

WHEN YOUR LOVED ONE HAS DIED BY SUICIDE

John Hewitt, the author of *AFTER SUICIDE* says that a loved one's death by suicide leaves the survivors with a triple whammy. First, someone close has died, second, the death was sudden, and third, one has to deal with the additional pain and regret of suicide.

For the survivors of a suicide the emotional reactions are likely to be intensified. In addition to the painful emotions of grief, feelings of embarrassment, anger, guilt, rejection, and bewilderment are strong. Our society looks on suicide as an "unacceptable" way of dying. The phrase "committed suicide" bares this out. It almost implies that the person committed a crime. Both the person who suicided and the close family members are suspect. Thoughts that the person who suicided was emotionally sick or "not in his/her right mind" invariably follow. Many times the survivors are blamed for not preventing the suicide.

Frequently the survivors blame themselves. This usually results in guilt which can complicate normal grief. Survivors must face and resolve this guilt. If they don't they may never resolve their grief. They need to realize that they are not responsible for the suicide, no matter what they did or did not do. Suicide is an act completed in solitude—and only one person is responsible for it—the deceased. Just as no one can make another person take his life, no one can prevent a suicide without spending 24 hours a day restraining the potential suicide.

In addition to guilt, survivors of suicide struggle with the question "Why?" Rarely is there a satisfactory answer. Suicide is usually caused by factors that have accumulated over the years, not just one event. Circumstances come together and the person sees no way out. He may experience feelings of hopelessness and despair, or suffer severe depression. As a result his judgment becomes hazy or confused and he can't reason clearly. Those who suicide are not choosing death, but an escape from what they perceive as an intolerable situation. Since we can't know the persons inner struggle, we can't answer why.

If your loved one suicided, be especially patient and caring of yourself. You have suffered a deep wound that will take long and hard grief work to heal. Those who have survived their loved one's suicide advise

facing the fact of suicide as soon as you are able. They suggest making reference to the suicide at the funeral. Avoiding the truth or denying that it was suicide only prolongs the inevitable, or sets you up for and never-ending falsehoods about what happened. Also, facing the truth helps you realize that you are not responsible and tells others the same thing.

Another suggestion for helping yourself is to read material on both grief and suicide. Two good books are *LIVING WHEN A LOVED ONE HAS DIED* by Doug Manning and *AFTER SUICIDE*, by John Hewitt.

Don't be afraid to reach out to others for help. Find a friend that will let you talk about your feelings and thoughts. Talking about what happened and how you feel is absolutely essential. Join a support group. Many cities have Survivors of Suicide (SOS) groups. Your funeral director or the pastoral care department of a local hospital may be able to put you in touch with SOS or some other appropriate self-help group. Some survivors of suicide seek the help of a professional such as a psychologist, social worker or a bereavement specialist.

Your life has been drastically changed by suicide. Don't expect to be "over" it in weeks. Grief lasts far longer than society in general thinks—more than two years is not abnormal. You have special difficulties to overcome in your grief, which may make it even more prolonged. But, as one survivor said, "I had no choice when my loved one suicided. It was out of my control, but I do have a choice in how I heal myself."

Margaret H. Gerner MSW, CGC