

Reaching Out When A Suicide or a Sudden Death Occurs: What's Helpful and Not Helpful

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General Comment on Suicide and Sudden Death Situations

For family members (also known as “survivors”) dealing with a suicide, or for any other type of truly shocking or unexpected grief, there are 2 stages of reactions. That which is needed and helpful changes as the family’s ability to cope (or not cope) evolves. The first stage is shock mode, the immediate aftermath of the suicide or sudden death. The later stage is the period in which the affected survivors learn to live with the tragedy. It is important to know that this kind of grief NEVER completely goes away. The goal for survivors is to learn how to cope and, for some, it can take a very, very long time.

This kind of tragedy, so unthinkable, and also so potentially personally threatening, may emotionally overwhelm would-be helpers as well. There is often a fear that you won’t know what to say or do. It’s OK. The important thing is to convey your sympathy and caring. As we dealt with the aftermath of our daughter’s suicide, the things that saved us from “falling over the edge” were the sense of unconditional support, with and without words, as well as the very concrete help that seemed to materialize out of the air from family members, friends and members of our church and larger community.

Helpful Things to Do in the Shock Phase/Immediate Aftermath of a Suicide

Recognizing that people in shock may not even know what they need is a first step. It is good to say I am so sorry for your loss, but saying “if there is anything I can do, call me” may not be so helpful as the person may be too overwhelmed to make the call. Here are concrete areas of assistance that people may need. If you offer to do something concrete, grieving family members are far more likely to take you up on it.

1. Food to feed selves and people coming in from out of town
2. Help in making or fielding phone calls and shielding the family if they need some down time or time to make arrangements.
3. Help in organizing offers of help (food chains, returning dishes to those who have brought food, organizing the refrigerator/dating items as they come in, etc.)
4. Help with miscellaneous tasks (e.g., manning the house during a service, researching something, helping to plan a funeral reception, assistance with out of town family and friends such as offers to put them up, pick them up at the airport , arranging child care, etc.)

5. Doing a needed errand such as help with grocery shopping, pharmacy pick-up, going to the dump or putting trash out (e.g., “I’m going to the dump. How about if I swing by and take your stuff too?”)
6. Reducing isolation: just being there and listening (The latter is hard, but people suffering this kind of trauma need to process it, over and over, and are looking for answers. This goes on for a long time and in some cases there may be no answers to the questions being asked. You do not have to answer the questions, only facilitate the grieving person’s processing of what has happened. Sometimes “throwing the question back” (e.g., what do you think happened?) can enable this.
7. Reassurance that God is with the survivors: It is very common for personal faith to be severely shaken by a suicide (e.g., “How could God let this happen?”) Notifying applicable clergy (i.e., minister, priest, rabbi of the religious affiliation of the surviving family) of the suicide would be helpful if the family has not already done so. If the family has no formal religious affiliation, offering to facilitate this if desired by the family could be helpful. Some churches, ours included, give hand-made shawls to the grieving family. Placing the shawl around one’s shoulders is symbolic of the church family putting its arms around the survivors. Months later, placing such a shawl around one’s shoulders can get one through a difficult night or time.
8. Dealing with the issue of “secrecy” vs “non-secrecy”: Ultimately acknowledging a suicide is the family’s decision but it may be important to remind them that keeping secrets requires a lot of energy and may in fact cut them off from the support and understanding they so desperately need (and will likely need far into the future). We found that being open about the suicide enabled others to be more open about talking about it, suicides in their own families and the personal struggles many people have had with severe clinical depressions and other forms of mental illness in their own lives.
9. Offer to get the survivors out of the house by giving them a temporary diversion (dinner at your house, going to a movie or for a walk)
10. Helping in some way with arrangements (providing readings or music for a service, helping a survivor choose clothing for the deceased, gathering and arranging photographs, doing a floral arrangement, facilitating the printing of service programs, etc.)
11. Try to reach out to ALL of the members of an affected family (men, women and children). Even if you know other members of a family less well, it is important to remember that all are individually affected by the loss. How and in what timeframe each person experiences the loss can be quite different. Grieving persons in the same family are often not in the same place. (E.g., one might be angry, another completely withdrawn, another acting out, another hysterical....)

12. Reach out to close personal friends of the deceased and urge the family to do this if they are able. Close peers are survivors too and will likely be experiencing many of the same emotions and feelings of loss that the immediate family members are experiencing. For our family, having our daughter's friends come to visit, tell stories of the deceased and share in the grieving process was immensely helpful to both the young people and to us. Many participated in the funeral service including preparing many boards of photos of their times together with our daughter. The school where our daughter and some of her friends had attended high school offered the use of its copying facility to the young people preparing the photo boards. Several of our daughter's friends spoke at the funeral. Some of them are still visiting us (and our daughter's grave) three years later and many have organized events in suicide prevention at their college or for the Samaritans, an organization working in the field of suicide prevention and intervention. Our daughter's peers' continued contact reaffirms the importance of our daughter (and us!) in their lives and helps us to remember some of the better times. It can also be painful for the family as they move on with their lives while one's own loved one cannot. Over time, we have found that this kind of pain lessons and the value of this kind of contact far outweighs the emotional pain

Less Helpful Things in the Immediate Aftermath of a Suicide

- Don't ignore someone because you don't know what to say. A quick hug or a hand on the arm and the words, "I'm so sorry for your loss" can help acknowledge the loss and reduce the isolation of the grieving person.
- Don't say things like "I sensed something was wrong." If you really noticed these things, why didn't you say something? Saying it after the fact only adds to the guilt of the surviving family.
- Don't assume that the family members of a suicide somehow missed cues about the pending suicide or were in some way insensitive to their loved one. In some cases the suicide be the result of years of struggle about which you may not have been aware. Also, some suicidal people can be extensively engaged in their lives and appear outwardly very successful and happy in the eyes of others.
- For some family members who have dealt with the fear of a potential suicide of their loved one for a long time, (e.g., In some cases it can be years of fear and threats to end it all), it is possible that once the death actually occurs, there may be a sense of relief. This sense of relief can in turn trigger more guilt. Reassure the family member that it is normal to experience some relief under these circumstances.
- Don't try to dissect what happened unless initiated by the grieving family. There are no easy answers and there will likely always be areas beyond comprehension.

