



A Grief Like No Other

*When Suicide Takes
Someone You Love*

by Dr. Kari Vo

If you are reading this booklet now, you are probably a survivor of suicide. Someone you care about has died, and you are grieving. We are so very sorry.

This booklet has several purposes. We hope to dispel some myths about suicide and explain some truths. We hope to offer some ideas and insights that may comfort you, or give you help in caring for someone else who has lost a loved one to suicide. And above all, we hope to assure you that God's love is with you even now, in this deepest pit of sorrow—and that you can trust your loved one into His hands.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there were 44,193 suicides reported in the United States in 2015, the latest date for which statistics are available. This means an average of one death every 11.9 minutes. Suicide was the 10th leading cause of death for Americans.

Suicide deeply affects the survivors—that is, family members and friends who loved the person who has died. It is estimated that each suicide intimately affects at least six other people. That means a minimum of 265,158 new survivors of suicide in 2015, and their numbers increase every year. You are probably one of them, like so many of us. May God comfort you and strengthen you.

The Questions

Suicide leads to a host of questions for those left behind. We ask ourselves: Why did this happen? Is it someone's fault? Is it mine—because I wasn't good enough? Why didn't I see the signs and step in? Is it my fault because I didn't intervene forcefully enough? Could I have stopped it?

Or we may be focusing elsewhere. What about someone else in my family—the person's spouse, parent, or child. Was it their fault? Did they drive him or her to it? Was there something secret going on I just don't know about?

Last and most painful are the questions that run through our heads about the person we've lost. Was it some terrible lack in him that led to this? Did she simply hate me and want to cause me pain? Was this the final result of some secret sin or addiction I know nothing about?

Some Answers

The answers to all of these questions are no, no, no, and no. These are totally natural questions to ask, but they are also unhelpful. The chances are you will never identify a "cause" for the suicide. Human minds are mysterious, and human beings are fragile. Things go wrong with us so easily and so grievously. Sometimes it is impossible for anybody else to truly help, however hard they try. Being deeply beloved is no guarantee against suicide. We are breakable people living in a broken world.

This means we don't have to play the blame game. Jesus our Savior died for all of that—all of our brokenness, all of our sin, all of the terrible mistakes and wrong actions we have ever done. He died for the person you love who committed suicide. He loves that person—He loved them then, and He loves them now. And He died for you as well. His death covers it all.

Luther recognized this fact. He blamed suicide squarely on the devil. He said, “I don’t share the opinion that suicides are certainly to be damned. My reason is that they do not wish to kill themselves but are overcome by the power of the devil. They are like a man who is murdered in the woods by a robber ...”

A great many people who commit suicide do it under the influence of depression or some other mental suffering—temporary or chronic. Depression and schizophrenia are the two most common mental illnesses linked to suicide. An estimated 1 in 10 U.S. adults report depression. It’s also reported that roughly one out of every six people in the United States—and almost half of all people who commit or attempt suicide—have been diagnosed with some type of mental illness. Depression is a terrible thing and can be as deadly as cancer. We do not blame cancer victims for succumbing to the power of the disease. In the same way, we can have compassion on those who commit suicide.

“But,” you may be saying, “I didn’t see any signs of depression in him at all. He seemed perfectly normal.” Yes, that could very well be true. Not everybody commits suicide from depression, and the ones who do often manage to conceal their depression very well, especially just at the end. God, however, knows all the circumstances, and He is completely wise and merciful as well. It isn’t necessary for us to figure out everything. We can entrust the person we love into the arms of God, who loves him or her far more than we can imagine.

