

Survivors of Suicide

A handbook
for those left behind



SHAWNEE COUNTY
SUICIDE
PREVENTION
COALITION

Survivors of Suicide

Our intent is to provide you with some initial resources in this most difficult time. Please know that while this is likely the most difficult thing you will ever face, you are not alone. There are others who are here to help you now and in the future. We sincerely hope you find this handbook helpful and that you will access some of the suggested resources.

The Shawnee County Suicide Prevention Coalition is made up of individuals who have an interest in and desire to help reduce the number of suicide deaths in Shawnee County. The goal of the coalition is to work with community partners to save lives and support families in Topeka and Shawnee County through suicide prevention training, education, and awareness.

We encourage you to review this handbook several times because you may find it hard to stay focused during the following days and weeks. Remember: **You are not alone.**



Letter of Introduction

We understand. We are your friends, your neighbors, your co-workers, your family.

We live in the same community and have been touched in some way by the pain and stigma of suicide. Some of us are recent survivors, others have survived for years.

The phrase “**Survivors of Suicide**” is a term used for those coping with the loss of someone they cared about to suicide. Coping with any death is not an orderly progression. We are constantly moving forward and backwards through the various stages of grief. Coping with a death by suicide can be compounded by the tragic loss of a vital life, the public shame (perceived or real), secrecy, second guessing, and amplified feelings of guilt and anger.

We offer our resources to help support your healing. For many, sharing thoughts, emotions, fears, and questions can help diminish loneliness, pain, and isolation. **You are not alone.** Your grief is your own journey, but there are others who can help along the way. You can move forward from where you are now, despite the doubt you feel that anything can get better.

We offer this booklet as an opportunity to find resources, when you are ready, that may help your journey through this painful path of loss.

Each year more than 33,000 people in the United States die by suicide. In Shawnee County alone there are roughly 30 suicides per year. The devastated family and friends left behind are known as “survivors.” In fact, research shows that during the course of our lifetime 85 percent of us will lose someone we care about to suicide. That means that there are millions of survivors who, like you, are trying to cope with this heartbreaking loss.

The Range of Emotions Survivors Experience:

Shock is a common immediate reaction. You may feel numb or disoriented, and may have trouble concentrating.

Relief particularly if the suicide followed a long and difficult mental or physical illness.

Sadness. Once the “reactive” emotions have either passed or become manageable, the basic sadness that accompanies any loss moves to the forefront. This may be felt more acutely when confronted with reminders or special occasions. As we gradually learn to accept our loss and embrace happy memories of our lost loved one, we make room in our hearts for happiness to re-enter.

Depression may include disturbed sleep, loss of appetite, intense sadness, and lack of energy.

Anger is a natural part of the grieving process, but survivors of suicide are far more susceptible to it – anger towards the deceased, another family member, a therapist, yourself or a higher power.

Guilt including thinking “If only I had ...”. Guilt comes from a mistaken belief that we could have or should have prevented the death, or from regret over unreconciled aspects of the relationship. In truth, we all do the best we can. You are not responsible for your loved one’s suicide in any way, shape, or form.

Denial is the refusal to accept reality or fact, acting as if a painful event did not exist. This is considered a defense mechanism.

Acceptance is a survivor’s goal. To accept this tragic event as something that could not have been prevented and cannot be changed. Only with acceptance, can you move on with your life.

Support is Important

Suicide support groups are an immeasurable help to survivors. They are a place to receive emotional support, and learn from other suicide survivors.

Following the Suicide

Following the discovery of your loved one, there can be a cascade of events and responses that are set into motion. The first people to respond will usually be uniformed law enforcement officers. Depending on the situation, they may call EMS, the medical examiner, or other investigators and detectives.

The following are recommendations to assist you in getting through this difficult time:

- Until the facts are known, the investigation may be treated as if there was a homicide. This means that law enforcement officers may secure the scene, remove personal belongings from your home or property, or prevent your access to the area. They may ask to interview family members or others while facts are fresh. Remember that investigators are acting on the behalf of the victim and their loved ones.
 - If you should be asked to identify the body, it will be emotionally difficult for you. It is recommended that you ask someone to be with you to give you support during this time.
 - You may need to choose a funeral home.
 - When a person dies, his or her body is placed in custody of the medical examiner/ coroner who is responsible for determining the actual cause of death. The autopsy takes about 24-48 hours, after which the body may be released. During this time, the family will not be allowed to see the body. If blood tests, toxicology examinations, etc. are done, final results may not be available for some time. An investigator from the coroner's office will assist in the investigation of the death. Their number is 785-368-2350.
 - You may have to reclaim personal belongings. Usually possessions travel with the body, so you will want to make sure they are accounted for. In Shawnee County, belongings may be released when the detective believes they are no longer needed as evidence.
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- When a loved one dies in your home in a violent way, the results are an awful reminder of what happened and can create an unhealthy living environment. It is important to clean the area as soon as possible, for both psychological and health reasons. For the same reasons, it is important that you do not complete the cleaning yourself. Ask your assigned detective to recommend a reputable bio-recovery service company that provides this service. If they do not know of one, you can call the American Bio-Recovery Association's 24-hour hotline toll free at 888-979-2272 to connect you with a network of certified companies. Check with your homeowner's insurance company as your policy may cover these costs.
- You will need to get copies of the death certificate. Usually these are provided through the funeral home. Know that the medical examiner may delay signing the death certificate until all tests are complete and the actual cause of death is identified.
- It is a good idea to obtain a copy of the police report after the investigation is completed. These requests may be directed to the Topeka Police Department Records Section or your local law enforcement.
- Notify all of your insurance companies, benefits plans, governmental agencies, health care providers, and pharmacies either to file claims or to have their records changed appropriately. Remember to keep all receipts and keep track of all expenses as they occur.
- If your loved one has a will, you will need to locate it.

