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Is bereavement by suicide and other sudden traumatic death different?

The loss of someone you have been close to, whatever the cause of their death, can bring intense feelings of grief. But some of the responses and emotions experienced by people who are bereaved by suicide may differ from those felt after other types of death. The fact that a person's death appeared to involve an element of choice raises painful questions that death from natural or accidental causes does not.

Bereavement by suicide may sometimes be prolonged. It may reawaken earlier losses, especially if any of them were also by suicide. Shock, social isolation and feelings of guilt can often be greater for bereavement after suicide than for other causes of death. The grieving process is characterised by questioning and a search for an explanation. Some people may feel a strong sense of abandonment and rejection. Some of the particular aspects of bereavement by suicide are described below. Some – or perhaps even all – may be relevant to your own experience of grief.

Recurring images

A common and disturbing aspect of grief after suicide can be recurring images of the death, even if you did not actually see it happen. If you were the one who found the body of the dead person, this can be very traumatic, especially if the death was violent.

You may find that you have recurring nightmares and go over and over the images of the death in your mind. By talking about what happened and re-examining the details again and again, you may find that they become less painful. If the images persist and you find them interfering with your life, ask your doctor if they can refer you to a specialist who can help.

Why?

Many newly bereaved people will ask "why?", but bereavement through suicide can often involve a prolonged search for a reason for the death. Different members of the family may have very different ideas as to the reason why, and this can put a strain on family relationships, particularly if an element of blame is involved.

Many people bereaved by suicide eventually come to accept that they will never really know the reason why the person did what they did. Although the death may have followed a specific event, suicide is rarely due to a single cause.

Could it have been prevented?

Reliving what could have been done to save someone from suicide is a common experience of people bereaved in this way. Everything can seem painfully obvious in retrospect, and the 'what ifs?' may seem endless: "What if I had picked up on that warning comment or sign?" or "What if I had not been away that weekend?"

It may help you to remember that the changes in behaviour that lead to suicide can be very gradual. It is very difficult to see when a person gets to the point where they want to take their own life, and even mental health professionals find it hard to know when a person is particularly at risk. Once a person has decided to take their life, they can go to great lengths to cover up their plans.

Feelings of guilt

When someone dies by suicide, their family and friends may suffer from intense feelings of guilt, self-blame and self-questioning. Following her brother's death, one woman describes her terrible feelings of guilt:

“Not one day has passed that I haven't asked myself – why? – and haven't experienced the tidal waves of guilt that seem to drag me under deeper and deeper. I agonised over whether we as a family could have done something that might have made him want to stay with us. Why did we say all those terrible things to each other while we were growing up and even worse, why didn't I say all the things to him that I now wish I could?”

It may help to talk about your feelings with someone you trust to get a realistic perspective on them, but if you don't want to share your feelings, try not to blame yourself. You could make a list of the things you did do to help the dead person. Try to remember that you could not predict the future and that nobody is responsible for the actions of another person. No one is perfect, and the reasons for suicide are seldom simple. Try to forgive yourself if there are things you said or did which you now regret. If your feelings of guilt persist, you might find it helpful to discuss them in a support group or with a counsellor.

How do I tell other people about the death?

It is sometimes difficult to talk openly about suicide, but trying to keep the facts a secret will only add to your stress in the long term. If you don't want to talk about the details, you could say: “They took their own life, but I can't talk about it now.” Suggestions of what to tell children is in the section on ‘Bereaved people with particular needs’.

Rejection and abandonment

It is common to feel abandoned and rejected by someone who has killed themselves. One woman whose brother took his life recalled:

“I was upset that he hadn't come to talk to us. I think we all went through anger at some point. You think: ‘How could you do this to us?’”

Sometimes this sense of rejection leads to feelings of inadequacy and causes the bereaved person to cut themselves off from people who could help them because they feel worthless or fear further rejection. These are common experiences. It is possible that the person who died was so concerned with their own problems that they couldn't think about other people, or may have thought that others would be better off without them.

Suicidal fears and feelings

Despair is a natural part of grieving, but after someone has died by suicide, this feeling may be combined with fear for your own safety. People bereaved by suicide sometimes worry about whether suicidal tendencies are inherited and may become more vulnerable to suicidal thoughts of their own. If you have feelings like this, it may help to discuss them with a support group or your doctor. While these thoughts usually pass with time, it is essential to seek professional help if they become very strong.

