


**After  
a Suicide:  
A Practical and  
Personal Guide  
for Survivors**



## Acknowledgements

**“ The most authentic thing about us is our capacity to create, to overcome, to endure, to transform, to love and to be greater than our suffering.”**  
**Ben Okri**

Kites are often associated with young children playing in a field on a lovely summer day, laughing and running as they try to keep their kite soaring in the sky. At first site this image does not necessarily fit with what we might associate with the pain and suffering of suicide. The kite however, can have many meanings and associations. The kite can represent the person we have lost and the string the connection we will have with them forever. As we watch the kite flying high above us we remember those we have lost but who are always with us. We do not wish to let go of the memory of that person and hold on to the string and our connection with them. We do hope for the day we can let go of our pain and sadness so that we can remember and see the person more clearly. Those feelings can be like clouds that block our view of the kite. Let us see the person for all their brilliance, like these brightly coloured kites, fluttering in the sky. A person's value, identity and importance are not determined by how they died but rather by what they meant to us when they lived. The kite can also represent our connection to others, the need to connect with a community and stay connected to people who add to the quality of our lives. The kite represents our sense of purpose and hope, something that we grasp tightly. It also reminds us of the importance of staying connected to ourselves, to keep our feet on the ground and to sometimes put our heads in the clouds and dream, to be aware of ourselves, to feel our own importance and power, to care for and nurture ourselves and to have fun and play.

The string is a very necessary part of the kite for without it the kite is lost. The string is perhaps the central them, our need for connectedness, and connection with hope, with community, with those who have died, with those who struggle with thought of suicide and with ourselves. This string connects and unites us all together.

(Tim Wall, Executive Director of CASP, excerpt from 2009 World Suicide Prevention Day address.)

The Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention (CASP) is indebted and grateful to Klinic Community Health Centre and SPEAK (Suicide Prevention Education Awareness Knowledge) in Winnipeg, Manitoba for permission to adapt their handbook, “After a Suicide” for our purposes. In adapting the Klinic handbook, CASP has removed references to local Manitoba resources and provided space for other communities to include information on local/regional resources.

Klinic Community Health Centre is in turn indebted to the Alberta Health Services, Calgary Health Region, for sharing their resource guide “Survivor of Suicide Handbook”, which helped inform this document. We also wish to acknowledge Dr. Alan Wolfelt, Centre for Loss and Life Transitions, for his compassionate and caring work on behalf of those whose lives have been touched by suicide. For more information, please refer to the Resources section at the back of this handbook.

Thank you to all those persons who contributed to the development of this handbook.

Those who have survived the death of a loved one by suicide are among the most courageous people we know. This handbook is dedicated to them. If you are reading this handbook because you, too, have been affected by suicide, we hope you find peace, find hope, and find others to be with and to share your burden.

For further information or additional copies,  
contact:

**The Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention**  
**c/o Klinik Community Health Centre**  
**870 Portage Ave.**  
**Winnipeg, Manitoba R3G 0P1**  
**Phone: (204) 784-4073**  
**Website: [www.suicideprevention.ca](http://www.suicideprevention.ca)**

Historian Arnold Toynbee once wrote, “There are always two parties to a death: the person who dies and the survivors who are bereaved.”

Unfortunately, many survivors of suicide suffer alone and in silence. The silence that surrounds them often complicates the healing that comes from being encouraged to mourn. Because of the social stigma surrounding suicide, survivors feel the pain of the loss, yet may not know how, or where, or if, they should express it. (Alan Wolfelt, Ph.D.)

If you are new to the tragedy of a suicide, despair may be your companion. We hope you find some time to rest your burden and share your grief with those of us who do not need any explanation. You are not alone. The fact that someone died by suicide does not change our love for them, what they meant to us, their value, the contribution they made, and our right to celebrate and honour their lives. When someone dies by suicide, it does not mean that they did not love or value us. How a person dies does not define their life, us, or our relationship with them.

## About this Handbook

This handbook was written to help you through the death by suicide of your loved one. It contains both practical and personal information, as well as a list of books, websites and support groups, that we hope will help you through your grief.

Different parts of this resource may be of help to you at different times. Immediately after a death by suicide, there are many practical matters that families will need to attend to and questions they might have about what to do. This resource starts with addressing these practical matters.

Grief associated with a death by suicide can be complicated, and is also very different to what people experience following death by other causes. Immediately after a suicide death, people are often in shock and unable to describe or explain their feelings or make meaning of what has happened. You may need time before you feel ready to examine what has happened, how it has affected you, what it all means, and what you need in order to begin healing.

Read the more personal information on suicide grief in this handbook when you are ready. Understanding and exploring your own thoughts and feelings might feel scary but it is an important and necessary part of healing. You and only you will know when you are ready. As you read this, you may not even be aware that the process of healing has already begun.

Remember, you are not alone.

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## **PRACTICAL INFORMATION**

### **Emergency Response and Investigation**

When a sudden or unexplained death occurs, there are many procedures to follow. This can cause great anxiety for the family and friends of the loved one who has died. Understanding these procedures and the roles of different service providers can help reduce some of that stress and anxiety.

The Emergency Medical Services, the police, band constables and/or RCMP will be the first to respond to the emergency call. The fire department will also provide help where needed.

#### **Police, RCMP and Band Constables**

The police, RCMP and/or Band constables help by making sure everyone is safe, investigating the death of your loved one, and ruling out other causes of death. In order to do this, they make take photographs of the area, remove items or valuables, and record statements from the person who found your loved one. They will then notify the family of the findings.

