



# Permission to Grieve

For Survivors of a Loved One's Suicide



*Denying sadness  
denies healing...  
By letting your  
heart break, you let  
your heart heal.  
Anonymous*

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# Introduction

To be the relative or good friend of someone who has completed suicide is a devastating experience.

If you are a survivor of a loved one's suicide, you may feel confusing emotions.

What you are feeling is a normal reaction to an abnormal situation. Everyone responds to grief differently. You are feeling and reacting in a way that is normal for you.

## SORTING OUT YOUR FEELINGS

The suddenness and unexpectedness of a suicide leaves you, the survivor, unprepared and with little or no explanation. For the survivor there is no preparation for the death. There is no opportunity to say goodbye.

There is a range of different, long-lasting emotions you will feel in different stages and in different intensity. These feelings can last a short period of time or they can last a lifetime. They may occur immediately after the suicide or much later – sometimes years later.

Recovery is more difficult if dealt with alone, without a chance to talk about it or to understand what has happened and why. Suicide is sometimes never understood. Grief in its many manifestations will affect you both emotionally and physically.

## STAGES OF GRIEF

The following is a list of “stages” or emotions of grief you may experience – not necessarily in this order. Some stages are repeated over time.

- **DISBELIEF, NUMBNESS, AND SHOCK** – I can't believe this has happened.

As a survivor you may be stunned by the suicide and attempt to deny it, even to the extent of saying it wasn't a suicide, that “something else must have happened.”

Numbness and a disassociation with the activities going on around you are common. You may be devoid of

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feelings. Your thinking may be slowed or disorganized. Many survivors report they feel as if they are watching a play or having a bad dream.

- **DENIAL** – He/She couldn't do this. It was an accident! He/She isn't dead!

As your disbelief wears off, you will be hit with the reality that your loved one is gone. A new flood of emotions begins, and you may even experience physical pain and feelings of despair. For some, this pain is excruciating and lends itself to denial.

- **GUILT** – I could have prevented this. What did I do to cause this?

You may feel guilt as a result of the sense of helplessness or ambivalence about the loss.

Guilt can be a very powerful emotion and can occur for many reasons. You may feel guilty because you are alive and your loved one is not. You may feel guilty because you are angry with the deceased or with God for letting this happen. Most of all, you may feel guilty because you didn't prevent the suicide.

Regret is often mistaken for guilt. Regrets are things that you wish you had done or said. Most survivors eventually come to accept the fact that they are not responsible for the death of their loved one.

- **ANGER** – How could they do this to me?

Anger may take the form of rage or hostility and can lead to isolation. Anger can be misdirected at family, friends or colleagues. You may feel anger as a result of guilt because your loved one abandoned you. You might feel anger with yourself for not preventing the suicide. Anger is a strong emotion and at times is as frightening to you as it is to your family and friends.

Anger is an isolating emotion, as others do not know how to deal with you. Anger may make them feel helpless and uncomfortable. They might withdraw from you and only make you feel more angry and alone. Anger may continue for a long time, but with a gradual change in focus and intensity over time. Many survivors find relief in expressing their anger.

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- **HELPLESSNESS AND FEAR** – Will someone else I know kill him/herself? Can I ever go back to my old routine? Will I ever feel safe again?

These feelings are most intense at the beginning of the grief process, but fears can return to you at any time. When a loved one has died your life is altered, normal routines are disrupted and fear and helplessness can take hold. To cope, new routines have to be developed and roles within your family may have to be redefined. You may be unsure of your future and frighten easily. You may have fear of other suicides. But these fears do diminish over time as people do not abandon you, die or commit suicide.

## REORGANIZATION

During this reorganization of your life you will begin to develop realistic memories of the deceased and even experience some positive thoughts in remembering. You may return to your previous level of functioning and find added meaning in life. Emotionally, you will experience both sadness and happiness. You may develop new or renewed relationships and new interests. You will resume former coping skills and have developed new coping skills.

## GRIEF OR DEPRESSION: WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

After losing a loved one to suicide, struggling with grief is normal and expected. But how do you know if the grief process has taken a bad turn and has resulted in a biological depression, which may require counseling and treatment?

