If you are reading this, someone you know and love died by suicide. We are very sorry for your loss.

Most deaths that family and friends cope with are not traumatic deaths such as suicide. The grief reactions often are stronger and last longer when the death is by suicide. Many grieving people have symptoms of acute stress and post-traumatic stress. Therapists would say these are normal responses to abnormal events. Healing from these symptoms is a long, slow process.

Get ready for powerful emotions

When someone gets news of a sudden loss, the body responds physically and emotionally. These reactions may be quite strong. Because they happen automatically, you may feel out of control. This may be scary but it is normal. Most people feel some of these responses. You may feel some for a short time and others for a longer time. You may feel them one at a time or all at once. Here are some of the reactions you may feel:

**Shock.** You might feel numb or that your loved one's suicide couldn't possibly be real.

**Anger.** You might feel angry with your loved one for abandoning you or leaving you to cope with the grief. Or you might feel angry with yourself or others for missing clues about suicidal intentions.

**Despair.** You might be very sad, lonely or feel helpless. Some people have collapsed or even considered suicide themselves.

**Guilt.** You might blame yourself for your loved one’s death. The truth is that only one person is responsible for the suicide, and that is the victim. Accepting this does not mean that you do not love them or have compassion for their emotional pain. It means that we accept that we cannot read minds or control other’s behavior.

**Confusion.** Many people try to understand why their loved one took his or her life. But you’ll likely always have some unanswered questions.

**Feelings of rejection.** You might wonder why your relationship wasn’t enough to keep your loved one from committing suicide.

**Relief.** You might feel relief, if the person who died was abusive or had been threatening to harm themselves or others.

You might have **reactions of stress** such as nightmares, flashbacks, trouble concentrating, withdrawing, feeling scared for no reason, feeling that something bad might happen, and repeatedly reliving the death. You may have stronger reactions if you witnessed or discovered the suicide.

Early decisions

If you are a family member, you may need to make decisions about viewing the body and planning a funeral. Before you view the body, you may wish to discuss your options with the funeral director. It is your decision whether to view the body and how much of the body to view.
What do I tell people?

Some of us have been told that suicidal people are sinful, weak, or selfish. These are not true. If you believe these ideas, you might have trouble talking about suicide and you might not ask for help or support. This could leave you feeling isolated.

One of the best reasons to be honest about your loved one dying by suicide is that it will give your friends and family the opportunity to support you in appropriate ways.

Why did they do it?

This question may be in your thoughts for some time. You might have some idea of the reason for the suicide, you are likely seeing only part of the picture. You may discover that your loved one suffered from years of distress, addiction or other mental illness.

Most suicides follow an event such as losing a job, a breakup of a relationship, or learning bad news. Misconceptions occur when we mistake one of these events for the cause of the suicide. Instead, the suicide is likely due to a several stressors and risk factors. Those who tried suicide and lived have told us that the main goal of a suicide is not to end life but to end pain.

Alcohol and drugs

While depression, anxiety and other mood disorders are the most common risk factors for suicide, alcohol and drug abuse are the second most common. Alcohol and drug abuse cause many problems for the user. These problems can increase the risk of suicide. In addition, during the time right before a suicide attempt, alcohol or other drugs will lower inhibitions and make the person act more impulsive.

Common characteristics of those who die by suicide

Friends and family members often feel they could have prevented the death. Sometimes learning about common characteristics can help ease the feelings of guilt or blame.

Suicide victims often have:

- A mood disorder such as major depression, anxiety, or bipolar disorder.
- Chronic pain or a serious illness.
- A high sensitivity to emotional pain.
- A strong need for control. Many people who die by suicide have an obsessive need for control.
- Unrealistically high expectations of themselves and others.
- Very high goals. They always push themselves to do better.
- Fear of failure. They may think that success pleases others and failure causes people not to like them.
- Low self-esteem. They may feel useless or like a burden to others.
- Hopelessness. They feel that life will never get better.
- Childhood trauma. They may have emotional conflicts, unmet needs, and poor coping skills.
- Talent or high intelligence. Gifted people may feel that others expect more from them. They often feel different and withdraw.
- Made other attempts disguised as reckless behavior.
Explaining suicide to children

“What should I tell the children?” is often asked after a suicide. Many people believe it is best to shield children from the truth, that somehow this will protect them. More often than not, the opposite is true.

Misleading children, avoiding the subject, or telling fibs to them about how someone died can do much more harm than good. As Mr. Rogers wisely said, “Anything that is mentionable is manageable.”

When children hear the truth from someone else, their trust can be difficult to regain. They may get wrong information or be afraid to talk about their feelings or ask questions. When you talk to your children about suicide, you have the opportunity to provide truthful, age-appropriate information as well as loving reassurance.