If the family or friends wish to see the loved one before they are removed, this may only be allowed if the police, RCMP and/or band constables are sure how the person has died. Items or valuables will be returned if you make a written request to the Medical Examiner (see below). This includes a suicide note if one is left; however, the notes are only returned to the person they were written to.

#### **Victim Assistance**

Many communities have “crisis response teams” that support people after a crisis, tragedy or death. If you live in a First Nations community, there may be a crisis response team or other people there who are trained to support people following a suicide.

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## **Medical Examiner**

When a person's death is unexpected and the cause of death is not immediately known or is the result of an apparent suicide, it will be investigated by the Office of the Medical Examiner or Coroner. The Medical Examiner (ME) takes charge of your loved one and obtains their past medical history by interviewing next of kin and reviewing medical charts or records. The ME determines the cause and manner of death and signs the Certificate of Death when the investigation is completed.

If necessary, the ME may order an autopsy. Your permission is not required, but if you have concerns about this, tell them right away. They will explain everything involved and provide you with a copy of their report.

Only the Chief Medical Examiner's Office can sign and issue an official Certificate of Death when a death is a suicide. You will need at least one copy of this certificate. It is an official government document accepted as proof of death, and includes the deceased's name, place of passing, gender, marital status, age, and cause of death. Both the ME's report and the autopsy report are available at no cost to the adult next of kin upon written consent to the Chief Medical Examiner's office. Insurance companies who may require these reports are charged a fee.

## **After the Investigation**

When a loved one dies at home, the family and friends are responsible for cleaning the area. If you are unsure how to do this or have concerns, you can call your local health centre or local health authority for advice. Some cultures encourage ceremonies and gatherings to help you cleanse and settle the spiritual and emotional energy in the space where the death occurred.

If you cannot or do not want to do this task, contact a cleaning company or the Band in your First Nations community. Household insurance companies may cover the cost of cleaning, but you will need to call them to find out if there is coverage for this. In a rental home, the family may be responsible for the clean-up and you should discuss this with the landlord.



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## **Tissue and Organ Donations**

If you are unsure about tissue or organ donations, talk to your family and friends. You will need to know if your loved one has an organ donor card on them. The police, RCMP or Band constables may be able to help confirm whether or not there was an organ donor card. If there is no organ donor card or you cannot find it, family can request that organs and tissues be donated by notifying the ME's office.

## **Public Fatality Inquiry**

In Manitoba, a Public Fatality Inquiry can be requested by the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner. However, if your loved one was in custody, a ward of the courts, or in police or RCMP custody when they died, then an inquiry will automatically take place. Information from an inquiry does not assign legal fault for a loved one's passing. The police, RCMP or Band constables will be able to explain the process to you.

## **Making Arrangements**

Funerals, wakes, and other memorial practices provide you with a chance to say goodbye to your loved one.

All cultures, religions, and spiritual perspectives have different customs and traditions. Elders, clergy or a funeral director can help you make choices that are right for you. Some people choose to hold a memorial where their loved one's body is not present.

If you choose to have your children and youth at the ceremonies, it is wise to talk with them ahead of time about what will happen. On the other hand, if a child or teenager does not want to attend, let them know that it is okay not to be there. Sometimes we forget that they are also experiencing and struggling with the same feelings as us adults.

If you choose not to have a funeral, wake or cultural service, you may ask the funeral home to care for the body of your loved one for you.

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If you want to, it is okay to say that the person died by suicide, and to acknowledge the pain the deceased was feeling. When we talk openly about suicide, without blame, and with sensitivity and compassion, we reduce the stigma of suicide. Shrouding a death by suicide with secrecy can increase feelings of guilt and shame and impair healing. When you feel ready to talk about the fact that your loved one died by suicide, it should be at a pace and in a way that is of your own choosing.

Do not hesitate to celebrate the life of your loved one and talk about happy memories. How someone died does not change what they meant to us when they were alive, or diminish what they brought to our lives and family. Some services have an open notebook available so that others can share their stories of your loved one.

A memorial service is similar to a funeral, except the body of the deceased person is not present. If you choose not to have a service, you can ask a funeral home to care for the body of your loved one.

To avoid any potential harmful effects on others who may be vulnerable and potentially at risk of suicide, consider the following suggestions:

- Present a balanced view of your loved one that includes positive traits, as well as those things they may have struggled with, such as drug abuse, depression, mental illness, trauma, etc. Distinguish between their qualities and accomplishments and their final act of suicide. Avoid glorifying, romanticizing or idealizing the person or their death.
- Although a prevailing belief may be that the afterlife is a much better place, this should not be emphasized publicly. For those attending the service or gathering who is dealing with suicidal thoughts, “the lure of finding peace or escape through death” may make suicide a stronger option.
- Communicate suicide’s painful and permanent consequences.
- Avoid overt details about the means and place of death.
- Emphasize help seeking behaviour and resources.

The costs of a funeral can be very difficult for family and friends. If you have First Nations Status, some help may be available, so contact your Band or Indian and Northern Affairs Canada. Your communities and any organizations your loved one belonged to may also be able to help.

If your loved one was in the Canadian Armed Forces, they may be given a military service. You will need to contact the Last Post Fund at Veteran’s Affairs for information.

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If your loved one was on Income Assistance, you may be able to get some financial help from them for the funeral. Some life insurance policies also cover expenses, so contact the insurance company's benefits information department. Other sources can include Canada Pension Plan or the Office of the Public Trustee.

