

## SUICIDE 101

By: Mort Schrag  
Bereaved Father  
Los Angeles, CA

**YOUR CHILD HAS DIED** .....The death of anyone you love can be devastating. The death of a child can be overwhelming and incomprehensible; after all, the natural order of things is for children to bury parents, not the reverse. A parent's job is to care for and protect his child. In the final analysis, you and I were unable to do this. In failing to meet expectations we have for ourselves, we feel guilt.

**BY SUICIDE:** But the death of a child by suicide adds yet another dimension that can dramatically increase the already excruciating pain.

Any parent whose child has died may find that people grow distant, almost as if the catastrophe that has engulfed his life is somehow catching, like a virus-borne disease. Even relatives and long-time friends frequents may stay away, saying, in essence, "Don't brush off on me."

Add to this common phenomenon society's abhorrence of suicide (which even in 21<sup>st</sup> century American remains a great taboo), and the result is a heaping of blame, guilt and shame on the already distraught parent – an action that is not only unenlightened, but the vast majority of cases, undeserved. Typically, the parent of the suicide asks himself, "Why?" If he understands why, he still wrestles with another demon: "Why this child?" This is enough of a burden without people questioning his role as parent and implying that his behavior somehow led to the child to suicide.

**GUILT:** Many people assume that any survivor of a suicide is a member of a dysfunctional family, someone who must feel intense guilt for doing "bad" things that caused the child to kill himself. Self-righteous, ignorant accusations (more often implied than stated) may strengthen the accuser's perception of himself as an upholder of society's traditional mindset and provide a rationale for his shunning the "guilty" parent. Wracked with pain and anguish, it may take all the energy you can muster, but such an accusation must be confronted honestly. In all likelihood, you loved your child and tried in every way you could to understand what he was going through and to help him. The love and support you offered your child, the doctors and other knowledgeable people you consulted, the efforts you made to intervene – all demonstrate the depth of your love and caring. While it is natural to feel you could have done more, and to wish the outcome had been different, you did your very best. You have nothing to be ashamed of, or to feel guilty about.

**"IF ONLY..."** If only I had done something differently, the suicide might not have occurred." Every survivor of suicide thinks this, but there is no way of knowing if it is

true. You can think of a hundred “if only” scenarios, but they are all expressions of guilt over the unrealistic assumption that you could have been omnipotent and prevented the suicide. Distorted though his thinking may have been the decision to die was your child’s. He searched for a solution, but ultimately found the extreme pain of daily living to great to bear. In most cases, as in those who suffered from major depression or other uncontrollable mental illness, the death was not the fault of the child. And it certainly was not YOUR fault.

“If only’s” cannot bring back your child, and even if it were possible to go back in time and substitute an “if only” scenario for the actual situation, there probably would have been a similar outcome. Dwelling too long on “if only” can defer the healing process and keep you stalled on the road to recovery. We all do things on occasion that make our child unhappy, but any guilt feelings must be weighed against or many acts of outreach and love. Forgiving yourself is the only way to relieve the guilt and allow healing to begin.

**TERMINOLOGY:** When a person dies by suicide, it is commonly said that he “committed suicide.” This phrase is particularly hurtful to survivors because of the stigma that it perpetuates. People “commit” crimes, deliberately unlawful acts. People are “committed” to institutions because they presumably are unable to care for themselves properly. But our children have not committed crimes; they have taken their own lives out of desperation and feelings of hopelessness. It is terrible enough that they died in this way; we should not stand idly by as people add to our burden the sense that our children committed criminal acts. Recently bereaved people often have a great difficulty expressing feelings publicly. But as they regain a degree of strength and start out on the long journey toward recovery, one of the feelings they might want to express is resentment over the additional unwarranted insult contained in the expression “committed suicide.”

**ABOUT MENTAL ILLNESS:** Suicide often results from mental illness that, more often than not, was not diagnosed. Society is reluctant to recognize that the brain can become just as sick as any other part of the body. Because a chemical imbalance in the brain is harder to detect than a broken leg or heart disease, this most important underlying cause of suicide frequently goes undetected. A brain disorder is a matter of biochemistry and genetics. It has nothing to do with willpower, how a person was raised, or failure of character. Most people who attempt suicide are not acting on sudden impulse or out of moral or physical frailty. They are neither cowards nor heroes. They are engulfed in an illness that causes unceasing pain, an illness that generates an urge to self-destruction as the only escape from that pain.

Failure of a marriage, a reprimand by a parent, or the loss of a job may trigger suicide, but the most common cause is major depression, the most pervasive form of mental illness. Events in a person’s life and his psychological makeup combine with the biology of his brain and his genetic inheritance to create an unmanageable problem; unbearable emotional stress, causing constant pain, with no relief in sight.

Of her struggles to overcome depression, my daughter wrote, “It’s like trying to draw a rainbow with a black pen.”

If depression is diagnosed, it most often can be treated with medication. But when it is not diagnosed, or the patient’s body is resistant to medication, the ensuing months of insomnia, anger, lack of appetite, inability to enjoy anything and feelings of unhappiness and futility can lead to giving up hope and to suicide.

Note: The above was excerpted from a pamphlet **Recovering From Your Child’s Suicide** by Mort Schrag. To obtain a copy contact Mort online at [sabamortla@aol.com](mailto:sabamortla@aol.com)