for an explanation for the suicide, for feeling rejected by the deceased, for feeling alone and abandoned.



# Duke University Health System Bereavement

## Coping After a Suicide

### Coping with Suicide Loss

Some survivors struggle with what to tell people. Although one should make decisions that feel right to them, most survivors have found it best to acknowledge that their loved one died by suicide.

- Maintain contact with other people during the sad, stressful, and confusing months after a loved one's suicide.
- Keep in mind that each person grieves in his or her own unique way, at his or her own pace - there is no timeline for grief.
- 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.
- Create a ritual or other way to say "good-bye" to the person who has died.
- Write down your thoughts and feelings; keep a journal, write a letter, compose a poem.
- Take care of your physical well being, maintain adequate nutrition, sleep, and exercise.
- 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.

### What Can You Do if You Need Help?

Some people find it helpful to explore feelings and thoughts with someone outside the family. **Know that you are not alone. There are people available to you who understand and care.**

Support group – A safe place where survivors can share their experiences and support each other.

Religious / Spiritual community – People who can help identify spiritual resources that may be comforting for you.

Bereavement counselors – Specialists who help people adjust to the death of a loved one.

Duke Hospital Bereavement Services – Bereavement Services provides a clearinghouse for information, resources and support about grief, loss, dying and death, 877-460-7969.

Local mental health associations – For more information and referrals.

[www.afsp.org](http://www.afsp.org) - the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. Information and grief resources, *Surviving a Suicide Loss: A Resource and Healing Guide*. (Toll free, 888/333-2377)

### Remember to Call Your Doctor if You

- Are unable to take care of yourself or your family.
- Have persistent thoughts about harming yourself.
- Become very depressed.