

Suicide Bereavement

Grief after suicide is complex

Supporting those bereaved by suicide

Losing someone to suicide is a uniquely painful and often life-altering experience. Alongside the deep sadness of grief, people bereaved by suicide may also face shock, confusion, guilt, anger, and even a sense of abandonment. These reactions are normal, but they can feel overwhelming.

Many people also experience stigma, social isolation, or a reluctance to talk openly about the death. This can make it harder to get support and may leave those grieving feeling alone or misunderstood. Everyone's experience of suicide loss is different. There is no "right" way to feel, no set timeline, and no easy answers. What's important is knowing that you are not alone, and that support is available — both from others who have experienced similar losses, and from trained professionals.

This fact sheet aims to acknowledge the complex emotions of suicide bereavement, challenge common myths, and offer guidance on where to find help and hope.

Common Myths and Facts

Myth *I could have prevented their suicide if I had done something differently — "If only I had been home," "If only I had recognised how they were feeling," "If only I hadn't said that."*

Fact While these thoughts are a common part of suicide bereavement, it's important to recognise that there are limits to what anyone can control. No one is responsible for another person's decision to end their life. (StandBy Support, 2021)

Myth *Talking about the suicide will make it worse or cause more harm.*

Fact Open and honest conversations about the loss can help break stigma and isolation. Suppressing the truth can increase shame and prevent healing.

Myth *If you feel angry at the person who died, something is wrong with you.*

Fact Anger is a very common and valid response. It may be directed at the person who died, at yourself, others, or the situation. These emotions do not mean you didn't love or care deeply for the person.

Myth *You must be strong for others and hide your feelings.*

Fact You're allowed to grieve. Expressing your feelings and seeking help can help others in the family and community feel safer to do the same.

Unique Experiences of Suicide Bereavement

People who have lost someone to suicide often face:

- **Shock and trauma** – Especially if they discovered the death or witnessed it.
- **Guilt** – "Could I have stopped this?" is a common and painful question.
- **Blame** – Family members and others close to the deceased may feel blamed by others, blame themselves, or each other. This can be an attempt to make sense of the loss, but if these feelings persist, they may complicate the grieving process.
- **Anger** – Feeling hurt and abandoned can lead to anger toward the person who died. Talking about this anger and finding healthy ways to cope is important.
- **Shame or stigma** – Many feel unable to talk about the death openly.
- **Isolation** – Friends and family may not know what to say or may avoid the topic. The bereaved may also withdraw, fearing blame, feeling embarrassed to show emotions, or wanting to avoid explaining the death.

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- **Complicated grief** – Suicide bereavement may lead to longer, more intense or disrupted grief.
- **Fear of judgment** – From others or directed inward.
- **Relief (and guilt about feeling relief)** – Especially if the person who died had been struggling for a long time through many years of chronic mental illness.
- **Feeling suicidal** – Grief can feel overwhelming, leading to thoughts like “I can’t go on.” It’s important to seek support or professional help during these times.

Suicide bereavement isn’t something to ‘get over’ or find ‘closure’ to. However, what does happen is that you will grow your life to accommodate the death. In this way you can keep your loved one in your heart and in your life without feeling guilty or pressured to give them up. (StandBy – Support After Suicide, 2021)

Caring for Yourself After Suicide Loss

- **Talk to someone** – Friends, family, or others who have experienced suicide loss.
- **Join a support group** – Peer support can be powerful.
- **Speak to a professional** – Grief counselling or trauma-informed therapy can help navigate complicated grief.
- **Practice self-compassion** – You are not to blame.
- **Find healthy ways to remember the person** – Create a memory book, plant a tree, write a letter to them, or engage in a meaningful ritual.
- **Prepare for anniversaries and triggers** – These may include birthdays, holidays, or reminders of the loss.
- **Understand that healing is not linear** – Good and bad days may come and go. This is normal.

Understanding the Difference Between Grief and Depression

Telling the difference between grief and clinical depression can be challenging, as they often share similar symptoms—especially after a suicide loss, which may increase vulnerability to mental health struggles. However, recognizing the distinctions is important, particularly when considering when to seek professional support.

Grief can be a roller-coaster -- it involves a wide variety of emotions and a mix of good and bad days. Even when an individual is in the middle of the grieving process, they will have instances of pleasure or happiness. With **depression**, on the other hand, the feelings of despair and emptiness are a constant. Other symptoms that suggest depression, not only grief, are:

- An intense, pervasive sense of guilt
- Suicidal thoughts, or preoccupation with dying
- A feeling of worthlessness and hopelessness
- Slow body movements and speech
- Inability to function at home, work or school
- Seeing or hearing things that are not there

Support Services (Australia)

- **StandBy Support After Suicide**
24/7 local suicide bereavement support service
www.standbysupport.com.au
- **Beyond Blue**
Mental health and wellbeing support
www.beyondblue.org.au – 1300 22 4636
- **Griefline**
Support for anyone experiencing grief
www.griefline.org.au – 1300 845 745
- **Lifeline**
24/7 crisis support and suicide prevention
www.lifeline.org.au - 13 11 14
- **Suicide Call Back Service**
Free counselling for people affected by suicide
www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au – 1300 659 467
- **Thirrili**
Thirrili is an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led organisation supporting families and communities after suicide.
www.thirrili.com.au – 1800 805 801

References

StandBy Support. (2021). *Why is grief after suicide different?* (Support pack No. 16). StandBy Support. Retrieved from <https://standbysupport.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/16.-Why-is-grief-after-suicide-different-support-pack.pdf>

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