



Bereaved Parents of the USA

A support group for parents, grandparents and siblings who have suffered the death of a child, grandchild or sibling.

SUICIDE

Suicide is the eighth leading cause of death in the United States, ahead of both homicide and AIDS.

The highest numbers are in the 15 to 34 age group. Statistics are small comfort to parents of suicide victims who now face the loss of their child plus the heightened negative emotions which suicide leaves in its wake.

Normal grief reactions such as shock, guilt, denial, anger, and depression will occur and are intense for the families of suicide victims. Searing flashbacks of the suicide scene may add to that intensity. Parents often feel a deeper sense of guilt and failure than those whose child died in other ways. They feel they should have known what was going to happen, that they missed vital clues, that they are somehow responsible for not preventing the suicide, that they didn't love enough, that the dead child didn't love them enough, that they were poor parents. These feelings persist even though most psychiatrists will tell you that if a person is determined to complete suicide, he or she will find a way in spite of anyone's best efforts to prevent the act.

Society's attitude toward suicide often exacerbates the parents' negative emotions. Generally speaking, society frowns on suicide and looks toward the parents as possessing poor parenting skills. They may point at mental illness as the cause and scrutinize a family's history of aberrant behavior. The clergy often is at a loss to know what to say since many believe the Bible points to suicide as a mortal sin. Consequently, they may be somewhat tongue-tied in trying to comfort. (Careful Bible reading *will not* reveal that Jesus condemned suicide although most people do not know that.)

If your child left a suicide note, you have some understanding of his or her frame of mind. Without a note, the question *why* burns more deeply. If your child had a troubled past or was receiving mental health services, you may be able to conclude that medication was wrong or that irrational thinking beyond his or her control led to the act.

The question *why*, with or without a note, will haunt you for months or even years as you strain to gain understanding of the dynamics of suicide. In your search for answers you may read about suicide, evaluate what you read, and apply what you have learned to your own personal situation. You will examine your life and coping techniques, which is also a natural part of any bereavement. You will no doubt make changes in your beliefs and actions. For many, a kinder, more understanding person will emerge.

As time goes on, you will realize you may never have all the answers, the *why* will grow less urgent, and you will finally be able to put it to rest as one of life's unanswerable questions. You will not get to this last stage easily or quickly. But hold to the thought that you will get there as you grow and heal.

Many parents are able to deny the death was a suicide. Short of the use of a gun for an undeniably self-inflicted wound, parents frequently look for alternate causes. Some are able to conjure up other elaborate scenarios for the death, and some are so convinced of these scenarios that they never face the fact of suicide, thus slowing their progress down grief's twisting, torturous road. It is normal to have some denial, and that denial may put off parts of the grieving process until your conscious mind and emotions are strong enough to deal with the facts. This is not necessarily a bad thing. Parents whose child died by other means also experience denial. Saying the word "suicide" when someone asks how your child died is especially hard. You can measure your progress by the fact that it gets easier to say aloud, but you will never like the word.

For all parents, guilt and what-ifs go hand in hand with grief. The guilt after a suicide can be all-consuming for months or even years. You find yourself recalling every cross word you ever said, every wrong decision you ever made, every turn of events you think you could have altered. At first it is impossible to admit that you did the best you could given what you knew (your own level of maturity) at the time. Do you really know a parent who gets up in the morning and asks, "Now let's see what I can do today to make this child miserable"? Somewhere in your grief you will finally accept that you did your best, but if you didn't, you will learn to forgive yourself for your mistakes, resolving to do better. Forgiving yourself and your child is a big hurdle along grief's rocky road and is a sign of the healing you are striving for.

As you watch any surviving children try to deal with the suicide of their sibling, you may experience anger at the child who died, at others you feel contributed to the death, at society for its attitudes toward suicide, or at God for letting it happen. Society generally does not understand the anger that can go with grief.

Even to family members, your anger may seem inappropriate, frightening, and upsetting. For this reason you may want to seek professional help to deal with the anger, you may want to write down your feelings as a way of defusing them without doing harm to your surviving family and those around you, you may want to attend a support group of bereaved parents where understanding is abundant, or you may be fortunate enough to have close friends or clergy who will listen non-judgmentally. Do not swallow your anger because it will fester inside you and increase the depression you are already experiencing. Rational anger is a healthy emotion which can be a steppingstone toward positive resolution of grief.

Remember that crying is normal so don't censure yourself for it. As a bereaved parent you will cry, you will get depressed, you will think you're going crazy, and you may wish you could swap places with your dead child. These are all normal grief reactions.

Acknowledge that your surviving children, if you have any, need your loving attention after their sibling's suicide since that death may make them feel especially fragile and less secure in their ability to control their own lives. They, too, will feel society's ambivalence about the manner of death. Because they are trying not to upset you further, they may be reluctant to discuss their true feelings. If they seek others for solace, be understanding of that but do embrace every opportunity for honest discussion and reassurance of your faith in them and your love for them.

At the beginning of your grief journey, you will think nothing good can come from the soul-wrenching experience of your child's suicide, but you can grow from your grief and reach a new understanding of life and the way it should be lived. Other families have come to terms with suicide, eventually sifting out happy memories of their child to carry in their hearts. You cannot, after the fact, change the circumstances of the death, but you can change yourself for the better. Look for every opportunity to do that.

*Written by Elizabeth B. Estes
in memory of Patricia Lane Estes
daughter of Charles and Elizabeth Estes*

The Bereaved Parents of the USA is a non-profit, self-help organization that offers friendship, support and understanding to bereaved parents (including foster and step-parents), grandparents and siblings after the death of a child, grandchild or sibling regardless of the age of the child or the cause of death. Individuals differ but are all alike in seeking ways to overcome grief. Grieving people can adjust and life eventually can have meaning again.

Other brochures which are available are:

Bereaved Parents of the USA – Information
Sudden Death
Prolonged Illness
For Bereaved Grandparents
When a Child Dies: What Medical Personnel Can Do
Emergency Personnel: How to Help the Family
After the Sudden Illness, Injury or Death of a Child

For further information, contact BP/USA at PO Box 95, Park Forest, IL 60466 or by calling 708-748-7866. Our website, www.bereavedparentsusa.org is also available on the internet. You may find out about chapter locations and other groups which offer help and you may read the current and past newsletters and other publications and brochures there. Information about our annual Gathering is also posted on the web.

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