### **Legal and Financial Matters**

If you do not understand the banking and legal affairs of the deceased, let your family know and get help. The local law society can advise you, or if you belong to a First Nations community, Indian and Northern Affairs may be able to help. Local organizations and communities can also help.

### **Assets or belongings**

Your loved one may have left a will or a note about their wishes for their belongings and assets. The deceased may have identified the person responsible for making sure their wishes are followed. That person is known as the "Executor", and they should be called as soon as possible after your loved one's passing.

The will may have to be proven valid in court and this is called "Probated". Any property that is shared, such as houses, cars or bank accounts, can be easily transferred to the surviving spouse or partner, and then that person must take financial responsibility for the assets.

### **Handwritten notes**

Sometimes a signed handwritten note by your loved one can be used as a will. This includes suicide notes. Be aware that this type of note can be reviewed in court and may not be considered a legal will if it is determined that your loved one was not mentally well when it was written.

### **If there is no will or your situation is complicated**

If there is no will, or if no will is found, the deceased died "intestate" and you may need to speak to the Public Trustee Office in your area. For other reasons, like marital separation or common-law relationships, you may need to contact a lawyer.

If your loved one lived in a First Nations community, you can contact Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (1-800-817-3977) for help.

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## Insurance

If your loved one had insurance for a house, car or life, you must inform the insurance companies of their death. In Canada, life insurance policies must have been in effect at least 24 months to be valid when the death is by suicide. Talk to a lawyer if you have trouble understanding the insurance policy.

## Personal documents

- P death certificate - you must have the death certificate before you can cancel, transfer and apply for benefits and obligations
- P birth certificate
- P First Nations Status card P certificate of citizenship P driver's license
- P marriage certificate
- P passport
- P personal will or note from loved one
- P Social Insurance Number
- P income assistance cards

## Banking and financial documents

- P bank account numbers, passbooks, statements (chequeing and savings)
- P bank and credit cards
- P investment records (stocks, bonds, RRSPs, GICs)
- P lease and/or rental contracts
- P loan agreements (monies owed or owing)
- P mortgage papers
- P safety deposit box number and key

## Health documents

- P **Provincial** Blue Cross number
- P **Provincial** Health Care number
- P First Nations Status cards
- P Veterans Affairs card

## Property documents

- P land title(s)
- P personal possessions (art work, jewellery)
- P vehicle registration(s)

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## Other documents

- P child support and alimony agreements
- P divorce papers and child custody papers
- P pardons and any other court documents (subpoenas, tickets, settlements, probation orders)
- P pensions and veterans information
- P income tax returns
- P employee benefit booklets
- P Unemployment Insurance payment cards
- P insurance policies (life, medical, home, car, business, mortgage)
- P membership cards (sports/recreation clubs, professional associations, libraries, points clubs)
- P utility account numbers (phone, gas, water, electricity)
- P student cards, pass cards, and any photo identification

Once all documents have been gathered, you will have to cancel, transfer and apply for benefits or obligations. Be aware that there are rules and fees associated with some of these matters.

## Items to cancel

- P Blue Cross or similar insurance
- P Provincial Health Cards
- P Bank cards in the name of your loved one - you will have to provide a certified copy of the death certificate, not a photocopy
- P Canada Pension Plan and Old Age Security - 1-800-277-9914. Your loved one's estate is entitled to the pension cheque for the month they passed away
- P Canada Post - redirect or cancel mail
- P Cheques can be cancelled by telephone - you will be asked for the name, address and social insurance number of the person
- P Credit cards - contact the issuing bank to cancel credit cards
- P Disability benefits - contact the local Employment Income Assistance office for provincial benefits. For Federal benefits, call
- P Doctor and dentist - notify the person's doctor, dentist, and any clinics they regularly attended
- P Email accounts and online social networks
- P Income assistance cheques - contact your Band office or local office

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- P Indian and Northern Affairs Canada Status card - 1-800-567-9604
  - P Insurance policies - notify all insurance companies with whom your loved one had policies (e.g., auto, business or life insurance). If appropriate, notify the person's employer in case there were any workplace insurance policies in place
  - P Leases/rental - cancel any lease or rental contracts in the name of your loved one, or transfer them to another name
  - P Seniors Income Supplement
  - P Seniors Shelter Benefits
  - P Memberships (sports/recreation clubs, professional associations, libraries) - cancel or transfer them to another name as appropriate
  - P Passport - if your loved one held a valid passport, you need to return it to the nearest passport centre or mail it in with a copy of the death certificate or letter stating why you are returning it. For more information, call 1-800-567-6868
  - P Social Insurance Number - 1-800-206-7218
  - P Unemployment Insurance benefits - contact your local Employment Income Assistance office
  - P Veterans Affairs benefits - if your loved one was a veteran, you may be eligible for help with funeral expenses. Contact Veterans Affairs at 1-866-522-2122

### **Items to transfer**

- P Insurance policies or rebate programs for co-ops and farmers
- P Joint bank accounts, credit cards, investments like RRSPs, GICs, etc.
- P Land titles
- P Stocks and bonds - ask your financial advisor or bank how to transfer these assets
- P Utility accounts (phone, gas, water and utilities) if your household utilities were in the name of your loved one
- P Vehicle registration - contact a registry office to help transfer your loved one's vehicles registration

### **Items to apply for**

- P Allowance for the survivor - 1-800-277-9914. This benefit for the surviving spouse (husband or wife) is based on income. Proof of marriage is required; common-law relationships will be considered. Apply for this one as soon as possible.

