

COPING WITH SUICIDE

Information for employees

The grief felt by those who experience the loss of a friend, family member or coworker by suicide is a complicated and painful process. Not only do survivors feel the pain of their loss, but they are also left with unanswered questions about why their coworker or family member chose to die. Suicide survivors experience the normal range of emotions associated with a loss, but tend to experience these feelings much more intensely because of the complicated circumstances surrounding the death.

Common reactions to suicide

Shock: This is usually the first reaction to a suicide and can be accompanied by a feeling of physical and emotional “numbness.” This is the mind’s way of protecting us from feelings and thoughts that are too overwhelming to deal with all at once. This numbness allows us to deal with the pain in smaller, more manageable steps.

Confusion: Only about one-third of suicide victims leave behind an explanation for their choice to die. Even with a suicide note, however, many questions remain for survivors. One of the hardest tasks for survivors is accepting that they may never know the answer to the most haunting question – “Why?”

Anger: Reaction to suicide is further complicated by the fact that survivors often feel intense anger at the victim for taking their own life. Survivors may also find their anger being directed toward doctors, therapists, family members or themselves. Survivors need to give themselves permission to have these feelings. Accepting them as a normal part of the grieving process is an essential part of healing.

Guilt: Survivors are left with repetitive thoughts of “what if/only” scenarios following a suicide. “What if I had done this ...,” “If only I hadn’t said that ...” “Why didn’t I notice the warning signs ...?” In time survivors learn that they did not have control over the victim’s choices and behaviors and that it wasn’t their fault.

Despair and depression: Feelings of sadness and despair can affect a survivor’s sleep, appetite, concentration and hope for the future. These feelings can lead to depression, so survivors should not hesitate to seek help from professionals as they learn to cope with their reactions. Survivors may also be traumatized by having witnessed the suicide or by finding the victim. In these cases, survivors may also experience stress reactions associated with trauma such as nightmares and flashbacks.

Stigma and shame: Societal, religious and personal beliefs can all contribute to survivors feeling uncomfortable about revealing the cause of death, or being unable to talk about it because they feel ashamed of the person’s choice to die. For this reason and/or out of respect to the deceased, families may choose to publicize a death by suicide as “accidental.”

Relief: In many cases, a suicide occurs after years of coping with emotional pain and suffering. A feeling of relief on behalf of survivors is very normal in these situations. Survivors may feel relieved that their coworker/family member’s suffering is over and/or relief that they no longer have to worry about them. This is an acceptable emotion and survivors need not burden themselves with extra guilt over feeling some relief.

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The following are some suggestions for how to cope with the suicide of a coworker

One of the most difficult emotions to manage after the suicide of a coworker is guilt. Coworkers are often like a second family, and a suicide can lead us to question what we “could have” or “should have” done differently. It is important to acknowledge this as a normal reaction, but not dwell on hindsight. The reality is that the person who took his/her own life was in control, and no one else.

Coworkers in mourning can be a natural support system for each other. There is comfort in knowing you are all going through the same thing and probably having many of the same reactions. If needed, there are also formal support groups for survivors in most communities.

Recognize that suicide may add more layers to the grieving process and can intensify all the normal grief reactions. Do not hesitate to seek professional support to help you through the process.

It is important to remember the life of your coworker, rather than dwelling on the circumstances of his/her death. Consider a memorial service or appropriate workplace ritual that can honor your coworker in a positive way.

Eventually, you will be able to sort out the conflicting emotions associated with a suicide and begin to accept the circumstances surrounding their death. Remember that not everyone will arrive at this place at the same time, and no two people will grieve in the same way. Allow your coworkers to reach this stage in their own time, while reminding each other that we can best honor a person's life by the way we carry on with our own.

How you can help someone who is grieving a loss by suicide

Let them know you are available to listen and provide support. This is especially important after the first few weeks, when things “get back to normal” for everyone except the bereaved. If you don't know what you can do, ask!

Be patient, compassionate and understanding. Try to avoid clichés that provide a simple explanation for their loss. Accept that survivors will be struggling with intense emotions well beyond the limits experienced in other types of deaths.

The stigma, guilt and blame that survivors can feel often isolates them from others and causes them to be uncomfortable discussing their loss. Follow the lead of the bereaved. If they are able to discuss the loss as a suicide, don't be afraid to acknowledge that. If they are unable to talk about it as such, use the same language they are using to discuss their loss.

Provide unconditional support without making judgmental statements about what could have or should have been done differently. Listening without judgment is the best resource you can offer. A nonjudgmental listener can help them process and move past their own feelings of guilt.

If you or someone you know is struggling with a loss by suicide, your employee assistance program (EAP) is a good source for locating counseling services and information on coping with grief. The National Mental Health Association (nmha.org) and the National Institutes of Health (nih.gov) both provide information and resources on coping with grief for friends and family members of suicide victims.