

# “Shame Festers in Dark Places”: Keeping Suicide Secret

by Stacey Freedenthal, PhD, LCSW

A friend recently sent me an anguished email about a friend of hers whose teenage daughter died the week before. The mother was telling others that the death was an accident, when it was unquestionably a suicide.

This saddened my friend greatly – not only the suicide itself, but also the family’s shame, so intense that they had to lie about their daughter’s death. It saddens me, too.

## Understanding Shame and Secrecy

I do understand the root of such shame. Suicide still carries an enormously heavy stigma in many, if not most, circles. People may blame the victim or the family, without realizing that the fault lies with the forces of suicide itself, in the same way that people who die from heart attacks, strokes, and cancer are not to blame.

I understand not wanting to answer questions laced with accusations of blame: “Did you see any clues?” “What did you do to help her?” “Did she have a bad childhood?”

And I understand not wanting to accept that a loved one ended her own life. Denying a loved one’s suicide can spare the survivors from agonizing questions, questions usually coming from grief rather than reason, but still excruciating: Could I have done more to prevent her suicide? Why wasn’t I enough to live for? Did I cause her suicide in any way?

I understand, but I wish that families who hide a suicide would make a different decision. I say this not only for the public at large, which would benefit from knowing the full truth about suicide. Not only for others who lost a loved one to suicide and who are further stigmatized when death by suicide is considered so horrid that it must not be named. Not only for those who have attempted or seriously considered suicide, and who are hurt by the notion that what they did is shameful.

I say this also for the family itself.

## How Secrecy about Suicide Hurts the Family

Shame festers in dark places. The more the family hides, or denies, that their loved one died by suicide, the more the shame will grow inside of them. By keeping the suicide secret, they are buying into the idea that their loved one did something shameful, and that it brought shame to them.

When shame goes unchallenged in its darkness, it wins. When shame – undeserved shame, I should say, and shame about suicide is most definitely undeserved – is exposed to light, it weakens. With openness, people find a community of others who have also lost a loved one to suicide, who can normalize the experience, who can offer hope and healing, and who welcome those who feel shame with its antidote – acceptance.



By hiding the suicide of their loved one, families are depriving themselves of support from others, as well as community with other survivors. They are depriving themselves of the comforting truth that they are not alone. How many people might respond, upon learning the truth, “Oh, how awful. My mother died by suicide when I was young...” or “I once attempted suicide. I can tell you what was going on in my head, and that may help you to understand a little of what was going on in her head.”

### **Help from Others who Lost a Loved One to Suicide**

There is an entire movement of people who have lost a loved one to suicide and who, in turn, are dedicated to helping others who find themselves in the same tragic situation. This community is tragically large; in recent years, [almost 40,000 people in the U.S. each year](#) have died by suicide – [almost 1 million a year](#) throughout the world. So you can imagine how many millions of people have been touched by suicide.

Cities and other communities have support groups for “suicide survivors” ([the term for those who survive the suicide of a loved one](#)). [Online support groups](#) exist as well.

The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention even has a [survivor outreach program](#). A suicide survivor makes personal visits to people who are newly bereaved to suicide, if they request the service. (Please see this site’s [Resources page](#), particularly [the section for survivors of suicide](#), for more information about survivor groups in person and online.)

### **Effects on Children**

Finally, secrecy hurts children. I wrote about this previously in my post [“What to Tell Children of a Loved One’s Suicide?”](#) Children need to know the truth.

Only with the truth can they make sense of the world around them and maintain trust in the adults in their world. They can also be spared the same internalized shame that afflicts so many others.

I once read a devastating account about Frank Campbell, PhD, executive director of a crisis intervention center in Louisiana. This story comes from the excellent book for suicide survivors, [Touched by Suicide: Hope and Healing After Loss](#).

Dr. Campbell explained that a mother came to him seeking grief counseling for her 5-year-old son, whose father had fatally shot himself in the head. She insisted that Dr. Campbell not tell her son that his father had died by suicide, as she was “protecting” him from this truth.

When Dr. Campbell met privately with the boy, the boy confided that he knew his father killed himself because he had overheard his aunt talking about it. “But please don’t tell my mommy,” the boy entreated. “She thinks my daddy died in a car accident.”

Children figure things out, whether now or later. If suicide was kept secret, they will absorb the message that suicide is so shameful that it had to be denied.

### **In Closing**

For the sake of children, the community, other suicide survivors, and themselves, I wish more families would name suicide. Many families have compelling reasons not to, but the more they hide suicide, the more those reasons remain compelling.

It helps instead to call suicide for what it is: a devastating cause of death that happens because of some combination of mental illness, overwhelming pain, unbearable stress, and feelings of hopelessness.

It can be hard for a family to let others know that a loved one died by suicide. But the acceptance, community, and wholeness that come afterward from compassionate people can, at the least, help liberate them from shame.

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