

Losing a Loved One to Suicide – by Ron Rolheiser

May 27, 2024

I have been writing on suicide for nearly forty years. I do so because suicide is generally misunderstood, badly misunderstood. Moreover, perhaps more than any other form of death, suicide leaves those who are left behind with a heavy burden of sadness, hurt, and guilt.

Four things need always to be said upfront about suicide:

First, suicide is a disease, perhaps the most misunderstood of all diseases. In most cases, the death is not freely chosen. When people die from heart attacks, strokes, cancer, AIDS, or accidents, they die against their will. The same is true for suicide, except that in the case of suicide, the breakdown is emotional rather than physical – an emotional stroke, an emotional cancer, a breakdown of the emotional immune system, an emotional fatality.

And this is not an analogy. Suicide is a disease. Most people who die by suicide die against their will. They only want to end a pain which can no longer be endured, akin to someone jumping to his death out of a burning building because his clothes are on fire.

Second, we should not worry unduly about the eternal salvation of a suicide victim, believing (as we used to) that suicide is the ultimate act of despair and something God will not forgive. God is infinitely understanding, loving, and gentle. We need not worry about the fate of anyone, no matter the cause of death, who exits this world broken, oversensitive, gentle, overwrought, and emotionally crushed. God has a special love for the broken and the crushed.

However, knowing all of this doesn't necessarily take away our pain (and anger) at losing someone to suicide because faith and understanding aren't always meant to take away our pain but rather to give us hope, vision, and support as we walk within our pain.

Third, we should not torture ourselves with guilt and second-guessing when we lose a loved one to suicide. "Where did I let this person down? If only I had been there? What if?" It is natural to be haunted by the thought, "if only I'd been there at the right time." Rarely would this have made a difference. Indeed, most of the time, we weren't there for the exact reason that the person who fell victim to this disease did not want us to be there. He or she picked the moment, the spot, and the means so that we wouldn't be there. Suicide is a disease that seems to pick its victim precisely in such a way so as to exclude others and their attentiveness. This is not an excuse for insensitivity, but a healthy check against false guilt and painful second-guessing.

We're human beings, not God. People die of illness and accidents all the time and sometimes all the love and attentiveness in the world cannot prevent a loved one from dying. As a mother who lost a child to suicide writes: "*The will to save a life does not constitute the power to prevent a death.*"

And so, we must forgive ourselves for our human inadequacy vis-à-vis having lived with someone in suicidal depression. But that is not easy, as this man who lost his wife to suicide attests: "My wife had been unhappy and depressed for so long that I pray that she is now finally at peace. At least once a week for the past four or five years, she would remark that she wanted to die. ... It's been hard for me to disentangle the role I played in her unhappiness. ... At a minimum, I will take to my grave the realization that I could have done more to keep her afloat. Over the past several years, instead of giving a pep talk to try to encourage her to see things in a more positive light, my default option had become avoidance and withdrawal. I had assumed that trying to dispel the fog of her depression only tended to make matters worse, at least for me, since I would often become the easier target for her anger/unhappiness."

That is a common guilt feeling shared by many who have lost someone to suicide, particularly a spouse. What needs to be understood is that the depressed person's anger is most often focused precisely on someone whom they trust and are very close to because that is the only safe place where they can unload their anger (without the other reciprocating). Consequently, the person who is the target of that anger will often escape by avoidance and withdrawal – with the resulting guilt feelings afterwards.

Fourth, when we lose loved ones to suicide, one of our tasks is to work at redeeming their memory by putting their lives back into a perspective so that the manner of their death doesn't forever taint their memory. Don't take down their photographs, don't speak in hushed tones about their life and death, don't put a permanent asterisk beside their names. Their lives are not to be judged through the unfortunate prism of their deaths. Redeem their memory.