I wish I didn’t have to write this, but given the world we live in, there is bound to be at least one person who will tell you that your loved one is in danger of hell for committing suicide. There is only one unforgiveable sin, but it is not suicide. It has to do with rejecting the Holy Spirit—refusing His gift of faith in Jesus Christ. Your loved one may or may not have committed this sin (only God knows exactly what was going on in their mind at the time), but suicide, like all sins, comes under the blood of Jesus Christ our Savior. It is forgivable. It is forgiven for those who believe in Jesus. Suicide is not stronger than Christ. He is the light that is stronger than the darkness. And even when we fall, “underneath are the everlasting arms” (see Deuteronomy 33:27). Trust in the Lord to catch the one you love—because Jesus loves him and died for him. He died and rose for that person. Rest in Christ as you grieve.

Feelings

When someone you love commits suicide, you will experience many different feelings. Grief is the obvious one, but you may also feel fear, anger, shame, and even guilt. All of these feelings are normal.

Grief

Grief is what we feel when we experience a loss. It includes sadness, an aching, empty feeling, and a tendency to switch back and forth between “normal” and feelings of great pain when the memory of your loss comes crashing back in on you.

Grief is a process that can take years to resolve, and even so, you will never be entirely the same person you were before. That’s okay, because the person you love matters to you, and always will. Still, it’s important that you give yourself enough time to grieve. Don’t expect to be “over it” in a matter of weeks or months; don’t listen to people who tell you that you should be, or who tell you that you’re doing it wrong (for example, by continuing to wear a wedding ring, or by taking part in certain activities). Grief almost always takes longer than people expect it to.

With that said, it’s wise to remember that there are conditions known as traumatic grief and PTSD, and if you are a survivor of a loved one’s suicide, you are more at risk for these problems. If you yourself feel that you need extra help, or if your family and friends are telling you the same, look into counseling. You can visit a professional counselor. Many health insurance plans cover this. You can also talk with your pastor or with any wise and compassionate Christian friend. Do what you need to do to take care of yourself and any other survivors you have responsibility for, such as children.

Fear

Oddly enough, fear is still an emotion you might experience after a suicide has taken place. You may wonder: If such a horrible thing can happen in this world, what else might happen? Will someone else I love take his or her life? Will the burden of grief drive me to the same act? What about the rest of my family—can they recover from this, or will we be shattered forever?

These are normal fears and will take time to resolve. Again, seek help if they become crippling. Most of all, pour out your fears to God. You are allowed to feel this way. Over time, the fear will diminish.

Shame

Shame is another odd one. Our culture places a lot of stigma on suicide; you may find it impossible to tell other people anything about your loved one's death because you feel ashamed and embarrassed. And yet, suicide is not a fact that is easily hidden. This creates a practical problem: How do you notify the people who need to know without creating an even heavier burden for yourself?

One thing you might do is to ask a friend or more distant relative to take on the task of notifying people and having this delicate conversation. Of course, you will want to ask someone who is both compassionate and able to cope with a variety of reactions. A pastor might be able to help. Decide who needs to know, and exactly how much or little you want them to know—and then let your friend go to work. The information will spread quickly, and as a result, most of the people you face in the coming days will already know the simple fact—and so you will not have to go over it again. If you **do** face anyone who wants to ask questions you don't want to answer, just repeat "Thank you so much for your concern, but I'm not comfortable talking about that." You are not obliged to satisfy anyone's curiosity.

Anger

Some people are surprised to realize that they are intensely angry at the person who has died. That anger may show itself in thoughts like

Why did he do it?

Did she just want me to suffer?

What a selfish thing to do!

How could he leave me all alone this way?

What was she thinking?!

and similar thoughts.

Anger is a common experience for people grieving any death, and in the case of suicide, it's practically guaranteed. You have experienced tremendous pain. An angry reaction is normal and not something to blame yourself for. Of course, if you find the anger is beginning to spill into other areas of your life such as harming your relationship with the rest of your family or your ability to function at work or school, get help.

