

# May is Mental Health Awareness Month

## How to Cope with Suicide Loss—Helping yourself and others

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### Helping Yourself... for Survivors of Suicide Loss

**Ground yourself:** It may be very painful, but you must learn to hold tightly to the truth that you are not responsible for your loved one's suicide in any way, shape, or form. **Plan ahead.** When you feel ready, assist your family in finding ways to mark your loved one's birthday, family holidays or other milestones. Understand that new moments, experiences or events will be met with sadness, even with emotional setbacks. Preparing for how you will move through these calendar dates will help minimize traumatic reactions.

**Make connections.** Consider joining a support group specifically designed for survivors of suicide loss. The environment can provide a mutually supportive, reassuring healing environment unlike anywhere else. **Give yourself permission.** To cry. To laugh. To seek professional help if you need it. Remember that you are moving through the most difficult of losses—and you can take control of the path to healing.

Guilt is the one negative emotion that seems to be universal to all survivors of suicide, and overcoming it is perhaps our greatest obstacle on the path to healing. Guilt is your worst enemy, because it is a false accusation. You are not responsible for your loved one's suicide in any way, shape, or form. Write it down. Say it to yourself over and over again (even when it feels false). Because it's the truth. Why do suicide survivors tend to blame themselves? The theory is that human nature subconsciously resists so strongly the idea that we cannot control all the events of our lives that we would rather fault ourselves for a tragic occurrence than accept our inability to prevent it. Simply put, we don't like admitting to ourselves that we're only human, so we blame ourselves instead.

Chances are you will find that each person—no matter how close or removed they were from the suicide victim—willingly takes the lion's share of blame on themselves. If they were the one closest to the deceased then they theorize, "I should've known exactly what was going on in their mind." If they were distanced from that person, they feel, "If I'd only been closer to them..." Well, you can't all be to blame, can you? Isn't it far more logical that none of you are responsible? Well, then, who is? The simple truth of the matter is that only one person is responsible for any suicide: the victim. But that's a tough pill to swallow, so instead of ascribing responsibility to our suffering loved one, we nobly sacrifice by taking it on ourselves. It's understandable to feel such love and empathy toward the person we lost that we are loathe to place blame on them. The key lies in understanding the difference between blame and responsibility. Blame is accusatory and judgmental but assigning responsibility need only be a simple acknowledgment of fact. It's unclear how much control, if any, suicide victims have over their actions. And if clinical depression is at the root, then we could easily think of suicides as victims of disease, just like cancer victims. This is why a person who dies by suicide doesn't deserve blame.

Guilt is anger turned inwards. Suicide produces many painful and confusing emotions in survivors, one of which is frustration at being so violently cut off from the victim—from the chance to help them, talk with them, or even simply to say goodbye. This frustration produces anger, and when we turn this anger upon ourselves, the result is guilt. Guilt can also come from an unfounded assumption that others are silently blaming us. Both parents and spouses express fear that the world at large will brand them as failures in their respective roles because of the suicide. While some small-minded people may think or even speak such accusations, most will not, so don't project negative thoughts onto others by judging yourself for them.

...hold tightly to the truth that you are not responsible for your loved one's suicide...

I give myself permission to:

Cry... laugh... seek help...

shine

Parents of children who die by suicide often battle an added type of guilt. Even if they do not blame themselves for not directly intervening in the suicidal act, they often feel guilt over some perceived mistake in raising their children. “Where did I go wrong?” “I pushed them too hard.” and “If we hadn’t gotten divorced...” are just a few on the list of self-recriminations. But parents need to remind themselves that, while they have great influence over their children’s lives, they do not personally create every aspect of their children’s being, as a sculptor carves a statue. From their earliest years, children are shaped by an assortment of outside influences beyond the control of parents. Even children and teenagers have to bear responsibility for their actions.

Spouses also tend to feel acutely guilty for a suicide. The natural partnership that comprises marriage implies a mutual responsibility to look after each other. But spouses need to realize that the root causes of suicide—notably clinical depression—are beyond the control of even the most devoted husband or wife, and that even mental health professionals often fail to detect the warning signs of suicide.

Moving forward with your life brings its own dose of guilt. Whether it’s returning to the simple routine of daily subsistence or embarking on new journeys in life, survivors often feel as if this is some affront to the person we’ve lost. “How can I live knowing they’re not here?” your mind may taunt you. Your strength lies in knowing that, while your lost loved one has chosen death, you have chosen life—and life is a gift that we honor by living.

## Ways to Help a Survivor of Suicide Loss

If you know someone who has lost a loved one to suicide, there are many things you can do. In addition, by reaching out, you also help take stigma out of the equation. Don’t be afraid to acknowledge the death. Extend your condolences, express your feelings of sorrow. Make sure you use the loved one’s name. “My heart is so sad that John died.” Many who have lost someone to suicide have a broken heart—clinically called “Stress Cardiomyopathy”—and really need your empathy, compassion and understanding to heal.

Ask the survivor if and how you can help. Though they may not be ready to accept help, asking signifies that you are there—not avoiding or distancing during this tragic event. The notion of being there if needed is extremely comforting for survivors. Encourage openness. Be accepting of however survivors need to express their feelings. It may be with silence, with sadness or even anger.

Be patient. Don’t set a time limit for a survivor’s grief. Complicated grief can take years to process. Moreover, don’t limit a survivor’s need to share and repeat stories, conversations or wishes. Repetition is a key factor in grief recovery. Listen. Be a compassionate listener. This means don’t look to fix things. The greatest gift you can give someone you care about who has survived a suicide loss is your time, reassurance and love.

Common Ground facilitates a Survivors of Suicide Support Group twice monthly, 248-451-2613, [www.commongroundhelps.org](http://www.commongroundhelps.org).



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### Counseling...

No matter what your need, our licensed and experienced counselors are here to help, and are available by appointment at a variety of times including weekdays and evenings. For more information, call: **855-882-2736**, or visit: [www.ccsem.org/behavioral-health-counseling/](http://www.ccsem.org/behavioral-health-counseling/).



**Common Ground**  
*helping people move from crisis to hope*

### Survivors of Suicide Loss Support Groups...

We provide outreach, support, and information for those who have lost a loved one to suicide in your choice of two ways. First, we offer open support group sessions to offer you comfort, strength, and hope in the company of fellow survivors and trained peer facilitators. Open group usually meets 7 to 9 pm on the first and third Mondays of the month. We also offer individual support sessions which are available by appointment. They provide space for a person or a family to share their loss, learn about surviving the suicide loss of a loved one, and discover more about local and national resources. To register, schedule an appointment, or learn more, call: **248-451-2613**, or visit: [www.commongroundhelps.org](http://www.commongroundhelps.org).