

Suicide grief: Healing after a loved one's suicide

A loved one's suicide can be emotionally devastating. Use healthy coping strategies — such as seeking support — to begin the journey to healing and acceptance.

By Mayo Clinic staff

When a loved one commits suicide, overwhelming emotions can leave you reeling. Your grief might be heart wrenching. At the same time, you might be consumed by guilt — wondering if you could have done something to prevent your loved one's death.

As you face life after a loved one's suicide, remember that you don't have to go through it alone.

Brace for powerful emotions

A loved one's suicide can trigger intense emotions. For example:

- **Shock.** Disbelief and emotional numbness might set in. You might think that your loved one's suicide couldn't possibly be real.
- **Anger.** You might be angry with your loved one for abandoning you or leaving you with a legacy of grief — or angry with yourself or others for missing clues about suicidal intentions.
- **Guilt.** You might replay "what if" and "if only" scenarios in your mind, blaming yourself for your loved one's death.
- **Despair.** You might be gripped by sadness, loneliness or helplessness. You might have a physical collapse or even consider suicide yourself.

You might continue to experience intense reactions during the weeks and months after your loved one's suicide — including nightmares, flashbacks, difficulty concentrating, social withdrawal and loss of interest in usual activities — especially if you witnessed or discovered the suicide.

Adopt healthy coping strategies

The aftermath of a loved one's suicide can be physically and emotionally exhausting. As you work through your grief, be careful to protect your own well-being.

- **Keep in touch.** Reach out to loved ones, friends and spiritual leaders for comfort, understanding and healing. Surround yourself with people who are willing to listen when you need to talk, as well as those who'll simply offer a shoulder to lean on when you'd rather be silent.
- **Grieve in your own way.** Do what's right for you, not necessarily someone else. If you find it too painful to visit your loved one's gravesite or share the details of your loved one's death, wait until you're ready.
- **Be prepared for painful reminders.** Anniversaries, holidays and other special occasions can be painful reminders of your loved one's suicide. Don't chide yourself for being sad or mournful. Instead, consider changing or suspending family traditions that are too painful to continue.
- **Don't rush yourself.** Losing someone to suicide is a tremendous blow, and healing must occur at its own pace. Don't be hurried by anyone else's expectations that it's been "long enough."
- **Expect setbacks.** Some days will be better than others, even years after the suicide — and that's OK. Healing doesn't often happen in a straight line.
- **Consider a support group for families affected by suicide.** Sharing your story with others who are experiencing the same type of grief might help you find a sense of purpose or strength.

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Know when to seek professional help

If you experience intense or unrelenting anguish or physical problems, ask your doctor or mental health provider for help. Seeking professional help is especially important if you think you might be depressed or you have recurring thoughts of suicide. Keep in mind that unresolved grief can turn into complicated grief, where painful emotions are so long lasting and severe that you have trouble resuming your own life.

Depending on the circumstances, you might benefit from individual or family therapy — either to get you through the worst of the crisis or to help you adjust to life after suicide. Short-term medication can be helpful in some cases, too.

You can contact MHA for help seeking counselors or therapists:

Mental Health America of Wisconsin
600 W. Virginia St, Suite 502
Milwaukee, WI 53204

(414) 276-3122 or (866) 948-6483 (toll free)
(414) 276-3124 (fax)
info@mhawisconsin.org

Face the future with a sense of peace

In the aftermath of a loved one's suicide, you might feel like you can't go on or that you'll never enjoy life again.

In truth, you might always wonder why it happened — and reminders might trigger painful feelings even years later. Eventually, however, the raw intensity of your grief will fade. The tragedy of the suicide won't dominate your days and nights.

Understanding the complicated legacy of suicide and how to cope with palpable grief can help you reach inner peace and healing, while still honoring the memory of your loved one.