"I'm older now than my mother was when she killed herself: perhaps that means I've escaped her fate... Suicide is seductive; when it becomes an option, you toy with the idea of it... For years whenever I believed I had screwed everything up I would think I had to commit suicide... This mood can still come on me but it's rarer now".

Stigma and isolation

A mother writing about her son's death pointed out that many of us have never been told what to say to someone who has had a suicide in the family.

"What I needed to hear was the same thing that might be said to anyone else who had experienced the death of someone close – 'I'm truly sorry for your pain and is there anything I can do? If you need to talk about it I'm a good listener. I've got a good shoulder to cry on.' And I needed to know it was really meant. Nobody wants to talk about suicide. Everyone thinks that it's best not to say anything, that if you don't talk about it, it will be forgotten and will go away. For me nothing could be further from the truth."

Although attitudes to suicide are changing, the silence of others may reinforce feelings of stigma and shame. If other people are embarrassed, uneasy and evasive, you may feel isolated and that you are lacking opportunities to talk about, remember and celebrate all aspects of the person's life. You may feel a strong need to protect the dead person and yourself from the judgment of others. You might isolate yourself, either through a sense of shame, or simply because you want to shut yourself away for a while.

Friends may not get in touch because they don't know what to say. You might be able to make it easier for others by letting them know what they could do to help. Joining a support group for people bereaved by suicide can help reduce the sense of stigma and isolation. There are also websites where people can share their experiences (see 'Sources of support').

Suicide notes

People who die by suicide sometimes leave a suicide note. This can be a source of comfort for family and friends if the person expresses love, asks forgiveness or tells them they are not to blame. If the death was entirely unexpected, a note can help to settle any uncertainty about whether it was a suicide. Occasionally however, a note can be hurtful, unpleasant and blaming. It helps to remember that the note only reflects the writer's state of mind at the time when their thoughts and feelings may have been disturbed. A note will not necessarily provide all the answers as to the reason for the suicide, but if no note of explanation is left, this can also be upsetting.

Public exposure

Other aspects of bereavement by suicide which can be particularly difficult are the police investigation, the coroner's inquest and media publicity

These are some suggestions of things you may find helpful.

- Set aside some time each day for grieving, so that you can cry, remember the dead person, pray or meditate.
- Keep a journal to record your feelings, thoughts and memories. Writing may help you gain some control over intense emotions. If you write down some of the obsessive thoughts that keep coming into your mind, they may lose some of their power.
- Take care of yourself. Try to get enough rest and eat well. When you are able, start to set aside time for things that you used to enjoy. This is not disloyal and will help you cope with your grief.
- Exercise will usually help you feel better emotionally and will make you physically tired so that you sleep better.
- Meditation, relaxation techniques, massage and listening to music can help reduce the emotional and physical stress of bereavement.
- Some people find it helps to express their feelings through writing poetry or painting. Other creative activities like sewing, cooking, gardening or woodwork can also be healing and restorative.
- Try to avoid making any major decisions, like moving house or getting rid of the person's possessions immediately after the death. You may not be thinking clearly and may do things you later regret.
- Birthdays, holidays and the anniversary of the death can be difficult, although sometimes the anticipation of the day can often be worse than the day itself. Talk to other family members and plan in advance how you want to spend the day. You might decide to make a change from your usual traditions or set aside part of the day to remember the dead person in a special way.
- Be aware that you may hit a low spot after the death when the tasks of planning the funeral and sorting out the affairs of the person who died are over. Ask for help if you need it. Grief may resurface years later, perhaps after another loss, or if you lost someone while you were a child.
- Try not to turn to alcohol or drugs as a way of relieving your sadness. While they may provide short term relief from painful feelings, they hinder grieving and can cause depression and poor health. If you find yourself using alcohol or drugs in this way, seek help, usually from your doctor in the first place, or contact an organisation like Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous
- If you are feeling depressed (which may result in prolonged sleep disturbance, poor appetite, loss of energy and interest, suicidal thoughts and other symptoms), it is important to seek help from your doctor.

