

Information for Catholic Survivors of Death from Suicide

This handout does not cover all aspects of this topic, but may contain some helpful information.

When a loved one dies regardless of the reason, the pain and suffering from the death can be very deep. Even Jesus wept when his good friend Lazarus died (see John 11:1-45). It is healthy for us to acknowledge and be open to this uncomfortable feeling of pain. Emotions are part of what it means to be human.

In past decades, mental health professionals talked once about “stages of grief” and so many people believed that they needed to follow these stages by the book. What we know today from more recent research is that grief and the feelings connected to it do shift and change over time...but not so much in orderly stages. Grief and associated feelings move around in somewhat unpredictable ways. We also know that instead of experiencing one emotion at a time as might be expected with the concept of stages of grief, what usually happens is that a person may experience a wide range of thoughts and emotions, and sometimes many of them together at the same time. Mixed and changing emotions then are common in grief. It is one thing that makes grief complicated. This is especially true when grieving a death that has resulted from a mental illness or addiction.

People who are grieving (and those around them) sometimes wonder how long they will suffer. There is no timetable. Each person has his or her own internal timetable for recovery. We should allow ourselves and others to grieve in our/their own way, on our/their own time. The passage of time usually does heal. If a person suffers for an extended time in ways that interfere seriously with life functions (work, school, family, et cetera), then a consultation with a mental health professional might be appropriate.

It is human nature to want to make sense out of tragedy and suffering when it occurs. It is normal to talk about what happened (sometimes over and over), and to try to understand what often is just a mystery. Death from mental illness or addiction is particularly hard to understand because it seems so irrational and unnatural. Sometimes we may learn more about what our loved one might have been experiencing, but sometimes we will never fully know exactly what caused a person to die from his or her own action.

Blame is a powerful temptation. In the process of our trying to understand the “why” of suicide and mental illness, it can be human nature to want to blame ourselves, others, and even God for what happened. This will usually not help. Mental health professionals usually believe that “what” is a better question than “why.” We may ask God in discernment, what we might do now that this tragedy and suffering has happened, and we may ask Him what His will is for us now.

It is important to understand that suicide is nearly always the unfortunate result of mental illness and/or drug/alcohol use or some other type of addiction. In fact, in many cases, it is appropriate to understand that depression or addiction or some other mental illness caused our loved one’s death even if the person seemed rational and well. If we choose, we can tell others that our loved one died from depression, for example, or from addiction. Mental illness and addiction are gradually being seen as any other illness, such as cancer or diabetes. People sometimes unfortunately die from mental illness or addiction just as they may die from cancer or diabetes.

Catholics sometimes worry about the soul of their loved one who has died from suicide, depression, or addiction. In the past, suicide had been discussed as an unforgiveable sin because it involves taking a life. Causing a death is always a serious spiritual and moral issue. However, today because of our better understanding of suicide and mental illness and addiction, the Church does not have the same perspective that it may have taken in the past. Because we do not fully know all of the circumstances happening in the person's life and we do know that God in His immense and perfect wisdom does understand these circumstances fully, we can allow God to care for our loved one's soul. We know from St. Maria Faustina that God wants us to know more than ever about His great mercy which is like an ocean, an overwhelming sea of love. So as in the event of any type of death of any loved one, we entrust the person's soul to God. We can believe that if our loved one knew of Jesus and tried to follow Him, then now he or she is likely on the way toward Heaven (see again John 11:1-45). This is why Catholics celebrate the Mass of Resurrection after death as part of the funeral process, and why we pray for the soul of our loved ones after their death. It is quite important actually for us to pray for our deceased loved ones. It is an action of love that we can take, and it is effective and may offer some consolation at a time in which we feel helpless and powerless. We do not know when they might reach Heaven, but once they do, we can be certain that our loved ones will intervene for us on our behalf with Jesus, and that our prayers may be used for someone else who is in need of them on the way to Heaven. Our prayers are never wasted. Our prayers are always heard.

Our loved ones will not visit us after death, and we should not seek to converse with them or try to "see" them. One of the tricks of our spiritual enemy (the devil) is to tempt us in the midst of our suffering to try and have these encounters with deceased loved ones. Instead of making some sort of contact with our deceased loved ones via some psychic or medium, we may either be swindled out of money or worse...we may be inviting demonic activity into our presence. In other words, in the midst of our grief the enemy will take advantage of us because we are looking for a way to ease our suffering. Keep in mind that this is different from having a dream about a loved one or hearing their voice or even thinking we see them...which is entirely normal and is a part of the grieving process. After a dream, a sound, or a vision, we may realize quickly that it is our imagination being stirred from the depths of our grief. This is different than trying to see or hear them and engaging the help of someone, even someone who seems religious, who says they can allow us to see or hear our deceased loved ones. Our Catholic Church Catechism (CCC) addresses this clearly (see CCC 2116) with a warning for our protection. We can reach our deceased loved ones best by praying for them, and asking them to pray for us. Staying close to the sacraments (Mass, Confession, Anointing) is the best way to be protected against evil. Our Blessed Mother is a great protector against evil, as is her spouse St. Joseph.