- Don't encourage someone to dispose of personal possessions of the deceased too quickly. Decisions made too quickly can lead to regret later on. Family members can get much comfort from owning or wearing something of the deceased. This is true for more extended family members and peers as well. We ended up giving some of our daughter's jewelry to her cousins and friends. Several of her closest friends helped us choose what piece would be appropriate for whom and we wrote notes accompanying these pieces to each friend. Both female and male friends still talk about how much it means to have something of our daughter's.

More Helpful Things as Survivors Try to Pick of the Pieces of Their Lives

- Recognize that sometimes the most mundane of activities (e.g., shopping) can become overwhelming to someone suffering such a loss. Offer to help or go with the person when they first resume these activities.
- Share a similar experience. It can help to give hope that one can survive overwhelming grief.
- Continue to actively listen and encourage the person to talk about their loved one.
- Try to assess if outside help may be needed and facilitate this if the person is having difficulty doing this. For example:
 - a. Encourage the grieving person to get into contact with other survivors through a hotline, conference or support group for survivors (e.g., Samaritans have drop-in groups in many locations. A more structured, time-limited group or therapy by a professional may be needed (e.g., Jack Jordan, PhD, Psychologist specializing in work with survivors, 781-235-2052 or 410-305-3051. The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention also runs regional conferences. Other types of bereavement groups (e.g., widow/widower, siblings, children's groups, etc.) are available through area hospitals, hospices, mental health facilities or can be found in area human resources directories. Talking with someone else who has "been there" can greatly reduce isolation and provide a good outlet for grief expression.
 - b. Medical intervention including pharmacological aids to deal with sleep problems, severe depression or other difficulties.
 - c. Written materials (e.g., After Suicide Loss: Coping with Your Grief, by Jack Jordan, PhD and Bob Baugher, PhD).
 - d. Library resource folder on suicide resources (to be prepared by the Kilburn-Petersons). Many on-line resources will be listed in this as well.
- Continue to offer survivors a chance to get out of the house. A meal out at someone's home ("with no strings; come, eat; you can leave anytime"), a walk, etc.

- Be aware that certain times of year are especially hard. The birthday of the deceased, the anniversary of the death, the first holidays (and even subsequent ones) without the loved one can bring back the loss acutely. Even a happy event can be difficult: a wedding, the birth of a baby, things a survivor may never get to share with his or her loved one. Sending a note, making a phone call or in some other way acknowledging this can provide the survivor with reassurance that others still care about their loss and are sensitive to their ongoing grief.
- Make a special effort to welcome survivors home if it is their first trip away. Returning to an empty house can be VERY difficult. It brings the reality back. Leaving a note, hanging a sack of breakfast things on the door knob, bringing dinner things for the first night home, or leaving an invitation to come over for a meal at your house in the near future can make a huge difference in easing this difficult transition.
- Be aware that grieving people can experience “triggers” that bring on grief very unexpectedly. (e.g., hearing a song, a reading in church, doing something for the first time that the survivor used to do with his or her loved one). Often a hug, hand squeeze or arm around the shoulder is enough.
- When the survivors are ready, encourage them to reconnect (coming to church, getting out to something, going back to work, participating in an activity, class or project).
- For survivors that are emotionally ready, participating in an activity geared towards prevention, advocacy or intervention related to suicide may be a powerful way to help them make a difference in the lives of others and can serve as a partial antidote to personal pain. For some however, such activities would be far too emotionally overwhelming.
- Encourage survivors to maintain or initiate contact with friends of the deceased or to participate in activities they once did with the deceased..

Less Helpful Things for the Longer Term

- Don't assume that grief is a one year proposition (for anyone suffering grief, not just survivors of suicide). People cannot just “get over it” or “move on.”
- Don't avoid talking about the person who has died or avoid acknowledging the grieving person's talking about the person who has died. People who are grieving need to talk about it. Also, death does not negate the many years you spent with the person who has died. Talking about the person helps. You will not increase a person's pain by joining in the conversation. You are in fact validating the relationship and importance of the deceased person in the survivor's life. When others say nothing or don't acknowledge or also tell stories, then the grieving people can feel terribly isolated and suffer even greater emotional pain.

- Don't expect the grieving person to fully return to the person you once knew. Suicide is life-changing and often causes people to change their priorities and way of relating to the world. Things that used to be important may no longer be.

Some words of inspiration to those offering a helping hand:

Excerpt from "Meditations of the Heart"
(Howard Thurman)

I share with you the agony of your grief,
The anguish of your heart finds echo in my own.
I know I cannot enter all you feel
Nor bear with you the burden of your pain;
I can but offer what my love does give:
The strength of caring,
The warmth of one who seeks to understand
The silent storm-tossed barrenness of so great a loss.
This I do in quiet ways,
That on your lonely path
You may not walk alone.