Depression and grief have some overlap. With both processes, a person may feel sad or irritable most of the time, lack energy and motivation, and have trouble with sleep and appetite. But there are a couple of major differences. While people who are grieving may feel guilty about what has happened and may also long to be with the deceased, they usually are not suicidal themselves. It is unusual for a person

## Things People Say

to lose his sense of self-worth and feel suicidal while grieving, though these can be very common symptoms with depression. While grief can be a difficult process, it tends to get better every month, and every year, moving in a positive direction. Thus, while a person may be grieving for a loved one for years, she should be functioning better as the months go by. Depression, on the other hand, tends to stay the same or get worse over time.

Seek outside help if you find your depression is lasting longer than two weeks. Seek help immediately if you are feeling a strong desire to hurt yourself or if you become preoccupied with death.

If depression runs in a family, there is an increased risk that a person in the middle of the grieving process will become depressed. Think about your relatives and try to recall if any of them have struggled with depression. If they have, this increases your risk.

On a hopeful note, a large majority of patients with depression respond very well to antidepressant medications that have been discovered in the last decade. These new classes of drugs alleviate the depressive symptoms with very few side effects. In addition, getting therapy from a licensed professional can help someone with depression as well as grief.

## THINGS PEOPLE SAY

Many people are uncomfortable talking about death. A suicide makes this even more difficult. Many friends and relatives will mean well and try to be comforting, but frequently they do just the opposite. Their comments can be painful and reinforce the guilt and shame.

Others may be insensitive, possibly even nosy, and may ask too many questions.

If you are comfortable telling these people how you are feeling, do so. If not, indicate you don't wish to talk about it at the current time and walk away.

# Getting Through Your Grief

## GETTING THROUGH YOUR GRIEF

You can help yourself during this difficult time. The best approach is to maintain the basic rules of diet, exercise and rest. These apply to anyone pursuing good physical and mental health.

### Diet

Although food may have no taste to you, eating well-balanced meals is essential. In times of stress it is easier to eat snack foods rather than plan proper meals. If it's impossible to eat a well-balanced meal at one sitting, try spreading meals throughout the day by eating smaller portions more frequently.

### Physical Activity

Exercise, always important to good health, is even more important now. Regular activity can help reduce stress, alleviating anger or frustration. Try to devote at least 20 minutes, three or four times a week, to walking, yard work, using stairs, running, bicycling, or other activities that work for you. Exercise can reduce your stress level, increase your energy level and sense of well being, and improve your appetite and sleep patterns.

### Rest

You may be having a hard time sleeping regularly. The grief process is very tiring by itself, and going without sleep can add to the problem. Here are some suggestions that may help you if you are having trouble falling asleep:

1. Make every effort to go to bed at the same time every night and to get up at the same time every morning. Keep to this pattern even on weekends.
2. If you wake up during the night and can't get back to sleep, get up and out of bed and do some activity that relaxes you, like reading or watching TV. When you feel sleepy, go back to bed.
3. Meditation or soothing music can help some people relax and fall asleep. Find a tape on relaxation or meditation and play it at bedtime.

# Survivor Resource Guide

4. Coffee, tea, cocoa, chocolate milk and many soft drinks contain caffeine, which may keep you awake. These should be avoided at bedtime. Instead, drink herbal teas, warm milk, decaffeinated coffee or juices.
5. Avoid eating a heavy meal or drinking alcohol before bedtime.

## OTHER THINGS YOU CAN DO

Develop a support system of people with whom you feel comfortable and who can help if you become overwhelmed by grief.

Read as much as you can about the process of grief (see reading list). You will gain a better understanding of yourself and your grief will be less frightening.

Grief takes time, so have patience with yourself. Take it slowly. If you can, avoid any new responsibilities. Many issues can wait. You will have plenty of changes to make that require time and energy for coping.

Don't compare your grief to that of others who may be mourning a similar loss. Remember, everyone's grief is different.

## SURVIVOR RESOURCE GUIDE\*

### Support Groups

Utah has many support groups specifically designed for survivors after a suicide. These self-help groups provide services to families and friends of someone who has completed suicide. Monthly meetings provide survivors the opportunity to process their grief with others who are working through their own grief.

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*\*Disclaimer:* Staff of the crisis/help telephone lines listed in this brochure are not certified by the Utah Department of Health (UDOH). Neither the staff of the UDOH nor the members of the Youth Suicide Prevention Task Force are responsible for the content of any counseling, advice or therapy given by any of the individuals or agencies listed herein.