Family

A bereavement may bring a family together to share their pain and give each other comfort and support, but it can be difficult if members of the family grieve in different ways or blame each other for the death. Women are sometimes able to express their grief in a more openly emotional way – crying, talking about their feelings and the person who died, and going over what happened to try to understand it.

Men may deal with their grief by problem-solving – focusing on practical activities and feeling the need to be strong for the rest of the family. Children's moods may change very quickly from being sad one minute to laughing and playing the next. Adolescents may shut themselves in their room or 'act out' their feelings through reckless behaviour. Younger members of the family may need special support (see 'Bereaved people with particular needs').

Try to be patient and understanding and talk to each other about how you feel. Everyone grieves in a different way, and if someone goes about it in a different way to you, it doesn't mean that they don't care. Try not to compare grief reactions.

Friends

Friends can be a great source of support, for example with practical things immediately after the death when you might be finding it impossible to deal with day-to-day life and for talking about the person who died. Sometimes though, friends may find it hard to know what to do or say for fear of upsetting you. You can make it easier for them by letting them know what they can do to help, when you need to talk and when you'd rather be alone. Some friends may be so eager to help that they insist on talking about your loss even when you don't want to. If this happens you might say something like: "I don't even want to listen to anybody else talking about it just now."

Remember, you don't need to take the advice offered by friends – make your own decisions about what you want to do. If you feel that your family and friends cannot provide all the support you need, there is other help available

The future

The time people take to mourn the loss of someone they have been close to is different for everybody. Some feelings, such as missing the person, may never go away completely, but the pain becomes less with time. An important part of rebuilding your life seems to be to accept that the death really has happened and the person is not coming back. Gradually the things that were good about the person when they were alive can start to be important, as well as their death. Although life is never the same again, for most people there does come a time when they begin to enjoy living again. When things seem very bleak it is important to live from day to day but remember that things will change in the future and that help is available if needed.

*I had thought that your death
Was a waste and a destruction,
A pain of grief hardly to be endured
I am only beginning to learn
That your life was a gift and a growing
And a loving left with me.
The desperation of death
Destroyed the existence of love,
But the fact of death
Cannot destroy what has been given.
I am learning to look at your life again
Instead of your death and your departing.*
Marjorie Pizer

"For Simon to commit suicide was almost beyond my endurance. Yet nevertheless, we do endure, and we do laugh, and we do go on contributing to our family and friends, and that, I suppose, is the miracle."

Lois in *A Special Scar: The Experiences of People Bereaved by Suicide*. Alison Wertheimer (2001). London: Routledge, p. 166.

Children

Children may deal with grief in different ways from adults. It is common for a child to switch from being very upset to wanting to go out and play as if nothing has happened. This is their way of coping and does not mean that they are not affected by the death. Some changes in behaviour which you might notice are:

- repetitive behaviour;
- crying or giggling for no obvious reason;
- acting out the loss with toys;
- anger or aggression to friends, parents or toys;
- tantrums;
- copying behaviours of the dead person;
- acting like a younger child or more like an adult;
- running away or not wanting to go to school;
- problems with school work;
- irritability, restlessness and problems concentrating;
- attention-seeking;
- clinging, being anxious and not wanting to leave your side;
- wetting the bed and thumb-sucking;
- not sleeping or having bad dreams;
- wanting to sleep with a trusted adult;
- eating problems.

How shall I tell my child about the death?

Talking to your child about the death will not be easy, but you will probably feel relieved afterwards and glad that you have been honest. It is distressing for a child to find out about a suicide by accident, so it is important to be honest and open from the start.

They may feel betrayed and unable to trust you if they think you have not told them the truth. It is easy, especially with an older child, to underestimate their depth of feeling, their ability to conceal it (often to protect their parents and loved ones) and their unexpressed need for detailed information about what has happened. Very young children may not understand that death is irreversible and that a dead body cannot feel anything.

They may think that they have caused the death in some way. Use simple words that your child understands and encourage them to talk and ask questions. Your child may ask the same questions over and over again. Listen seriously to their questions, even if they seem trivial, and try to answer them honestly and consistently. Children may not take everything in at first, so be prepared to tell the story of what happened many times, as this helps them come to terms with their loss. One way of explaining suicide is to tell your child in five stages:

1. Explain that the person has died.
2. Give simple details about how they died.
3. Say that the person chose to take their own life.
4. Provide a more detailed description of how the person died.
5. Explore possible reasons why the person chose to die.

