

Day by day: Life following bereavement by suicide

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Thank you for having me and good wishes to SOSAD in their important work...

- ▶ An Understanding of Bereavement by Suicide vs. Other Bereavement
- ▶ Dealing with Traumatic Grief at Different Life Stages
- ▶ How to support someone who has been impacted by Suicide
- ▶ Tips on how to help yourself adapt after a bereavement by suicide
- ▶ Conclusions

Some thoughts to begin with....

“A stone thrown into a lake reflects the rippling effects of suicide and its impact on survivors”

Andrissen & Kryszynska 2012

“The problem can no longer be seen only as an individual and family tragedy, borne in secrecy and stigma. Suicide is everybody’s business”

*Psychological Society of Ireland
1992*



Setting the scene.....

- ▶ Every year more than 6 million people lose a loved one through suicide (Schotanus-Dijkstra, 2014)
- ▶ 72% of people bereaved by suicide (or suicide survivors) expressed the need for professional help, yet only 47% actually received it (Andriessen & Krysinaka, 2012)
- ▶ Those who are bereaved as a result of suicide can be at higher risk of developing mental health difficulties
- ▶ Stopping a person from taking their own life is ultimately impossible

Expected Grief Reactions include....

- ▶ Yearning for loved one
- ▶ Feeling consumed by grief
- ▶ Feeling a loss of control over life
- ▶ Feeling anxious about the future
- ▶ Shock, denial & anger
- ▶ Change of role & family dynamics

People bereaved by suicide may also experience....

- ▶ Feelings of stigma or being judged by others
- ▶ Anger and injustice (especially if suicide is directed toward someone)
- ▶ Possible sense of relief if there was a prolonged crisis for the dead person, this can later elicit feelings of guilt/shame.
- ▶ Perception of “failure” by victim or family to deal with an emotional issue
- ▶ Death Anxiety/ life crisis/ “What is it all about?”

(Cvinar, 2005)

Experience of People bereaved by suicide in Ireland.....

- ▶ Some research suggests that Irish people experience is similar to other countries, including a higher risk of depression & worry, Post Traumatic Stress and distress caused by contradictory thoughts and feelings (Gaffney & Greene, 1997; Gaffney et al, 2000)
- ▶ Part of the impact for survivors is influenced by underlying social, religious and political ideas
- ▶ The Legal system requires A Coroners Court case and there can be media attention to deal with
- ▶ Suicide can impact broadly, including upon health professionals (Gaffney et al, 2009)

Traumatic Bereavement in Childhood

- ▶ Early Childhood
- ▶ Middle Childhood
- ▶ Adolescence



Early Childhood (0-5 years)

- ▶ Children of this age are developing attachments to caregivers and are capable of grief, though not in a way that adults may understand.
- ▶ They need the support of trusting adults to express themselves verbally and emotionally. They will need repeated explanations time and time again to understand what is said.
- ▶ They do not understand the finality of death/ They may attribute death to magic or unseen reasons.
- ▶ They do not understand the long term implications of death and may appear unaffected. They are more likely to think about death in quieter times.

Young Children's Reaction to Trauma

- ▶ Young children tend to experience trauma as a fright and may display this by crying or being startled
- ▶ They need to make sense of what has happened, leading to many questions, and often playing out the loss
- ▶ Some young children experience stress by becoming irritable, experiencing night terrors, bed wetting or feeding difficulties
- ▶ Sudden deaths that are witnessed by children have a more direct impact even if they don't understand what they see. They may create traumatic fantasies to fill in the gaps in their knowledge.
- ▶ They are highly sensitive to the reactions of those around them, and do better when they are free to ask questions and receive answers and feedback

Young Children's Reaction to Trauma

- ▶ Young children have a shorter attention span which may make their grief appear less intense. In reality their grief feelings switch on and off.
- ▶ They can become preoccupied by safety and may need reassurance from trusted adults.
- ▶ They are especially reliant on a daily routine and an upset in this routine makes them feel less secure.
- ▶ They are dependent on their caregiver and the adjustment of the caregiver is known to be the biggest influence on a child's coping skills. The more distressed the adult, the less likely the child is to cope.

Middle Childhood (5-10 years)

- ▶ They understand death is irreversible with concrete causes.
- ▶ They may become preoccupied with unfairness, and may feel singled out or different from their peers.
- ▶ They can empathise with others but they are more likely to hold back their feelings. They understand that death brings sadness. They are less likely to talk for fear of upsetting family members.
- ▶ Like younger children they become preoccupied with safety and their daily routine and rely on their parents/ caregivers reactions.