In our grief, we may become deeply lost in our distress, especially at first. However we need to remember others who may need our help: a spouse, a parent, children or siblings, and friends. Sometimes we may not be in a position to minister well to them and support them ourselves, but we can make sure that they don't get lost or left alone, that there are others supporting them for us until we can reach out to them. We must realize that the stress of this situation has the potential to create division among our family and friends, and we should guard against this happening by being mindful and careful with our anger that may be part of grief. We are one body, and when one hurts...we all hurt (see 1 Corinthians 12:12-26). Grief can sometimes create situations that call for forgiveness or apologies when we are ready to forgive or apologize.

Finding resources for help can be important during the time of grieving, such as books, support groups, and counseling. Many parishes have bereavement groups. We recommend Catholic counselors for Catholics, because a Catholic counselor will understand your faith, will help you deepen it in the context of your distress, and will not make any suggestions for relief that would be contradictory to the teachings, values, and traditions of the Church.

The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (www.afsp.org) offers a brochure “After a Suicide” and organizes “Out of the Darkness” walks around the country to promote awareness. Many surviving loved ones of death from suicide like to participate in these walks. It also gives a feeling that we are doing something, which can help combat the sense of helplessness and powerlessness of the situation regarding suicide. The Katie Foundation (www.thekatiefoundation.org) offers St. Dymphna and St. John of God prayer cards in English and Spanish. San Diego Auxiliary Bishop John Dolan co-edited a pastoral handbook published by Ave Maria Press entitled “Responding to Suicide” to assist Catholic ministry leaders.

Our Blessed Mother Mary has many titles. One of them is Our Lady of Sorrows. This title recognizes that because of her close connection to her son Jesus, her life contained many sorrows which are represented in the traditional painting (shown below) by seven daggers in her heart. Praying along with Our Mother under this title is very comforting to many Catholics. As a suffering mother, she knows our pain. We can also unite our suffering to that of her son Jesus, by meditating on the crucifix. There is no way to escape human suffering, though we may try.



The death of a loved one can be especially troubling to children, as for example they may not understand the concept of death being permanent. They may have many questions, and even though we are suffering, and their questions bring more pain...we need to address their questions honestly but in a way that they can understand at their age. They may be afraid in the situation, and have some anxiety. They may also feel guilty in an unnecessary or unhealthy way.

Our job as adults is to reassure children and help them feel safe. This means that we may allow situations that we usually don't agree to...such as sleeping in close quarters with parents or other siblings in situations that are safe and comforting for them. We can eventually get back to the usual routine with them. Children may also cope with grief in other ways, such as physical complaints and being distracted, temporarily not being able to concentrate in schoolwork, for example. Again, patience and reassurance are helpful for them. Sometimes a private message can be communicated to the teacher(s) and/or school counselor(s) when such an event occurs in a child's life. Many schools are responsive and compassionate in these situations.

Self-care is important during this time. This may mean setting boundaries with others who mean well in trying to support us. Self-care for example involves trying to eat well and sleep well and asking for some time off from work. Self-care might also look like allowing others to do things for us, such as meals, yard work, childcare, et cetera until we feel stable again. Adoration and going to Mass more often are other methods of self-care that can help us connect with God's peace and consolation during our time of grief.

People sometimes are angry with God in the midst of a great tragedy like suicide. It is okay to express this respectfully but also good for us to work toward a resolution and forgiveness of God and/or others. Sometimes a counselor or spiritual director can help us get unstuck from resentment and anger, so that we do not have to carry that extra weight around. Counseling and spiritual direction are also healthy forms of self-care. Talking with a close friend or family member can help as well. Anger becomes toxic to us and others if we hold onto it for too long.

The Catholic funeral Mass is an important tradition and is of great value in healing and moving through the process of grief. If it is too overwhelming to be so involved in the funeral plans, you can ask others you trust to help you with the events. A person who has died from suicide, depression, or addiction is deserving of a Catholic funeral Mass just as anyone else who has died from an illness. How you describe the events in the obituary or on social media is up to you. Be firm but kind with others regarding what you desire regarding public information about your loss.

Try to be patient with those few people who may be judgmental or rejecting because they do not understand suicide, mental illness or addiction. Most people will be understanding and compassionate. Focus more on them and less on those who are being insensitive.

It may be hard to imagine moving on through life without the person you love, but it is possible in time. With God's grace and the help of others, all things are possible. Be gentle with yourself, your family, your parish, and with the process of grief. Reach out for help as needed.

Do not be surprised if your experience of this pain at some point in the future may enable you to reach out and show compassion and support to another person, couple, or family who has experienced a death of a loved one from suicide, mental illness, or addiction. It may help you educate your parish community about mental illness or addiction. We have strength in numbers, and this is what it means to be a loving and merciful church community.

Peace be with you.