These stages can be introduced within a short space of time or over a longer period, depending on the needs and age of the child. Use plain, direct language and avoid phrases like 'passed away' or 'gone to sleep' (as this may alarm children who take things literally and may be frightened to sleep in case they don't wake up). Make sure they understand that the person will not be coming back. If you believe in an afterlife and want to tell your child about it, explain that they will not see the person again on earth. It is very important to make it clear that the child is not to blame or responsible in any way. Reassure them that they are loved and cared for, and that other adults in their life will probably not die until the children have grown up.

The following are suggestions as to how the above might be done:

"I want you to know that Daddy died because he killed himself.

- He took a lot of tablets – far, far more than you are meant to take. Because there were so many tablets his body stopped working and he died.*
- He put a rope around his neck and let it get so tight that he couldn't breathe any more. When he couldn't breathe he died.*
- He jumped from a very high place and got very hurt so that he couldn't breathe any more and he died.*
- It's important you know that Daddy loved you very much, and it wasn't anything you did that made him feel so bad. We all feel very upset and sad, but remember that you can talk about Daddy and ask questions whenever you want to."*

Your child may ask you why the person chose to die. You could say something like:

"Mummy had an illness which made her feel very sad and confused. She felt so bad that she decided it would be better if she wasn't alive any more."

"Your brother had a lot of worries – he had lost his job and then Mandy said she didn't want to be his girlfriend any more. He was drinking a lot of alcohol and maybe this made it difficult for him to think clearly, so he thought things would never get better. We're very sad that Sam wasn't able to ask for help. Nothing is so bad that there isn't some way out. That's why we need families and friends who look after each other – but we need to tell people when things are going wrong so they can try to help us."

Should my children see the body and go to the funeral?

It's normal to be worried about involving children in the funeral arrangements, but it can be an important step in helping them to accept the death, express their grief and say goodbye. It may not always be possible or desirable for a child to see the body, but if they do it is important to prepare them. You may want to go into the viewing room beforehand so that you can describe to the child what they are going to see, and explain that the person may look different from the way they remember them, and will feel cold if they touch them. Some children have said they found it helpful to be included in planning and taking part in the funeral, for example by taking flowers or pictures to put on the coffin, or by singing a song or reading a poem. A funeral can be confusing for small children. You can help by explaining what will happen, and that some people might be crying. You may need to ask a friend or relative to look after your child during the ceremony and take them outside if they become restless.

Will my children be in danger of suicide themselves?

You may worry that your children will be at risk of 'copying' suicidal behaviour. Try to encourage them to talk about their feelings and explore different ways of solving problems and dealing with difficult situations. Give them lots of praise and encouragement so they feel good about themselves. If you are worried about your child, it is important to talk these worries over with somebody who is qualified to advise you. This could be someone from your general practice or a counsellor from one of the bereavement organisations that work with children (see 'Sources of support').

What other things will help?

You may feel overwhelmed by grief and unable to take care of your children properly, but it is important to keep to their normal routine as far as possible. It might be helpful to ask a friend or relative to give your child special support by talking to them or taking them out to give you time to yourself. Small children may worry that you may leave them too. Reassure them that you will not and tell them clearly about times when you will be away from them and when you will come back.

Don't be afraid to let your children see you grieving. This will let them know that it is natural to cry and express how they feel. Encourage them to talk about their fears and worries. If you try to hide your grief from them, they may think that you did not care about the person who has died. It is also important to let children know that they do not have to grieve all the time – playing and physical activity can be helpful.

Children may feel very angry after a suicide. Physical activities (like kicking a ball or running) can help them channel this rage.

Adapted with permission from Canterbury Bereaved by Suicide Support Group,

You can provide physical security, comfort and reassurance with hugs and cuddles, favourite food, soft blankets and nightlights. The loss of the person who died will change your family situation and roles within it. You may have to take on extra responsibilities and it may be difficult to make ends meet. Try not to lean on your children too much for support and comfort, though it can be good to talk to them about important changes and include them in decisions.