# Survivor Resource Guide

*The benefits of support groups include the opportunity to:*

1. Verbalize thoughts and feelings.
2. Seek direction and support.
3. Learn that you have resources within for helping yourself and others.
4. Make friendships with others who have suffered losses. This reverses the tendency of isolation and provides a sense of belonging and community.
5. Know that what and how you feel is normal for grieving.
6. Express your true feelings of anger and/or guilt without being judged.
7. Realize you are not alone in your grief.
8. Understand there is a positive sense of doing something about grief.
9. Meet people who truly care about you.

Support groups do not replace therapy, but work well in conjunction with therapy.

If you would like information on suicide survivor support groups please see the following list:

## Caring Connections

Hope and Comfort in Grief Program

University of Utah College of Nursing  
(Other locations are also available)

For information and to register, call (801) 585-9522

Caring Connections offers five types of grief groups, including one specifically for adjusting to the death of a loved one to suicide. Support groups are led by health care professionals. Held weekly for 8 weeks - \$40 fee for materials (can be waived if a hardship).

# Survivor Resource Guide

## Center for Grieving Children

A support center for grieving children, teens and their families

The Family Foundation, South Harrison Plaza, South Ogden, Utah 84403, (801) 476-1127

Groups for children and teens from 3-19 years of age. An adult family member or caregiver must accompany each child and may participate in the adult support group at the same time.

## Legacy

Survivors of Suicide Support Network, Inc.

For information or to subscribe to a newsletter, call Judy at (801) 771-8476 or Winnie at (801) 544-2857. Leavitt's Mortuary, 836 36th Street, Ogden.

Legacy is a free self-help support group. Legacy members will also offer support and help during the immediate aftermath of a suicide if desired. Group meets 2nd Tuesday of month.

## Memorial Estates

Provides an after-care specialist who leads a support group for suicide survivors or can work with individual families.

Group meets Wednesday evenings at 6:00 p.m. Contact Chelsea Whitting at (801) 262-5303. 5850 South 900 East, SLC, Utah 84107

## Seasons

Suicide Bereavement, Inc., Utah County Chapter

For information, call (801) 373-9991. Peggy McCausland, Provo, Utah.

Seasons is a mutual help group organized to bring together survivors of a suicide death to help each other develop a healthy understanding of the loss and work toward recovery.

# Survivor Resource Guide

## Unique Circle of Friends

A self-help support group for anyone who has lost a loved one to suicide.

## Peace Group

The Peace Group is a mutual support group initially started by parents grieving the loss of a child by suicide, but welcomes others in different circumstances. Monthly meetings are at members' homes. A group member(s) will visit you in your home initially if desired.

A packet containing helpful articles, a suggested reading list, Web sites, etc. that deal with healing following the death of a loved one from suicide can be requested by calling Dian Olsen at (801) 292-5668.

For information, call Lynne McGuire at (801) 571-2545.  
468 East 12000 South, Draper, Utah 84020.

Informal group will meet as arranged at the McGuire home.

For information, call Bill Johnson at (801) 546-1182 or  
(801) 589-8888. (Davis County and Salt Lake area)

## Crisis Lines

### Salt Lake City Area

Serving Salt Lake, Summit and Tooele Counties

**Valley Mental Health** (801) 261-1442

24 hours / 7 days

**Salt Lake City** (801) 583-5444

24 hours / 7 days

**Coping with Grief** (801) 553-7700

Ext. 1716	About grief
Ext. 1717	Death of a child
Ext. 1718	Death of a spouse
Ext. 1719	Helping grieving children
Ext. 1720	Getting help from others
Ext. 1721	How to help with grief

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## Orem

**Crisis Line of Utah County** (801) 226-4433

24 hours / 7 days

## Provo

**Wasatch Mental Health** (801) 373-7393

24 hours / 7 days

**Toll-Free Nationwide USA** (800) 784-2433

24 hours / 7 days

If this is an emergency, call 911 and ask for help. Tell them you are in suicidal danger.

## Referral Services

These services can provide you with someone to talk to and other individual counseling services. If applicable, please check with your health insurance carrier as they may be working with a specific mental health provider.