**P Children's benefit - 1-800-277-9914.** You may be able to get benefits for children under the age of 18 or for children between 18 and 25 who are full-time students. If any of these children are living with another caregiver (family member or guardian) and they are under 18, that person should apply for them. Children between 18 and 25 should apply for this benefit themselves

**P CPP Lump Sum Death Benefits - 1-800-277-9914.** This is based on the CPP contributions of your loved one. You will need to send a copy of the death certificate or statement of death, your birth certificate, and social insurance number

**P CPP Survivor's Benefit - 1-800-277-9914.** This is based on the contributions of your loved one. The amount given will depend on your age and other factors. Benefits for children may also be available

**P Guaranteed Income Supplement- 1-88-277-9914.** This is paid to the surviving spouse (husband or wife) over the age of 65, and is based on your income

**P Mortgage Life Insurance -** this is not the same as mortgage insurance. If your loved one held a mortgage life insurance, the mortgage may be paid upon their death. The mortgage company will need a copy of the death certificate. Call the bank or company that held the mortgage

**P Veterans Benefits for Aboriginal Veterans - 1-866-522-2122.** If your loved one was a veteran or a member of Canada's Armed Forces, you may be eligible for benefits.

Please note that some of these benefits are taxable to the person who receives them.

### **Other financial and legal matters**

**P Loans and personal debt -** loans (individual or co-signed) from a bank, company, or other institution may or may not be insured

**P Income taxes -** a final tax return must be filed. If your loved one passed away between January 1st and October 31st, the final return is due by April 30th of the next year. If they passed away between November 1st and December 31st, the final return is due 6 months after the death.

If tax returns from previous years have not been completed, they must also be filed. You should get a "clearance certificate" from Canada Revenue Agency. A clearance certificate shows that all amounts for which your loved one owed them has been paid. If you do not get a certificate, Canada Revenue Agency may try to collect your loved one's debt from you if you are the spouse. Contact Canada Revenue at 1-800-959-8281.

**P Employer -** contact your loved one's employer to collect a final pay cheque and let them know where to send the T4 slip. If your loved one worked for the Band, contact the Chief Financial Officer or finance department to take care of the final pay, benefits and the T4.

**P GST credit -** contact Canada Customs and Revenue Agency at 1-800-959-1953 for your loved one's GST credit.

**P Lawsuits -** judgements from lawsuits and collection agencies either for or against your loved one may have a claim against the estate. Contact a lawyer to help you.

**P Child support payments and alimony payments -** if your loved one was paying child support.

## **What to Say to Others**

You might find it hard to tell others how your loved one died. It is your choice how to talk about your loved one's death. Acknowledging that a death was by suicide can be an important part of healing; however, only you will know when that feels right for you. You may want to reach out and talk to a trusted person or a professional, such as your doctor, Elder, spiritual advisor, a mental health clinician, another person who has gone through what you are going through now, or a counsellor from your local crisis or distress line. They may help you figure out which words to use and how you want to talk about what has happened. There is no need to go into details of the passing, and it is okay to let people know what you can and cannot talk about. Employers, co-workers, school, landlords, social groups and friends outside your community may need to be told of your loved one's passing. You can ask someone else to make these phone calls for you if you cannot do this yet.



## **PERSONAL INFORMATION**

### **Understanding Suicide and Its Impact**

#### **Why People Die by Suicide**

Suicide occurs when someone's despair overcomes their hope. People who experience suicidal thoughts and feelings are suffering tremendous emotional pain. They have overwhelming feelings of hopelessness, despair and helplessness. People considering suicide feel as though their pain will never end and that suicide is the only way to stop their suffering. When people have thoughts of suicide, they often feel disconnected from others and the world around them. Someone can feel alone and hopeless even when surrounded by people who love and support them. Their pain can overwhelm their ability to ask for help and see options. At these times, it is difficult for them to access the caring and support around them.

Many factors and circumstances can contribute to someone's decision to end their life. Factors such as loss, addictions, trauma, depression, physical and mental illness, and major life changes can make some people feel overwhelmed and unable to cope. It is important to remember that it is how a person experiences an event that is important, not the event itself. What might seem small and unimportant to us may seem large and unbearable to someone else.

It is also important to remember it is not your fault that someone else made the decision to end their life.

#### **Know What to Expect from Yourself and Others**

Contrary to what others may think and want, you don't and won't just "get over it". All grief journeys are unique. Do not make any assumptions about how long your grief might last and what you will experience. Instead, consider taking it "one day at a time". As Dr. Alan Wolfelt says, there is "no reward for speed".

Emotional reactions to a suicide can be intense and complicated. Any death is a painful experience, regardless of the circumstances and whether it was expected or unexpected. A suicide death is traumatic and can leave someone feeling overwhelmed and unable to cope. People respond to traumatic events in their own way, according to their individual coping skills, past experiences and supports.

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The trauma of suicide can become a defining moment in a person's life and can change all the rules. It can cause someone to question their sense of self, others, faith and beliefs, as well as the world around them. For a while, nothing feels certain, and trying to re-establish order, meaning and balance is all the more difficult when we try to do it alone.

Right after the death of a loved one, people often find it hard to think clearly. It is not unusual to feel sick, angry, and overcome by sadness. And it is not unusual to feel ashamed, guilty and embarrassed, or even numb or nothing at all. Frequently people have difficulty concentrating and sleeping, and may find themselves continually replaying what has happened over and over in their mind. Sometimes people minimize the effect this event has had on them. Even in the same family, people will grieve, react and cope differently.