Adolescence (10-17 years)

- ▶ They experience trauma as a fright experience, and recognise it as a threat
- ▶ They need to understand events, including feelings of injustice. Finding meaning in trauma becomes important
- ▶ They can become stressed and this can manifest itself in poor concentrations, sleep problems, social withdrawal, school performance among others
- ▶ They can overestimate the negative role they may play in traumatic situations
- ▶ They react to separation in the same way as adults by yearning, sadness, heartache etc. They're highly sensitive to peer reactions and do not want to be singled out

Adolescence continued....

- ▶ They can become over whelmed and they can re-experience the grief over their lifetime as they learn more about the world
- ▶ They feel safe in a predictable environment and routine. Home, school and recreational settings are important to make them feel safe and secure. A sudden death can disrupt these routines and make their world less predictable and secure
- ▶ Adolescence is a naturally stressful time and at times parental relationships are strained. This can be difficult in times of trauma when they need parental support the most

Guidelines to support Children

In the short term

- ▶ Promote a safe environment, and try to maintain a routine as much as possible. Avoid unnecessary separations. Take their fears seriously.
- ▶ Be honest and identify their concerns, age appropriate explanations are necessary for children to make sense of the death.
- ▶ Encourage the child to do something for the person that has died such as a poem, a painting etc. Share the feelings of sadness, but not excessively so that the child senses a loss of control from the caregiver, this could impact their feelings of safety

Guidelines to support children

In the long term

- ▶ Allow children to visit graves, encourage questions and discussion
- ▶ Coping with emotions by talking through any anxieties or feelings the child may have. Reassure them that it is okay to have fun and/or feel sad
- ▶ Prepare for significant dates related to the loved one such as birthdays or funerals. Make these occasions have a positive focus as well as allowing for sadness, with a view to the future

Outcomes for Grieving Children

- ▶ Most children will recover from traumatic bereavement. However, like adult grief there is no pre-assigned timeline for dealing with loss. It is likely to have a lifetime impact, not necessarily negative
- ▶ The most intense reactions to trauma are usually expressed within the first 2 years. By increasing the child's sense of safety and supporting their emotional needs, their difficulties can be managed. A stable, caring environment based on facts and honesty is best.
- ▶ It is normal for children to revisit their trauma throughout their childhood and teenage years as they learn and understand more about their world. During these times their behaviour may become volatile. This is a normal reaction.

Adult Responses to Traumatic Bereavement

- ▶ Understanding Grief
- ▶ Short term needs
- ▶ Long term needs



Adults Understanding of Grief

- ▶ Death is unavoidable, permanent, irreversible.
- ▶ Death has concrete causes.
- ▶ They can become preoccupied with injustice.
- ▶ They experience trauma as a fright response
- ▶ They experience stress that may manifest as irritability, easily startled, nervous, nightmares, anger issues or intrusive thoughts.
- ▶ They can attribute blame and overestimate their negative involvement in the trauma.
- ▶ They can understand trauma and its life implications.

Adult Grief continued...

- ▶ Adults become extremely frightened in the wake of trauma, especially if they had witnessed it. Traumatic memories can revisit the person by intrusive thoughts or flashbacks. Trauma will interrupt daily living and make settling back into old routines difficult.
- ▶ The body can react to trauma with fatigue and vulnerability to illness
- ▶ The fright response is tiring on the body and cannot be upheld for prolonged periods of time
- ▶ Grief and trauma can be overwhelming individually, let alone combined. Many adults can become overwhelmed. They may feel anger, guilt or blame as reminders reawaken memories

Adult Grief Continued...

- ▶ Adults who have witnessed the trauma often need extra support and reassurance. Initially memories of the trauma may be more stressful than the bereavement itself. These people may experience a prolonged sense of threat and lack of safety.
- ▶ If the adults have not witnessed directly they may try and fill in the gaps of parts they do not understand, usually filled with worst case scenarios.
- ▶ People who have been traumatically bereaved sometimes seek support from family members and close friends. However, changes in behaviours or irritability may make it difficult for those close to the individual to support them.
- ▶ They may feel less secure and that their environment is unpredictable in the wake of trauma. It is important to try and make the home environment a stable and secure one.