Children and teens may have many feelings at the same time or simply may not feel anything at all in the beginning. Whatever they are feeling, the important thing to remember is that they understand that it’s okay to have feelings and it’s okay to let their feelings out. If they want to keep them to themselves for a while, that’s okay too. Children will express their grief as time passes.

After children learn that the death was by suicide, one of their first questions might be, “What is suicide?” You can say that people die in different ways. Some die from cancer, heart attacks, or accidents. Suicide means that a person made themselves die. If they ask how the person killed themselves, be gentle but honest.

Some ways to explain suicide might be:

- “Your brain is part of your body, just like your heart. Sometimes a person’s brain gets sick and they die.”
- “She had a sickness called depression and it caused her to die.”

Another way to say it might be, “Our thoughts and feelings come from our brain. Sometimes a person’s brain gets sick. The sickness makes a person to feel very bad inside. It also makes a person’s thoughts get mixed up so they can’t think clearly. Some people can’t think of any other way to stop the bad feelings, so they try to stop being alive. They forget that they can get help.”

Remind children that most people who have depression do not die because of it. Also stress that there are many ways to get help. Some people who were getting help for their depression die anyway. Just as in other illnesses, a person can get the best treatment and still not live. If this is what happened in your family, children can usually understand that when it is explained to them.

Children need to know that the person who died loved them. But, because of the illness, the person may not have been able to tell them how much they are loved. The person who died might have been too sick to think about how the children would feel after they died. Remind the children that the suicide was not their fault. Nothing they said or did caused the death.

However you explain suicide, children need to know they can talk about it and ask questions. They need to know that there are people who will listen. They need to know that they won’t always feel the so sad, things will get better, and that they will always be loved and taken care of.
Healthy coping

After a loved one’s suicide, you may be physically and emotionally exhausted. As you work through your grief, be careful to protect your own well-being.

Have someone stay with you for some time. Feeling scared is a normal response to hearing traumatic news.

Avoid alcohol. It is a depressant and will only make your healing from grief slower. Instead, plan a treat for yourself like a nice meal, a warm bath, or a movie.

Eat well, drink water and get some exercise. Remember to take slow deep breaths often.

Keep in touch with others who support you. Reach out to loved ones, friends and spiritual leaders for comfort, understanding and healing. Surround yourself with people who will listen when you need to talk as well as those who’ll spend time with you when you’d rather be silent.

Grieve in your own way. Do what's right for you. There is no right way to grieve. If you find it too painful to visit your loved one's gravesite or share the details of your loved one's death, wait until you’re ready.

Don’t rush yourself. Losing someone to suicide is a massive blow and healing must occur at its own pace. Don’t be hurried by anyone else’s expectations that it's been "long enough."

Grief is a back and forth process. Some days will be better than others, even years after the suicide, and that’s okay. Healing doesn’t happen in a straight line.

Consider joining a support group for those affected by suicide. Sharing your story with others who are experiencing the same type of grief might help you find a sense of purpose or strength. However, if you find going to these groups does not help you with your grief, seek out other means of support such as counseling.

Be prepared for painful reminders. Anniversaries, holidays and other special occasions can be painful reminders of your loved one’s suicide.

Don’t judge yourself for being sad. Some find it helpful to change or delay family traditions that are too painful. Some people find it comforting to create rituals to honor their loved one during these times.

Ways to honor your loved one

- Plant a tree in their memory.
- Write about your loved one. If you wish, share it in a way that feels right to you.
- Ask others to contribute their favorite memories or photos, and use them to make a scrapbook
- Cook your loved one’s favorite food, take part in activities they liked, listen to music they enjoyed, or read a book that reminds you of them.
- Train to be a grief volunteer, take part in a support group, or participate in a suicide awareness walk.
How to cope with strong emotional reactions or numbness

When you are overwhelmed with emotional pain, you need a way to detach so that you can gain control. Grounding ‘anchors’ you to the present and to reality.

Many people who have been through a traumatic event struggle with either feeling too much (overwhelming emotions and memories) or too little (numbing and dissociation). It is very helpful to keep a balance between the two, conscious of reality and able to tolerate it.

Grounding can help you when you feel like you have lost control of your surroundings. Grounding focuses on distraction and will help extreme negative feelings. Grounding can be done any time, any place, anywhere and no one has to know.

Practice grounding daily so that when you become anxious you can use it right away.

Keep your eyes open and turn the light on to stay in touch with the present. Take slow, deep breaths.

Stay neutral. Do not make judgments of “good” and “bad.” Focus on the present, not the past or the future.

Do not focus on your negative feelings. You want to distract away from negative feelings, not get in touch with them.

Practice saying kind statements as if you were talking to your best friend such as, “You are a good person going through a hard time. You will get through this.”