Plan things to look forward to and tell your children about these so they know you will still be looking after them. Tell the school about the death, and tell your child that you have done this. Practise with them what to say to friends and teachers. You may need to remind new teachers of the situation later. Some children find it helpful to make a 'memory box' or scrapbook containing photographs, drawings, letters, poems, stories and mementos of the dead person. They can return to this as they get older and want to know more about the person who died.

Making the memory box or book can be a valuable family activity. Winston's Wish and The Child Bereavement Trust supply a variety of special boxes for this purpose (see 'Sources of support'). Reassure your child that they won't always feel so bad. It may take a long time, but they will feel better and will always be loved and cared for. By talking about the death, encouraging questions, sharing feelings and comforting your child you can help them get through this difficult time. If you are worried that your child is not coping, ask your doctor to arrange professional help.

For parents of older children

A death in the family is a devastating experience, and can be particularly difficult for adolescents who are also coping with the usual pressures of growing up. They may find it hard to express their emotions. You can help by listening to what they say and encouraging them to express their feelings in their own way – this may be through music, writing poetry or painting. Accept that their way of grieving may be different from yours – they may be quiet and withdrawn, or crying and screaming. Be patient if they are angry and irritable. Try to talk as a family and share your grief. Older children may want to be away from a home that is full of sadness, and may need to be alone with their thoughts or out with their friends.

They may find it easier to talk to friends or someone else outside the family. Try not to be overprotective, but encourage them to go out and enjoy themselves if they want to. If one of your children has died, avoid idealising their memory, as this will make it more difficult for the brothers and sisters who are left. If you are worried that your child might be getting depressed or feeling suicidal, ask for professional help from your doctor.

PAPYRUS offers advice and support for people who are worried about young people Who may be feeling suicidal (see 'Sources of support').

Sources of Support

Bereavement through suicide

A special scar: The experiences of people bereaved by suicide. Alison Wertheimer (2001, second edition). London: Routledge. ISBN 0 415 220 270.*° Describes personal experiences and offers practical suggestions for those trying to cope.

Coping with suicide. Maggie Helen (2002). London: Sheldon Press. ISBN 0 859 698 718.° Written by a bereavement counsellor who was herself bereaved by suicide, the book offers insights into the feelings and experiences of bereaved people, support in grieving and guidance about help.

After suicide: Help for the bereaved. Dr Sheila Clark (1995). Melbourne: Hill of Content. ISBN 0 855 722 622.° Understanding grief and advice on how to cope.

For people who have lost a child

Losing a child: Explorations in grief. Linda Hurcombe (2004). London: Sheldon Press. ISBN 0859698866.° The author, whose daughter died by suicide, offers support, information and practical advice for the bereaved and for the family, friends and professionals helping them to cope.

Children bereaved by suicide

Beyond the rough rock – Supporting a child who has been bereaved through suicide. Diana Crossley and Julie Stokes (2001). Gloucester: Winston's Wish. ISBN 0 9539123 3 7.*° Advice and help for parents and carers.

Supporting children after suicide.

www.health.nsw.gov.au/policy/cmh/publications/Supporting_Children_After_Suicide.pdf

Information for parents and other caregivers.

Personal accounts of loss through suicide

A voice for those bereaved by suicide. Sarah McCarthy (2001). Dublin: Veritas. ISBN 1853905933.*° Sarah McCarthy describes her despair and anger after her husband's suicide left her with four children under ten and how she rebuilt her life and came to terms with her loss.

Dear Stephen. A letter diary written to Stephen by his mother. Anne Downey (1987). London: Arthur James. ISBN 0 853 052 816.°

My son, my son. A guide to healing after death, loss or suicide. Iris Bolton (2001, first published in 1983). Atlanta: The Bolton Press. ISBN: 0961632607.°

The scent of dried roses. Tim Lott (1997). London: Penguin Books Ltd.
ISBN 140250840. Lott explores the reasons behind his mother's suicide and his own suicidal depression

Bereavement in general

The early days of grieving. Derek Nuttall (1991). Beaconsfield: Beaconsfield Publishers.
ISBN 0 906 584 299.*° Simple and direct support and information

Through grief: The bereavement journey. Elizabeth Collick (1986). London: Darton, Longman and Todd. ISBN 0 232 516 820.*°