Supporting Grieving Adults

Immediate Needs

- ▶ A safe environment, physically and emotionally
- ▶ Be honest in discussion and listen to any fears, questions or worries, and acknowledge the persons needs
- ▶ Reassure the bereaved person what they are feeling is normal and that their reactions usually decrease over time. Encourage them to seek professional support if they are noticing their distress for prolonged periods of time.
- ▶ Delaying non-essential decisions in the immediate aftermath, can allow people to sort through their feelings and think through choices which will be important in the long term. Encourage them to pace themselves and wait until they are ready.

Supporting Grieving Adults

In the Long Term

- ▶ Rebuild/refocus social network. Encourage person to partake in activities they used to enjoy or take up a new hobby
- ▶ Encourage person to interact with people who make them feel good and they enjoy being around. In the wake of trauma utilise people who are willing to help
- ▶ Encourage them to make plans for the future and create things to look forward to
- ▶ Encourage them to ask questions and explore their potential feelings of anger or guilt

How to be an Active Listener

- ▶ Tips on Supporting Someone through Bereavement by Suicide



Why is listening important?

- ▶ To be understood is healing and many people find talking through problems cathartic and cleansing.
- ▶ You don't need to give solutions or advice to be a good listener. A good listener does not need to give any advice, just being there as a pillar of support is often enough.

The Do's and Don'ts of Active Listening

Do

- ▶ Say something!
- ▶ Have open body language
- ▶ Encourage the person to talk
- ▶ Clarify through open questions...What? Who? Where? When? How?
- ▶ Be attentive
- ▶ Be aware of non-verbal cues

Don't

- ▶ Be distracted by noise or other stimuli
- ▶ Talk about yourself too much
- ▶ Tell them what to do
- ▶ Ask “why”
- ▶ Judge what the person says
- ▶ Rush in to say what you think

Self-Care Tips

- ▶ Minding yourself and your own needs



Vulnerability

- ▶ When dealing with grief increased vulnerability is inevitable.
- ▶ Grief will filter into every phase of life particularly in social situations, holiday times, anniversaries
- ▶ Grief redefines the past but as it passes it can open doors to the future. Grief will never be easy and while life will never be the same without your loved one, new pathways and chapters in life can and will emerge by using some of the ideas here

Identifying Vulnerability and moving towards resilience

- ▶ Machin (2001) has suggested that there is a typical range of response to loss. He suggests that people initially fall into predominantly overwhelming or controlling grief. He suggests that over time people should develop an overlap with more resilience, striving for a balanced grief where resilience is dominant.



Self-Care following suicide bereavement

- ▶ Self-care is extremely important to nurture you on your grief journey, BUT EVERY ONE IS DIFFERENT
- ▶ Asking “Why, What and If?” is very common, as is the tendency to blame and be blamed
- ▶ Little changes can make a significant difference
- ▶ Although you can't change what has happened there are things you can do to affect how you cope with your loss.
- ▶ If you actively engage in self-care, in time you will discover new ways to embrace life and progress along your individual grief journey.
- ▶ Seek outside help as soon as you feel you need it

Self-Care Tips

Break down large tasks into smaller manageable pieces.

Spend time with people and places that make you most happy.

Prioritise your life, responsibilities and time and it's ok to say "no" to items further down the list.

Make time for people who are positive supports and utilise their support.

Don't judge yourself for the range of emotions you will feel (anger guilt, frustration etc.). When you are ready share these feelings with others.

Listen to your favourite music/watch your favourite movies but be mindful that these may be grief triggers.

Self-Care Tips

Start a new hobby or take up an old one you used to enjoy. This will give you a focus and direct your energy into something positive. A certain amount of distraction is good, so that grief does not consume you.

Break down the day into smaller chunks when feeling overwhelmed eg. “I only have to get through lunch” or after lunch focus on your plans for that evening.

Make a list of short term goals that you want to achieve. These can give you a sense of purpose and achievement that you can accomplish after grief.

Fill your home with all your favourite things. Make your home a safe haven.

Self-Care Tips

Find adaptable ways to express your anger...and remember anger is not a problem if you are angry with the right person, about the right issue, in the right manner, in the right place at the right time

Perform random acts of kindness or surprise someone you love

In time, time alone can become more of a comfort

Start a journal that focuses on your strengths and what you are grateful for and want to achieve. Spending time with a pet can help too

Allow yourself and expect bad days when nothing seems right and you feel things are actually getting worse...

References & Further Reading/Resources

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