Grounding

Here are a few strategies that helped other grieving people.

- Look around and find 5 things that are the color green or just describe your environment in detail.
- Play a “favorites” game with yourself. Try to think of favorite cars, T.V. shows, or flowers.
- Play the Animal ABC game. (A is for aardvark, B is for bulldog, C is for caribou, etc.)
- Count to 10 or say the alphabet very slowly.
- Repeat a favorite saying to yourself such as the Serenity Prayer or “This feeling will pass.”
- Think of a favorite place in detail. Focus on the sounds, colors, and smells of a soothing place like the beach.
- Run warm water over your hands.
- Place a cool washcloth on your forehead.
- Grab tightly onto your chair as hard as you can.
- Touch various objects around you such as a pen, keys, or your clothing. Compare the objects you touch. Is one colder? Lighter?
- Distract your body by rubbing your hands together or massaging your ears from top to bottom.
- Carry a small object in your pocket such as a small rock, ring, or piece of cloth that you can touch.
- Plan a treat for yourself, such as a warm bath, flowers, or a massage.
Healing from the pain of your grief

After a loved one’s suicide, you might feel like you can't go on or that you'll never enjoy life again.

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

When should you start feeling better? Each of us grieves differently and it is important to have patience with yourself (and other family members) while you each walk through your grief journey. It is also important to remember that as you move on, you are not leaving your loved one behind. You will never leave the memory of them behind.

With time and healing, your memories of your loved one will bring you comfort. With time, you will be able to celebrate and honor their life.

Supporting a grieving friend or family member:

- Spend time with them. Listen and do not interrupt.
- Offer your help and a listening ear even if they have not asked for help.
- Be ready to support them during grief upsurges.
- Offer your support during difficult times such as holidays or the anniversary of the traumatic event.
- Don’t try too hard to divert them by talking about something else. Sometimes it is best just to be quiet.
- Don’t take their anger or other feelings personally.
- Help with everyday tasks like meals, cleaning, errands or child care.
- Don’t be afraid to talk about the person who died. It is comforting to hear others’ positive memories.

Know when to get professional help

If you have intense reactions that keep you from doing your everyday activities, think about finding a mental health therapist. Professional help is especially important if you think you might be depressed or you have thoughts of harming yourself.

You might benefit from individual or family therapy. Either will get you through the worst of the crisis and help you adjust to life.

Grieving is not weakness
Nor absence of faith.
Grieving is a natural as
Crying when you are hurt,
Sleeping when you are tired or
Sneezing when your nose itches.
It is nature's way
Of healing a broken heart.

~Doug Manning
Grief Support Services Library books
Call 218-786-4402 for library times and location

For adults
Dying to be Free: A Healing Guide to Families after a Suicide  Cobain, Beverly
After Suicide Loss  Jordan, Jack
The Wilderness of Suicide Grief  Wolfelt, Alan
No Time to Say Goodbye  Fine, Carla
After a Parent’s Suicide  Requarth, Margo

For youth
Living When a Young Friend Commits Suicide  Grollman, Earl
Straight Talk about Death for Teenagers  Grollman, Earl
Grieving the Sibling You Lost  Goldblatt Hyatt, Erika

For children
Someone I Love Died by Suicide  Cammarata, Doreen
After a Suicide Death: An Activity book for Grieving Kids  The Dougy Center
When Dinosaurs Die  Brown, Marc

For professionals
Grief after Suicide  Jordan, JR
Touched by Suicide  Meyers and Fine
Therapeutic & Legal Issues for Therapists  Weiner, Kayla M

Crisis resources
Essentia Health 24-Hour Crisis Line 218-723-0099 or 1-888-826-0099
Txt4life Suicide Prevention Resource Text: “LIFE” to 611222 or call 1-800-273-8255

Websites
www.save.org  Suicide Awareness Voices of Education
www.afsp.org  American Fdtn for Suicide Prevention
www.suicidology.org  American Assoc of Suicidology

Visit our website for grief materials you can download.  www.essentiahealth.org/griefsupportduluth

Support groups and Counseling Services
Essentia Health Grief Support Services offers support groups for adults, teens, and children. The groups are free and open to the public. Individual or family therapy can also help.

The Adult Grief Support Group for friends and family meets every month on the 3rd Tuesday from 7:00 to 8:30 p.m.

The Family Members Suicide Support Group is for people 18 or older who lost a family member by suicide. This group meets the 3rd Monday of each month from 7:00 to 8:30 p.m.

Both groups meet at St. Mary’s Medical Center, on the second floor, in the Grief Support Library (Room 2216).

The Person-to-Person program matches trained volunteers with people who have had a similar loss.
For more information or to schedule grief counseling, call 218-786-4402 or email griefcenter@essentiahealth.org.