For parents

The bereaved parent. Harriet Sarnoff Schiff (1979). London: Souvenir Press. ISBN 0 285 648 918.*°

A child's grief: Supporting a child when someone in their family has died. Julie Stokes and Diana Crossley (2001). Gloucester: Winston's Wish. ISBN 0 953 912 310.°

Helping children cope with grief: Facing a death in the family. Rosemary Wells (1988). London: Sheldon Press. ISBN 0 859 695 59X0.°

Grief in the family. Leeds Animation Workshop (2002).°

Email: law@leedsanimation.demon.co.uk. Website: www.leedsanimation.org.uk
Animated DVD/video and booklet which look at the ways children and young people respond to grief and what adults can do to help. Can be hired or bought from Leeds Animation Workshop: tel and fax: 0113 248 4997.

Not too young to grieve. Leeds Animation Workshop (2005).

This DVD/video and booklet is for parents and carers supporting babies and children under five who have been bereaved. Can be hired or bought from Leeds Animation Workshop (see above)

For children and young people

Badger's parting gifts. Susan Varley (1994). London: Picture Lions. ISBN: 0006643175.*°
For younger children – illustrated story about an old badger who dies and how the other animals miss him but their lives have been enriched by knowing him.

I miss you: A first look at death. Pat Thomas (2001). Hauppauge, NY: Barron's Educational Series. ISBN: 0764117645 Children's book to help them understand the concept of death and feelings they may have.

Facing grief: Bereavement and the young adult. Susan Wallbank (1991). Cambridge: Lutterworth Press. ISBN 0 718 828 070.*° Written for those aged 18–28.

When parents die: Learning to live with the loss of a parent. Rebecca Abrams (1999, 2nd edition). London: Routledge. ISBN: 0415200660.*° Based on personal experiences of the author and other bereaved young people.

Straight talk about death for teenagers: How to cope with losing someone you love. Earl A. Grollman (1993). Boston: Beacon Press. ISBN:087025003.

Healing your grieving heart for teens: 100 practical ideas – simple tips for understanding and expressing your grief. Alan Wolfelt (2001). Fort Collins, Colorado: Companion Press. ISBN: 1879651238.

General books about suicide

Night falls fast (understanding suicide). Kay Redfield Jamison, (2000). London: Picador. ISBN 0 330 481 789. ISBN 0 375 701 478.° Combines scientific research with personal stories.

The savage god: A study of suicide. AI Alvarez (2002, first published in 1971). London: Bloomsbury. ISBN 0747559058.° Historical, cultural, theoretical and literary perspectives on suicide and an account of the author's own suicide attempt.

The long sleep: Young people and suicide. Kate Hill (1995). London: Virago. ISBN 1853815896.*° Now out of print, but available through Amazon. Explores reasons for suicide in young people, using research evidence and personal accounts

Depression

Darkness visible: A memoir of madness. William Styron (1990). London: Vintage. ISBN 0099285576.

Leaflets and articles

Most of the following organisations have leaflets and articles that can be downloaded from their websites or sent by post.

Cruse Bereavement Care
www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk/pubs.htm
The Child Bereavement Trust
www.childbereavement.org.uk/resources/articles.php
or tel: 01494 446648.

The Compassionate Friends
www.tcf.org.uk

SOBS (Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide)
www.sobs.admin.care4free.net
After a suicide can be downloaded from the
Scottish Association for Mental Health website:

www.samh.org.uk/pdfs/AfteraSuicide.pdf or
tel: 0141 568 7000 (open Monday to Friday, 2.00 pm
to 4.30 pm).

Anthologies and poetry

All in the end is harvest: An anthology for those who grieve. Agnes Whitaker (ed) (1996). London: Darton, Longman and Todd. ISBN: 0232516243.*
Prose and poetry published in association with Cruse Bereavement Care.

Do not go gentle: Poems for funerals.
Neil Astley (ed) (2003). Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books. ISBN:1852246359.
Traditional and contemporary poems for people of all faiths, agnostics and atheists.

The long pale corridor: Contemporary poems of bereavement. Judi Benson and Agneta Falk (eds) (1996). Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books. ISBN 1852243171.*^o