*Jenkins, William S (2001). What To Do When The Police Leave,
WBJ Press, Richmond, Va.*

What Do I Do Now?

Let other people help you. Don't shut out your support system.

With everything you have been through, it can be difficult at times to remember that you can survive the pain. Through this process it is important to take care of yourself, both emotionally and physically, while remaining connected to others. We hope the following suggestions from fellow survivors can serve as a guide for you during this difficult time.

Take Care of Yourself

- Try to take care of your own well-being; consider visiting your doctor for a check-up. Discuss with him/her any difficulties you may be experiencing with sleep, appetite, or other physical symptoms you may have.
 - Try to continue to eat healthy food on a regular basis even if you don't feel like eating. This will help your immune system stay strong.
 - Try to find a way to get regular exercise as this will help your body's defenses against illness and will help as you work through your grief.
 - Don't be afraid to cry and give yourself time to heal.
 - It is not uncommon to experience unexpected waves of sadness. These are normal and a natural part of the grieving process. Expect setbacks. Give yourself permission to get professional help.
 - Be patient with yourself and others who may not understand.
 - This is not the time to make major life decisions such as relationships, financial situations, selling a house, etc. Be patient with yourself and take one moment or day at a time. Many survivors find it beneficial to connect with a support group.
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What Do I tell My Children?

One of the most common questions for survivors is how to explain suicide to children. Children are particularly vulnerable to feeling abandoned and guilty, so listening to their questions and offering honest, straightforward, age appropriate answers is paramount.

The following are suggestions from fellow survivors on how to explain suicide to children:

- Tell them the truth in simple, age-appropriate language.
 - When you have a choice, tell them as soon as you have the news, in a place where both you and they will feel comfortable.
 - Reassure them that the death was not their fault.
 - Resist the urge to keep the suicide a secret out of fear that the children will copy the behavior.
 - Reassure them that you, together with other appropriate adults, will take care of them.
 - Let them know they can approach you at any time if they want to talk.
 - Children may express their feelings by crying, withdrawing, laughing, or expressing anger at you or others.
 - Resume and maintain the child's regular routine as much as possible.
 - The greatest gift you can give children is your assurance of love and support. Allow them to express their feelings, answer their questions, and provide them with affection.
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To fellow survivors of suicide:

I lost my 21 year old son to suicide in November, 2010. He was smart and funny and had a wonderful group of friends. He had the biggest personality and was the one everyone went to when they needed something. It was completely out of character for him to take his own life. I was completely lost and confused. I didn't know what to do or how this could have happened in our family.

Grief impacts everyone differently. The best advice we received was from a friend who had also lost a child- he told us that our grief was our own- there was no right or wrong way to do anything, just our way. As long as we were not doing anything unhealthy, it was our journey. In our family it became clear that my husband and I were dealing with our feelings very differently. We quickly agreed that we were in this together and found a therapist to help with our powerful emotions and guilt. I also found a support group for parents who had lost children. It was important for me to know there were other people who understood my thoughts and feelings, sometimes not even having to say them out loud.

My life is forever changed by my son's suicide. Everything is measured by "before Matt died" or "after Matt died". We slowly had to learn a new normal, not just individually, but who we were as a family. The guilt and sadness are overwhelming at first. And to be honest, time does not heal everything. I will never be fully healed, I will never be completely whole again. But with time, the pain and guilt become more bearable. I will always be heartbroken from the loss, but have learned to cherish the memories and can now smile through my tears.

I was at such a loss for what to do when my son died. I didn't know, for example, his death would be treated as a crime and we would be "interviewed" instead of consoled. My hope for anyone reading this is to find something helpful to them in their time of grief, to know you are not alone and that there is hope when you are feeling hopeless.

— Elaine Adair

Mental Health Resources

Family Service & Guidance Center

fsgctopeka.com
(785) 232-5005

Headquarters Counseling Center

headquarterscounselingcenter.org
(785) 841-2345

Heritage Mental Health Clinic

heritagemhc.com
(785) 272-5566

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI):

namikansas.org (Kansas)
(800) 539-2660

National Hopeline Network

hopeline.com
(800) SUICIDE (784-2433)

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

nationalsuicidepreventionlifeline.org
988

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

newbeginningshealthcare.com
(785) 233-7138

Prevention and Recovery Services – (PARS)

parstopeka.com
(785) 266-8666

Professional Treatment Services

kspts.com
(785) 232-8623

Sims Kemper

sims-kemper.com
(785) 233-0666

Shawnee County Suicide Prevention

scspsc.org

Stormont-Vail West

stormontvail.org/Facilities/SVWest.html (785)
270-4600

Suicide Prevention Resource Center

sprc.org

Washburn Counseling Services

washburn.edu/counseling
(785) 670-3100 or (785) 670-1470

New Dawn Wellness & Recovery Center

newdawnrecover.org
(785) 266-0202