There is one question that I'd like to discuss a bit further. It's the angry, hurt question: "What was (name) thinking?" I can speak to this one from personal experience as well as my training, for I too was once suicidal. And what I would like you to know is this: for me and for many suicidal people, probably for most, there comes a sort of tunnel vision. People considering suicide are not thinking clearly, however well they manage to disguise it. The pain is too terrible, the world is closing in, and people honestly and truly believe that the world—and you—will be better off without them in it. This is not true, as you know better than anyone. But as their thinking gets more and more distorted, and their window on reality becomes smaller and smaller, they truly believe they are doing the best thing for themselves and for everyone. They are not normally trying to hurt you; they are not trying to do anything at all except to end the pain. And they have reached the point where they no longer perceive there could be any other solution to their problems except death.

This is a mental illness. It is a distorted thought process so extreme that they really can't be held responsible for much, if any, of the results. Yes, you can still be angry, but they are, as Luther said, "overcome by the power of the devil. They are like a man who is murdered in the woods by a robber," and are victims just as you are. Keeping that thought in mind might make it easier to move past anger in the long run.

It is also possible you might become angry with someone else—for example, a family member or friend whom you think could have prevented the suicide. If these feelings continue for more than a few days, it's wise to get counseling so you can get a realistic view of the situation. Anger can be irrational when it is fueled by grief; in fact, some people naturally tend to handle grief by turning it into anger. If that fits you, it's wise to seek counseling before your anger destroys relationships with people you love.

Anger with God is also common. You may be asking, "Why did God let this happen? Where was He when my loved one died?" It is okay to feel anger at God, and to express that anger in your prayers. God can handle it, and He knows your feelings anyway, whether you say them or not. If you are looking for words, the book of Psalms has many angry, almost despairing cries to God. One of them might fit your feelings. Christ Himself cried out using the words of Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" Your pastor should be able to suggest more resources.

Guilt

Guilt is one of the most difficult feelings to cope with in the wake of a suicide. Virtually everyone can think of something they believe they ought to have said or done, something they might have done to prevent the death. You may be thinking things like

- Why didn't I realize he felt that way?
- What if I had paid closer attention?
- Why didn't I see the signs?
- Why didn't I try harder to talk her out of it?
- What if I had come home earlier?

While most things are clearer in hindsight, most likely there was nothing you could have done to prevent it. You might think of this death as similar to one from the deadliest of cancers or viruses. In some cases, no amount of knowledge or wisdom or effort brings about the happy ending we wanted. This guilt results from our need to find a reason and place blame. This is a rational part of the grieving process.

What should you do with your guilt, whether rational or irrational? The first and best thing to do is to take it to God. Jesus our Savior is our remedy for guilt of all sorts. Tell Him how you feel as often as you need to. Feelings are not under your control, but God can help with them. Also consider talking with your pastor or another wise and mature Christian, one who will refrain from simply telling you it's irrational and you should "get over it." It's not that easy, as you know. You can also seek professional counseling.

Occasionally people are tempted to hang on to their feelings of guilt because it gives them a sense of control. It's like a kind of magical thinking that promises that—if **this** time they do everything right—no other evil event will take place and everyone left will be fine. You might want to examine whether that's a motive for you. It is terribly hard to live in a world where random evil strikes, and the temptation for us to claim control—even through self-blame—is enormous. But of course, in the long run, that kind of thing just causes more problems. You are not God, and you do not control anything but yourself—and even much of that is out of your hands. The true remedy for fear and feeling out of control is to flee to Christ and cling to Him with your whole heart. That's the only real strength for life in a world where evil happens.

Love

The last feeling that goes into this mix of grief is love. Of course, you still love the person who died, and that won't stop—no matter what other feelings you have—and that's good. Love can coexist with anger and sadness and guilt. There's nothing unusual about having mixed feelings in the wake of a terrible event like suicide. You are entitled to your feelings, however mixed, and it's unfair for anyone to blame you for them. If someone tries, ignore them. You love the person you're grieving for, and God loves them as well.