Your reactions may be stronger if you saw your loved one's death or found them after they died. It is important to remember that you are not to blame for their choices. Try to get help and talk to others.

Sometimes people feel relief after a suicide, especially when the relationship with the person who died was difficult and chaotic, or if they were suffering for a long period of time. It is not unusual for some people to become depressed following a suicide, and may themselves experience thoughts of suicide. If you or someone you know is experiencing thoughts of suicide, call your local crisis or distress line. There are trained and caring counsellors there who can and want to help you. Remember that time, sharing and support can move us to hope and healing and make us stronger.

### **Common Reactions to a Suicide Death**

There are some common feelings you might expect to experience after a suicide. These feelings are completely normal, given the circumstances. But it is important you remember that what you feel today is not how you will always feel. You will heal and you are not alone. There are people who want to listen and to help. You only have to ask.

### **Grief**

The death of someone precious is not to be resolved or fixed, but rather to be expressed, experienced, and gently, over time, to find its way to meaning. Never forget, however, that it does not mean there isn't peace, less pain, acceptance, accommodation, joy, and new meaning in our lives. We learn to live alongside our grief and to grow from it.

Each person will grieve differently. There is no right or wrong way to mourn the loss of your loved one.

In the weeks and months following a suicide death, some people will have nightmares and flashbacks, focus on the act of suicide itself, blame themselves and others, isolate themselves, and have no energy to do tasks. Family conflict may arise due to intense emotions and different ways of grieving.

### **Shock and numbness**

Suicide bereavement is one of the most intensely painful experiences you are likely to undergo. Initially, the pain may be so overwhelming that you turn off some of your emotions. You may feel like you are sitting in the audience watching a play about your own life, but not really taking part in that life yourself. Emotional numbness protects you from what has just happened, but at some point the numbness leaves and you will need to gradually experience the pain that has been buried.

### **Deep sadness**

Deep sadness is normal. Other common feelings associated with this sadness can include helplessness, hopelessness, fear, failure, anxiety, rejection and abandonment.

### **Fear**

You may fear that other family members or friends might die. A loss of self esteem, confidence, purpose and meaning in life can create that fear and contribute to depression.

### **Depression**

The world as you know it changed when your loved one died. Grief impacts everything, including sleep, eating habits, concentration, energy and motivation. It is important to pay attention to the signs of depression and to seek help if you notice yourself becoming depressed.

### **Anger and blame**

Anger and blame may be directed toward the person who died by suicide or toward those you perceive to be at fault.

### **Guilt**

Family and friends of those who died by suicide often feel they missed earlier warning signs of distress. Others may have decided to give up trying to help, or backed away because they themselves needed some distance in order to stay healthy. Hindsight almost always plays a role in our feeling guilty for what we think should have and could have done, but that is a false accusation. You are not responsible for your loved one's decision to take their own life.

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## **Shame**

It may be difficult for you to discuss how someone died because you are afraid you will be judged. Rather than make up stories, it is okay to simply let people know you are not ready to talk about the loss. Let family and friends know what you need from them. Secrecy will only intensify any feelings of shame.

## **Relief**

You may experience some feelings of relief after a suicide, especially when the relationship with the person who died was difficult and/or you watched them suffer for a long period of time.

## **Denial**

You may not fully accept the reality of the suicide. You may move in and out of denial. This is especially common in the initial phase of grief.

## **“Why” questions**

Asking “why” over and over in an effort to make sense of what has happened is a normal part of the healing process following a death by suicide. With suicide, even when people think they have touched upon or know the “answer”, the “Why” question can continue to surface. We struggle to find answers in an effort to ease our pain, but there is seldom an answer to our asking “why” that provides the relief and comfort we seek. In fact, comfort often comes from other sources and sometimes in unexpected ways.

## **Changes in relationships**

If people do not know what to say or do after a suicide, they may say or do nothing. As a result, you may feel abandoned at a time when you need people the most. Some people may pull away completely, which only adds to the hurt.

## **Spiritual or religious beliefs**

Previously held spiritual beliefs and values may be challenged and you may begin to question the meaning and purpose of life. Your religious or spiritual life might be deepened, challenged, renewed or changed as a result of your grief.

## **Thoughts of suicide**

Due to the intensity of the grief, some people just want the pain to end and may begin to experience thoughts of suicide. Having these thoughts is not unusual and it does not mean that you will act on them. However, it is important to ask for and seek help to discuss these thoughts and feelings. One place to start is your local crisis or distress line..

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## Moving Forward Through Grief

### Let Others Help You

Mourning the death of someone who died by suicide usually requires the support of others. No one should expect to do it alone. As mentioned earlier, some people may not know how to support you and some may pull away, but even one compassionate, understanding and supportive person can make a big difference. It is important to find that person, and you may not have to look far. Support is all around you.

It can be difficult asking for help, but please do it. Coping with all the feelings is much easier if you let other people help you and share your burden. Ask your friends, Elders, spiritual leader or a professional to support you in making decisions, and to help you identify and communicate what you need and want at this difficult time. Talk to your doctor or seek out medical help or help from a mental health professional, especially if you notice yourself becoming depressed. Asking for help is the smart thing to do.

“ I can release the pain that touches my memories, but only if I remember them. I can release my grief, but only if I express it. Memories and grief must have a heart to hold them.

