

**UNDERSTANDING
SUICIDE
BEREAVEMENT**

*Reflections of a Survivor
Linda L. Flatt*

SUICIDE BEREAVEMENT

Nearly 30,000 Americans die by suicide each year. It is estimated that for every suicide, there are from 6 – 8 survivors. Since 1970 more than four million people in the U.S. have become “survivors of suicide”.

SUICIDE BEREAVEMENT

Survivor of Suicide

*Anyone whose life
has been impacted
by a suicide death*

SUICIDE BEREAVEMENT

Survivors of Suicide are....

Family, friends, co-workers, classmates, therapists, physicians, nurses etc.. who are left behind to pick up the pieces after the shattering experience of a suicide death.

SUICIDE BEREAVEMENT

Survivors of Suicide....

....not only suffer the grief and trauma of losing a loved one to suicide, but also are themselves at higher risk for suicide and emotional problems.

SUICIDE BEREAVEMENT

**Multi-Leveled
(Complicated)
Grief**

SUICIDE BEREAVEMENT

**LEVEL ONE
SEPARATION (DEATH)**

SUICIDE BEREAVEMENT

- Loss of Relationship
- Changes in Lifestyle (Secondary Losses)
- Adjustment to Life Without the Deceased
- Emotional Healing/Grief Work

SUICIDE BEREAVEMENT

**LEVEL TWO
SUICIDE**

SUICIDE BEREAVEMENT

- Volitional Death
- Rejection & Abandonment
- Sudden Death
- Often Violent Death
- Post-Traumatic Stress

SUICIDE BEREAVEMENT

- Social Stigma (Real and/or Perceived)
- Embarrassment
- Isolation
- Loss of Social Support

SUICIDE BEREAVEMENT

- Unanswered Questions (“WHY?”)
- Blame and Responsibility
- Intensified Denial and Delusion
- Magnified Emotions
- Suicidal Feelings

SUICIDE BEREAVEMENT

LEVEL THREE

Often (but not always) present:

***SYSTEM STRESS
PRIOR TO SUICIDE***

SUICIDE BEREAVEMENT

- **Mental Illness**
- **Substance Abuse**
- **Unhealthy Family Dynamics**
- **Impaired Coping Skills**
- **Loss of Energy and Hope**
- **Relief**

SUICIDE BEREAVEMENT

What can be done for survivors?

- Self-care
- Support of family and friends
- Faith/spiritual beliefs
- Medical care
- Professional counseling
- Support and self-help groups for bereavement
- Survivor conferences and educational material
- Healing through involvement

- Effective clinical care for mental, physical, and substance use disorders
- Easy access to a variety of clinical interventions and support for help-seeking
- Restricted access to highly lethal means of suicide
- Strong connections to family and community support

From the *National Strategy for Suicide Prevention: Goals and Objectives for Action*

- Support through ongoing medical and mental health care relationships
- Skills in problem solving, conflict resolution and nonviolent handling of disputes
- Cultural and religious beliefs that discourage suicide and support self-preservation

From the *National Strategy for Suicide Prevention: Goals and Objectives for Action*

SUPPORTING SUICIDE SURVIVORS

SIEC ALERT #38
November 1999
Suicide Information & Education Centre
<http://www.siec.ca>

Supporting Suicide Survivors

- More than 30,000 Americans complete suicide each year.
- Compounding this critical loss of life is the profound and often debilitating despair and grief experienced by surviving families and friends.
- Using a modest estimate of six survivors for each suicidal death, researcher John McIntosh estimates that one out of every 68 Americans is a survivor of suicide.

Stigma

- Survivors may find their social network, perhaps even their clergy or caregivers, have judgmental or condemning attitudes or beliefs about suicide.
- Cultural and religious taboos combine with our tendency to avoid death and bereavement issues and can serve to isolate and stigmatize suicide survivors.
- A lack of social support can increase a survivor's risk of complicated grieving, depression, and suicide.

Some Common Survivors Responses

Some Common Survivor Responses

- A struggle to make sense of the suicide
- **ANGER**
- Guilt over failed responsibilities, real or imagined
- Isolation caused by a sense of self-imposed shame
- Aloneness when others keep their distance

Some Common Survivor Responses

- Blame towards those perceived to have contributed to the suicide
- Awkwardness when others don't know how to respond
- Having to face the traumatic and sometimes unexpected nature of the death

Some Common Survivor Responses

- Difficulty accepting that the death was by suicide
- Fear that powerful grief reactions may not be normal
- Remorse over lost opportunity

What Helps and Heals Us As Survivors?

What Helps and Heals Us as Survivors?

- Acknowledge that the death is a suicide
- Learn more about suicide and grief
- Acknowledge our feelings and our loss
- Find formal and informal rituals to honor loved one's life

What Helps and Heals Us as Survivors?

- Call upon our personal strengths and ways of coping from other difficult times
- Read, write, express our grief in a way and at a time that is comfortable for us
- Find other suicide survivors, share our stories and build mutual support

What Helps and Heals Us as Survivors?

- Understanding and thoughtful offers of support from others

“I’m here if you need someone to talk to.”

What Hinders Our Healing as Survivors?

What Hinders Our Healing as Survivors?

- Hide or deny that the cause of death is suicide
- Blame ourselves or others
- Internal and external pressure to “finish” or “stop” grieving
- Self destructive behaviors, e.g. drug or substance dependency

What Hinders Our Healing as Survivors?

Thoughtless or cliché comments from others:

- “It was so sudden!”
- “You can’t live in the past.”
- “Didn’t you know this was going to happen?”

How Can Caregivers Assist Survivors?

How Can Caregivers Assist Survivors?

- Listen without judging
- Accept the intensity of an individual's grief
- Communicate with compassion – not cliché
- Offer and provide information – literature, community resources, support group information

How Can Caregivers Assist Survivors?

- Reassure the survivor that their feelings are normal
- Be vigilant about suicidality: ASK!
- Be sensitive to difficult times: holidays, anniversary dates

How Can Caregivers Assist Survivors?

- Being there is important
- Let the bereaved know they are not alone
- Offer oneself, and expect that your invitations may be refused
- Have patience, and continue to offer oneself over time

UNDERSTANDING SUICIDE BEREAVEMENT

“Effective postvention for suicidally bereaved families may be one of the most important forms of multigenerational prevention available to mental health.”

John R. Jordan, PhD
Is Suicide Bereavement Different?
A Reassessment of the Literature
Suicide and Life Threatening Behavior
Volume 34, Number 2, 2004 (Summer 2004)

SUICIDE BEREAVEMENT

**POSTVENTION
IS
PREVENTION!**



Linda Flatt and
Terri Greenfield
with Senator Harry Reid

Nevada Life Keeper Quilt
on the Capital steps



Healing Through Involvement
Washington, DC 1998



2003

**Suicide Prevention Legislation
Adopted in 2003 Session
of Nevada State Legislature!**

SPAN-Nevada

Suicide Prevention Resources

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP)

www.afsp.org

AFSP-Nevada Chapter (AFSP-NV)

www.afspnv.org

American Association of Suicidology (AAS)

www.suicidology.org

Suicide Prevention Action Network (SPAN USA)

www.spanusa.org

Nevada State Suicide Prevention web site

www.suicidehelpnv.org

Surviving Suicide (survivor support) web site

survivingsuicide.com

1-800-273-TALK

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org

**Suicide Prevention Hotline of
Nevada**

1-877-885-HOPE (4673)

Crisis Call Center

Reno, Nevada