## Salt Lake County

**Salt Lake County Substance Abuse Services** (801) 263-7100

Substance Abuse Services

2001 South State Street

Suite S2300

Salt Lake City, UT 84190

**Valley Mental Health** (801) 261-1442

Community Treatment Program

3944 South 400 East

Murray, UT 84107

# Survivor Resource Guide

## Utah County

**Utah County Division of  
Substance Abuse** (801) 370-8427

Substance Abuse Services  
151 South University Avenue, Suite 3200  
Provo, UT 84606

**Wasatch Mental Health** (801) 373-4760

Mental Health Services  
750 North 200 West  
Provo, UT 84601

## Summit County

**Valley Mental Health – Summit** (435) 649-9079

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services  
1753 Sidewinder Drive  
Park City, UT 84060

## Davis County

**Davis Behavioral Health** (801) 451-7799

**Substance Abuse and  
Mental Health Services** (801) 447-8887

117 West 200 South  
PO Box 689  
Farmington, UT 84025

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# Survivor Resource Guide

## Weber and Morgan County

**Weber Human Services** (801) 652-3700

**Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services**

237 26th Street  
Ogden, UT 84401

## Box Elder, Cache and Rich County

**Bear River Health Department** (435) 752-1799

Substance Abuse Services  
655 East 1300 North  
Logan, UT 84341

**Bear River Mental Health** (435) 752-0750

Mental Health Services  
90 East 200 North  
Logan, UT 84351

## Tooele County

**Valley Mental Health – Tooele** (435) 843-3520

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services  
100 South 1000 West  
Tooele, UT 84074

## Wasatch County

**Heber Valley Counseling** (435) 654-3003

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services  
55 South 500 East  
Heber City, UT 84032

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## Duchesne, Daggett And Uintah County

**Northeastern Counseling Center (435) 789-6300**

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services

1140 West 500 South

PO Box 1908

Vernal, UT 84078

## Carbon, Emery and Grand County

**Four Corners Community Behavioral Health, Inc. (435) 637-7200**

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services

105 West 100 North

PO Box 867

Price, UT 84501

## Juab, Millard, Sanpete, Sevier, Piute and Wayne County

**Central Utah Counseling & Substance Abuse Center (435) 462-2416**

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services

255 West Main

Mt. Pleasant, UT 84647

## Beaver, Garfield, Iron, Kane and Washington County

**Southwest Behavioral Health Center (435) 634-5600**

**Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services (800) 574-6763**

474 West 200 North, St. George, UT 84770

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# Survivor Resource Guide

## San Juan County

**San Juan Counseling** (435) 678-2992

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services

356 South Main

Blanding, UT 84511

## Web Resources

Book Reviews on Depression, Suicide Survivors, etc.

[www.save.org/resources/book\\_reviews.html](http://www.save.org/resources/book_reviews.html)

Questions and Answers About Major Depression

[www.save.org/tally.html](http://www.save.org/tally.html)

Children and Grief

[www.aacap.org/publications/factsfam/grief.htm](http://www.aacap.org/publications/factsfam/grief.htm)

## Suggested Readings

*After Suicide* by John H. Hewett, Wayne E. Oates (Editor)  
May 1980

*An Empty Chair: Living in the Wake of a Sibling's  
Suicide* by Sara Swan Miller, June 2000

*Again* by Corrine Chilstrom, Sept. 1993

*Andy, Why Did You Have to Go? A Mother's Reflections  
on the Life and Suicide of a Son* by Joyce Gatson, July  
2000

*Grieving a Suicide: A Loved One's Search for Comfort,  
Answers and Hope* by Albert Y. Hsu, July 2002

*Healing After the Suicide of a Loved One* by Ann Smolin,  
June 1993



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*My Son... My Son: A Guide to Healing After a Suicide in the Family* by Iris Bolton, Curtis Mitchell – Author's Book Page, Dec. 1983/Nov. 1991

*No Time to Say Goodbye: Surviving the Suicide of a Loved One* by Carla Fine, Jan. 1997/Nov. 1999

*Standing in the Shadow: Help and Encouragement for Suicide Survivors*, by June Cerza Kolf, Feb. 2002

*Survivors of Suicide* by Rita Robinson, revised Sept. 2001

## Suggested Readings for Helping Children Cope with Suicide

*But I Didn't Say Goodbye: For Parents and Professionals Helping Child Suicide Survivors* by Barbara Rubel, April 2000

*Help Me Say Goodbye: Activities for Helping Kids Cope When a Special Person Dies* by Janis Silverman, April 1999

*Sad Isn't Bad: A Good-Grief Guidebook for Kids Dealing with Loss*, by Michaelene Mundy, R. W. Alley, Sept. 1998.

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# Notes:

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**Utah Department of Health  
Violence and Injury Prevention Program**



**Phone:**

**(801) 538-6864**

**Web Site:**

**[www.health.utah.gov/vipp](http://www.health.utah.gov/vipp)**