(Source unknown)

”

### Claim Your Right to Grieve

Not only is it important to grieve, it is necessary to experience the pain of your loss in order to gain relief.

### Express Emotions

Grief is emotional. Let people you trust know when you need support. Show them how they can be helpful. Talk to others who have experienced a loss by suicide.

Crying is good and so is sharing your tears. If people don't know what to say or do, tell them that they don't have to do anything other than simply be there for you.

### Reach Out

If you feel you need more support than family or friends can provide, contact your doctor, your spiritual advisor or Elder, a counselling agency, the emergency room, or your local crisis or distress line.

### Take Action

Take care of your physical health and be aware of what your body is telling you. Do something active rather than just sitting and thinking. Physical activity is healthy and helps with healing and recovery. This could include walking, exercising, meditating, yoga, Qigong, writing,

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drawing, painting, or other forms of self expression and creativity. To learn more about other ways of coping with stress, visit [www.de-stress.ca](http://www.de-stress.ca).

## **Walking the Path of Grief**

### **Grieving Takes Time**

As your spirit begins to heal, your feelings will change. Grieving takes time and the amount of time is different for each person. Celebrate your loved one and honour them by remembering good things, stories, and the time you shared with them. Share these memories with others who you trust and who will listen to you, and also with your children. Others can sometimes see things that you cannot at this time and can help you continue on your way to healing. Remember that each person's individual grief journey is their own and do not allow others, no matter how good their intentions are, to make you doubt your feelings. Persons who are grieving are doing the best they can at that time.

Laughter can be very healing, so do not feel guilty about having some moments of joy during this difficult time. Some people have described their emotions as being so interconnected and close to their grief that they began laughing. Occasionally, laughter turned to tears without them even realizing the change of their emotions. Although that can be very confusing and perhaps feel like a setback, it is a normal part of grief and healing.

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Healing does not mean forgetting those who have died by suicide. You do not dishonour their memory when you heal, laugh, and live your life again. Your life may not be exactly as it was before, but that does not mean it needs to be worse. As a result of what has happened, over time you may know yourself more, have a better understanding of who you are and what you need, have new or different priorities, and be more involved in taking care of yourself and taking charge of your own mental health. There may be a period of time when you feel like dying because of their death and gradually begin to live again because of your love.

### **Later Reactions**

Some friends and family feel even more alone many months after their loved one's death. As time passes, others may think you no longer need their support. It is not unusual to relive many of the emotions of grief over and over in the years ahead. Be prepared to face some difficult times, and remember that even if you feel alone, there are family, friends and people in your community who are willing to help if you ask them. As well, you can always talk to a counsellor from your local crisis or distress line, no matter how much time has passed since your loved one died.

### **Keep on Talking**

When you talk about your loved one's death, you help others to learn about suicide and to share their feelings with you. Keeping suicide a secret makes it harder to heal. People from all communities and cultures have been touched by suicide. Some people prefer to deal privately with the death of their loved one and only share with a few. Let others know how you wish to deal with your loss. When the pain of your loss is too great, try to find something else to do for a short time - this may help settle your emotions and spirit. You need not feel guilty for taking a break from your grief; it is necessary for your healing. It is also okay to want some alone time, and to let those who care about you know when you need to be alone. Remember to do what feels right for you, and know that it is okay to say "No" when invited to do things you really don't want to do.

### **Cherish Your Memories**

Often those bereaved by suicide, both adults and children, have found comfort in holding on to items that remind them of their loved one. Some parents have even made quilts of their children's remaining clothes. Elders and other community leaders remind us to find balance in all things. Cherish these items and keep them close to you for comfort, but try not to become so attached to them that they keep you glued to your grief. Ultimately we learn to find and take comfort from within as well as from the world around us.

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Some people have found it helpful to write stories, journals and letters to the loved one who died or to others they feel may have been neglected through their grief journey, and sometimes even to themselves. There are many creative ways of communicating and processing our thoughts and feelings it's a matter of finding the one with which you feel the most comfortable.

### **Difficult Days**

There will be many times during your journey when things become more difficult, like the day of your loved one's death, birthdays, and holidays. You may have mixed feelings in the weeks leading up to those days. It helps to plan ahead and talk to other family members, friends and significant others about how you want to spend the day. This gives everyone a chance to prepare and support each other.

### **Finding the Answers**

You may never know the answer to "Why?" In most cases, your loved one was in a lot of emotional pain for a long period of time. Eventually you will be able to live with questions that do not get answered. Take care of yourself by following your regular routine so you can begin to heal. Try to eat regularly and as healthy as you can. Try to sleep and keep your energy levels up. Listen to some favourite music, enjoy your pet, or focus on a hobby. Go for a walk every day, or just spend some time outside with nature to remind you that it's important to keep going in your own life and for others left behind.

### **Sharing Circles and Support Groups**

As time goes by, you may find it helpful to talk to others who have been bereaved by suicide. The healing power and comfort of a shared experience is very strong. If you live in a First Nations community, ask your health centre, crisis unit or Elders if they have ongoing talking or healing circles, ceremonies or a sweat lodge. Many cities have peer support groups, friendship centres or gathering groups specifically designed to help.

If you are not comfortable or not ready to share in a group, perhaps ask for help from counsellors, clergy, nurses, clinics, crisis lines and chat rooms. There are some resources listed at the back of this handbook for that purpose.

### **Children and Teenagers**

All children grieve. Any child old enough to love and bond with another person is able to and will grieve. Therefore, all children need to be encouraged to participate in mourning rituals.

