



Grief after suicide is similar to grief after other types of death. However suicide raises additional complex grief issues because of the sudden and traumatic nature of the death. These can include the following:

Trauma - Suicide is usually sudden and often violent leaving the bereaved traumatised. Intrusive images of the death can recur, even if the death was not witnessed. The initial grief reactions of shock and numbness may also be stronger and last longer.

“It’s a riddle that goes round and round and round in your mind and drives you absolutely crazy for years and years and suddenly you think I’m tormenting myself. I shall just never know the exact and precise reason.”¹

Why? - For many survivors of suicide there is a desperate need to know why the suicide happened. The search for answers may be relentless. However it is important that survivors reach the point where they feel they have struggled with the question enough. They may have enough answers to satisfy themselves or recognise that the reasons for the suicide will never be completely understood.

Guilt - Guilt is a common reaction in bereavement and research suggests that guilt is felt more intensely amongst those bereaved by suicide. Family members and friends often feel guilty about not having foreseen the suicide or prevented it. Survivors will often replay the events over and over again in their heads. There is a long list of ‘if only’: ‘If only I had been home’, ‘if only I had recognised how they were feeling’, ‘if only I hadn’t said that’. It is important to eventually recognise that there is a limit to your responsibility. No-one is responsible for another’s decision.

Relief - For those families who have been through many years of chronic mental illness with their loved one there may be feelings of relief: ‘at least now they are at rest’: and a sense of freedom from the ongoing worry for their loved one. It is OK to feel this way. It does not mean that you wished your loved one was dead.

Blame - It is common for people to react to a sudden death by looking for someone to blame. Bereaved families and in particular bereaved parents, often feel that they are held to blame in some way for the death: that there was something ‘wrong’ in the family or with their parenting skills. Families bereaved by suicide may also blame each other. Blame can be a way for some people to try and make sense of what happened. Holding on to blame in the long term can add further difficulties to the grieving process.



Social Isolation - Historically there has been stigma attached to a death by suicide. It has been a taboo subject and there are few traditions or customs directing how to respond to such a death. Many survivors note a lack of support following a suicide. This may be because family and friends are unsure how to react. It may also be that the survivor's feelings of shame and of being different cause them to distance themselves from possible supports.

Feeling suicidal -The pain of grief may be so intense and unrelenting that survivors may think 'I can't go on like this anymore'. Identification with the person who has died may make them feel particularly vulnerable. Survivors of suicide frequently have suicidal thoughts. Finding support and/or professional help at these times is very important.

Anger - Survivors of suicide often feel rejected and abandoned by their loved one and also may feel anger towards that person for leaving them. Anger is a natural response to being hurt. It is helpful to talk about being angry and find ways to deal with it constructively.

SOME QUESTIONS COMMONLY ASKED

Should I tell people it was suicide?

It is helpful to be honest. Telling the story over and over again can be healing. If you avoid the truth it will take extra energy and worry to maintain the lie and this will complicate the grief process.

What do I say when people ask me about the suicide?

It can be helpful to work out ahead of time what to say to people. You may want to share more with some people than others. If you don't want to discuss it at that time, let them know. You can say something like "I don't want to go into that at the moment." It may be better not to discuss the method in too much detail. Some people are more vulnerable and may be influenced by this.

What do I say when people ask me how many people are in the family?

This may be an awkward question for you. Your loved one will always be part of your life but it may be that you don't want to invite further questions. 'Do I include the person who has died or am I denying their existence if I don't include them?' Say whatever you are comfortable with. This may depend on who is asking the question and their reasons for it. It may also depend on how you are feeling that day.

¹ Wertheimer, A (1991) A Special Scar: The experiences of people bereaved by suicide. London: Routledge