Moving Forward

As much as it feels like the whole world has stopped, eventually, life continues. And you will begin living again too, though it may not feel like life for a long while. Be gentle with yourself. Take whatever time you need to grieve. Pour out your heart to the Lord, again and again and again. He will never turn you away.

As best you can, take care of others who are also survivors of this suicide. You can comfort one another and hold up each other in prayer. Grieving together is often easier than allowing grief to drive you apart. Others may be worrying about losing you as well. Reassure and comfort them. If you need it, take time to be alone, but also come back together with those who love you.

Lean on a Christian congregation or pastor for help. Allow people to care for you, even if it's just bringing you a casserole or offering to pick up the children from school. They are your family in Christ, and they love you. Ask them to pray for you—or if you're shy, get a friend to pass on what you need. People want to help.

As mentioned before, find a counselor to walk beside you if things seem to be getting worse, going on longer than you think they ought, or if you're tempted to commit suicide as well. The aftermath of suicide can include things like being easily startled, worrying all the time, having flashbacks, or being unreasonably angry with other people. There is medical help available for these things. If you need it, please get it.

If You Are the Caregiver

It's possible that you are reading this booklet, not because you are a survivor of suicide, but because you love someone who is. If that is the case, I hope what you've read gives you some idea of what your friend or relative is going through. You can do a lot to help. Your simple caring presence makes a difference your friend may never be able to describe.

It's sad, but so many people have no idea what to do or say after a suicide. As a result, they tend to withdraw from the survivors and say nothing. Don't make this mistake. Their grief is unbearable. If you are still with them, even if all you say is "I'm so sorry," that will be worth more than gold and diamonds to them. You don't have to have the answers. You don't have to know what to say. Just love them.

Simple acts of care can be incredibly helpful. Don't just ask, "What can I do to help?" Chances are good they will tell you nothing, because they aren't thinking at all clearly just at the moment. Instead, put yourself in their shoes and imagine the small needs they cope with every day. For example, if it is a spouse who has died, the survivor is most certainly picking up numerous responsibilities they never had to deal with before—anything from grocery shopping to handling the income tax. And what about cooking, or mowing the grass? Little things can make a huge difference.

It is possible to mobilize a congregation, school, or other group to provide these small acts of care via a website or app like <https://www.carecalendar.org>. Or your church may already have some structure for dealing with needs like this. Look into it. Together you can do far more than just one person.

Resist the urge to tell the survivor how to grieve—to tell him that his feelings are somehow wrong or shocking, or to tell her that she's taking too long to get over it. People differ greatly in how they handle tragedy. If you're truly concerned that something is deeply wrong, talk with your pastor and ask his opinion. He will know how to suggest additional help, if necessary.

As you support your friend or loved one, be sure to take time to draw on the source of all strength, our Lord. It's tough caring for someone in pain. Don't try to do it on your own strength; make time to pray, read the Bible, attend worship, and come to the Lord's Supper. You need the comfort and strength that God provides as you love this survivor.

The Hope We Have

In the end, our help is found in one Person only, the Lord our God. As you grieve, as you walk through the valley of the shadow of death, He is with you, even when you cannot sense Him. We pray for you. Together with you we look forward to the day when all loss will be at an end, when God

"... who sits on the throne will shelter them with His presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb (Jesus Christ) in the midst of the throne will be their Shepherd, and He will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (Revelation 7:15b-17).

And in another place it says,

"... Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be His people, and God Himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away" (Revelation 21:3b-4).

Resource Information

Find a Christian counselor: If you are suffering from a loved one's suicide, or struggling with suicidal thoughts yourself, please seek a Christian counselor who can help you. To find one near you, visit www.aacc.net/resources/find-a-counselor.

American Association of Suicidology—crisis helpline: 800-273-TALK (8255) • www.suicidology.org • 5221 Wisconsin Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20015 • Telephone: 202-237-2280

Statistical data was taken from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention National Suicide Statistics for 2015.
www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention

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