Children take their cues from parents and other adults because we are their emotional teachers. When children see and experience our grief, their own feelings and reactions are normalized and validated. They are given permission to express their own feelings and share them with others. If, however, they see us hiding our grief, they will also learn to hide and bury their feelings.



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There is actually much we can learn from children in processing feelings and grief. Children seem to have an almost natural and instinctive ability to heal, and tend to play out their experiences and grief in small doses, weaving times of play between times of sadness and grief. Even so, during the grieving process, they need us to help them feel safe and secure, included, and to know that what they feel is not unlike what they see in others.

Children and teenagers call tell when you are sad. They will ask questions and they need you to tell them the truth. If someone else tells them about your loved one's death, they can become scared or anxious and feel alone. It is okay to tell them your loved one was "so very sad, confused or in pain that they forgot they could get help". Let them know you understand, that you have the same feelings as they have, that those feelings are natural, and that it is okay to show those feelings.

Reassure them that someone will always be there to take care of them. And let them know that it is not their job to make things better for the family or to take care of others.

Children and teenagers may also ask questions about why the loved one died or where they went. You may not be able to answer their questions, but you can reassure them that nothing they said or did could have prevented the loved one from dying. Comfort them and let them know they are still loved and you will always listen to them. Remind children that when they feel sad, it is important for them to talk to someone and ask for help.

If you cannot talk about what happened, let your children know this and help them by letting them talk with other family members, Elders, people they trust, or a counsellor.

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While in many ways children and teenagers react in the same way as do adults, for example feeling sad and lost, that they are to blame, there can be some differences. They may feel:

Alone - the person who died didn't love them

Afraid - they will die also

Fearful - someone else they love will die

Worried - who will take care of them - they wished or thought of that person's death

Embarrassed - to see other people or to go back to school

Angry-with the person who died, at God, at everyone

Lonely - where did the person go and when are they coming back

In denial - pretend that nothing happened

Numb - can't feel anything

Frustrated - wish it would all go away

Many of these feelings mirror what adult's experience, and are by no means unique to children. However, children are sometimes more forthcoming in letting us know what they really think and feel. Remember that whatever your children and teenagers are feeling, they need support and opportunities to find expression, to be seen and to be heard. They also need to know that the person loved them, but because they were so sad, very confused, or in so much pain, they could not tell you and forgot that they could get help.

## How Others Can Help

Here are some suggestions as to what others can do to help you through your grief:

- Listen without judging you or your loved one's actions.
- Accept the intensity of your grief and feelings, and not attempt to change what you think or feel.
- Listen with their heart, and express their feelings with compassion. Cry with you and sit quietly with you.
- Tolerate and accept the endless search for "why".
- Do not assume or pretend to know your pain. Be open to learn and allow you to teach them about your experience.
- Make your loved one who died real by using their name, asking to see pictures, asking about their life.

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- Offer and provide information when appropriate. Know what supports are available in your community.
  - Be mindful that you may be experiencing feelings of guilt and blaming yourself. Remind yourself that this was not your fault and that you are not taking responsibility for your loved one's choice.
  - Remind you that your feelings are valid and normal considering what has happened.
  - If they think you may be suicidal, to ask you directly about suicide and get help immediately.
  - Be sensitive to difficult days like the anniversary of your loved one's death, birthdays, and holidays.
  - Respect your grieving process. Be patient and continue to offer help, even if you refuse it.
  - Be there because it makes you feel less alone, but understand that some- times you want to be alone and other times you don't.

Note: It is okay to use the word "suicide" and it is also important to be sensitive to your wishes. Using the word and talking about suicide can help the healing process, but only you can judge for yourself when you are ready to do so.

For more information, visit [www.reasonstolive.ca](http://www.reasonstolive.ca) or [www.suicideprevention.ca](http://www.suicideprevention.ca).

## Language

Words matter and the language we use can either support people's healing and offer comfort, or further stigmatize tragic situations and increase shame and secrecy. Stigma makes it all the more difficult for people to reach out for help. The terms "committed suicide" and "completed suicide" present particular problems because they are also used in connection with criminal offences. Suicide is not a crime, but negative terminology can place undue emphasis on how a person died, potentially linking their identity with how they died. In addition, the term "successful suicide" does not reflect reality - suicide is always a tragedy. "Suicide", "death by suicide" and "died by suicide" more accurately reflect what has occurred.

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## First Nations Prayer

I give you this one thought to keep - I am with you still - I do not sleep.

I am a thousand winds that blow; I am the diamond glints on snow;

I am the sunlight on ripened grain; I am the gentle autumn rain.

When you awaken in the morning rush I am the swift, uplifting rush of quiet birds in circled flight.

I am the soft stars that shine at night.

Do not think of me as gone - I am with you still - in each new dawn.

Author Unknown

## RESOURCES

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- Hope and Healing: A Practical Guide for Survivors of Suicide 2007. 2009 Consortium for Organizational Mental Healthcare (COMH). Faculty of Health Sciences, Simon Fraser University and the BC Ministry of Health. [www.comh.ca/publications/pages/hh/](http://www.comh.ca/publications/pages/hh/)
- Fine, C. (1999). No Time to Say Goodbye: Surviving the Suicide of a Loved One. New York: Doubleday.
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- Ross, E. (1987). After Suicide: A Unique Grief Process. Iowa: Lynn Publications.
- Supporting Suicide Friends, Family and Significant Others (1999, November). SIEC Alert, p. 1.

