

# Bereavement by Suicide

Bereavement by suicide shares characteristics with other bereavements and it is also different. The grieving process is often complicated and can last longer than other types of bereavement.

## Circumstances of the loss

A death by suicide is often sudden, unexpected and may be violent. This can increase the degree of shock and distress surrounding it.

## Witnessing or imagining what happened

If a person witnessed the death, found the body, or attended to the body, they may suffer from distressing images, flashbacks or nightmares. This can also happen when a person did not directly see anything but cannot stop imagining what happened.

## Questions

Most people bereaved by suicide are haunted by two questions: *“Why did they do it?”* *“Could I have prevented it?”*

It is natural to ask these questions as the brain attempts to learn and protect itself, and sense making is an important part of the grieving process.

But these are impossible questions to answer, and the reality is that you may never know why it happened.

There is no simple reason why someone might take their own life. It is most likely the result of many complex factors, and the final act is usually the last in a long series of events.

It can be hard to imagine that suicide is somebody’s ‘choice’ or ‘decision.’ It is usually the individual’s thought that dying was the only path they could take.

Thinking that you (or anyone else) could have prevented the suicide, is assuming that we all have far more power over the lives of others than we actually do.

In time, most people reach a stage where the questions occupy less of their thoughts, they may accept that they will never know, or they may settle on an answer they can live with.

It can be helpful to ask other questions like *“What can we do now?”* *“What will help me get through today?”* *“How can we support each other with this?”*

## Emotions

Bereavement by suicide can bring a range of intense emotions which might include guilt, anger, confusion, numbing, feeling of failure, abandonment, remembering, longing, regret, helplessness, frustration and sadness.

This bereavement can open up old wounds from other losses or create fear about future losses.

## Thoughts

You may struggle to make sense of what has happened and your beliefs about the world, people and yourself may be challenged.

## Physical reactions

Physical reactions may include physical tightness, restlessness, fatigue, headaches, stomach pains, sleeplessness, nausea, changed appetite and poor concentration.

- There are no set 'stages' of grief. Reactions in the way that you feel and think, and body sensations, can happen at any time and you may find that you go back and forth between feeling different ways.
- It's ok if you or others do not experience these feelings or don't grieve visibly - we all respond in different ways and will have had different relationships with the person who took their own life.
- You are not alone or reacting badly in what you are going through because these reactions are all common and natural.

## Group tensions

- ❖ Groups might come together in their shared grief and social support is really beneficial.
- ❖ If you get together as a group, try not to keep repeating the details about what happened, instead focus on what will help you all manage right now.
- ❖ Existing tensions in relationships can arise as a result of the shock and distress.
- ❖ People can find it difficult to communicate or they may worry about upsetting others.
- ❖ People may be uncomfortable or scared to share how they are feeling.
- ❖ People may have different views about suicide, they may express different judgements about the causes, impact and morality of suicide.

- Nobody should see themselves or another as having to be the 'strong' one.
- Some may value the chance to share how they are feeling & ask questions.
- Some may want company but might not want to talk about what happened.
- Some will prefer support from within the social group & others will prefer it externally.
- There is no time limit on grief so try to be patient with yourself & others

## Information, investigations & lack of privacy

It can be difficult to maintain privacy because many professionals & agencies may become involved across the timeline. Investigations can be lengthy and can reveal information you didn't previously know about the person. There may be public attention and the media may report on the situation.

- Interactions with different people or agencies may provide an opportunity for support, but, you have the right to consider who you want to talk to, when and what you feel comfortable talking about.
- You may wish to seek personal support if you are required to be involved in formal processes.

## How do I know if I need more help?

Most people will recover, some will need more help. You may wish to seek professional support if:

- You are struggling to do your job or function in your daily life as usual.
  - You are finding it difficult to sleep weeks after the event.
- Others have noticed a change in you and encourage you to get help.
  - You do not want to do the things that used to make you happy.
- You are drinking or smoking too much, or using drugs to cope with your feelings.
  - Around six weeks has passed and you do not feel any better.