## Reading List

**“A Man You Know is Grieving: 12 Ideas for Helping Him Heal from Loss”** by Tom R. Golden (Willowgreen Publishing, 1998). ISBN: 1885933274.

**“Bathed in Blue”** by Rona Ross (Chipmunka Press, 2008). ISBN: 9781847477460.

**“Beyond the Blues: A Workbook to Help Teens Overcome Depression”**  
by Lisa M. Schab (Instant Help Publications, 2008). ISBN: 1572246634.

**“Chee Chee: A Study of Aboriginal Suicide”** by Al Evans  
(Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2004). ISBN: 9780773526877.

**“Dying to Be Free: A Healing Guide for Families After a Suicide”**  
by B. Cobain (Hazeldon Publishing, 2006). ISBN: 9781592853298.

**“Healing Your Grieving Body: 101 Physical Practices for Mourners”**  
by Dr. Alan Wolfert.

**“How to Survive the Loss of a Love”** by Harold H. Bloomfield, MD, Melba Colgrove,  
Ph.D., Peter Williams (Mary Books/Prelude Press, 2000). ISBN: 0-931580-43-9.

**“Out of the Nightmare: Recovery from Depression and Suicidal Pain”**  
by David L. Conroy, Ph.D. (Authors Choice Press, 2006). ISBN: 0595414974

**“Swallowed by a Snake: The Gift of the Masculine Side of Healing”**  
by Tom Golden (Golden Healing Publishing, 2000).

**“The Wilderness of Grief: Finding Your Way”** by Alan Wolfert, Phd.,  
Centre for Loss and Life Transition (Companion Press, 2007). ISBN: 1-879651-52-1.

**“Understanding Your Suicide Grief: Ten Essential Touchstones for Finding Hope and Healing Your Heart”** by Alan Wolfert, Phd., Companion Press, Fort Collins, Colorado, 2009. ISBN: 978-1-879651-58-6.

**“When Nothing Else Matters Anymore. A Survival Guide for Depressed Teens”** by B. Cobain (Free Spirit Publishing, Minneapolis, MN, 1998). ISBN: 1-57542-036-8.

## Suicide Support and Crisis Services

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## Websites

Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention - [www.suicideprevention.ca](http://www.suicideprevention.ca)

Alberta Health Services, CalgaryHealth Region -  
[www.calgaryhealthregion.ca/programs/mhpip/HealingYourSpirit.htm](http://www.calgaryhealthregion.ca/programs/mhpip/HealingYourSpirit.htm)  
[www.calgaryhealthregion.ca/programs/mhpip/HopeandHealing.htm](http://www.calgaryhealthregion.ca/programs/mhpip/HopeandHealing.htm)

American Association for Suicidology - [suicidology.org](http://suicidology.org) American

Foundation for Suicide Prevention - [www.afsp.org](http://www.afsp.org)

Center for Loss - [www.centerforloss.com](http://www.centerforloss.com)

De-Stress - [www.de-stress.ca](http://www.de-stress.ca)

Dr. Dan Siegal - [www.drdansiegel.com](http://www.drdansiegel.com)

Centre for Suicide Prevention - [www.suicideinfo.ca](http://www.suicideinfo.ca)

Honouring Life Network is an Aboriginal Youth Suicide Prevention resource site in English, French and Inuktitut - [www.honoringlife.ca](http://www.honoringlife.ca)

International Association for Suicide Prevention - [www.iasp.info](http://www.iasp.info)

Metanoia provides information and resources addressing suicide, grief and loss -  
[www.metanoia.org/suicide](http://www.metanoia.org/suicide)

Manitoba Suicide Line - [www.ReasontoLive.ca](http://www.ReasontoLive.ca)

National Aboriginal Health Organization provides information and resources on First Nations, Inuit and Métis persons - [www.naho.ca](http://www.naho.ca)

Suicide Awareness Voices of Education (SAVE) provides information and resources for suicide - [www.save.org](http://www.save.org)

Suicide Prevention Resource Centre - [www.sprc.org](http://www.sprc.org)

North American Two Spirit Information Pages has information and resources regarding suicide for First Nations, Inuit, Métis, American Indian, and Alaska Native and Aboriginal Mixed Race persons - [people.ucalgary.ca/~ptrembla/index.htm](http://people.ucalgary.ca/~ptrembla/index.htm)

Trauma - [www.trauma-informed.ca](http://www.trauma-informed.ca)

Turtle Island Network is a First Nations gateway for information and contains the link to the National Residential School Survivors Crisis Line at 1-866-925-4419 - [www.turtleisland.org](http://www.turtleisland.org)



## Disclaimer

By using this “After a Suicide” handbook, you acknowledge and agree that any information contained in this handbook is provided on an “as is” basis. While every effort has been made to ensure accuracy, we do not provide any express or implied warranties on the accuracy of the information. By using this handbook, you acknowledge that there may be errors and those errors, once known, will only be corrected through later editions of the handbook.

By using this handbook, you acknowledge that you understand and agree that the information provided through this handbook is intended for general understanding and education only.

This handbook is not, and is not intended to be used as, a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician, psychiatrist, psychologist, nurse, or other qualified healthcare provider before you undergo any treatment or seek answers to any questions you may have regarding any medical condition that may result from your grieving after losing your loved one to suicide.

This handbook is not, and is not intended to be used as, a substitute for legal advice. Always seek the advice of your lawyer before pursuing any legal avenue.

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