



at this time:

when someone you know
has died by suicide



NSW  HEALTH





'We understand and respect that at this time no words, no reading material, no person can offer anything to help ease the pain. When you feel ready they may become helpful. Impossible as it seems...'

This tragic event – inescapable, irreparable, irreversible. Alternating confusion, numbness and indescribable pain, felt emotionally and physically. 'It's like a lump of cement is inside my chest.'

Grief – it's personal and private. It's a journey you take. This is my pain, my story. The feeling of loss doesn't go away. The intensity does subside.



Why me? Why my family?

This has changed who we were.

This isn't us. This is the unknown.

Fear penetrates all of your existence. You can't go over or around it. You have to go through it. This adds to your fear.

You want to run away and hide!

One fears for the other children in the family – will they become suicidal? You tend to become overprotective. Being defensive, apprehensive and feelings of dread are common.

Try to rationalise what is real and what is imagined.



Why didn't I see it and stop it?

Feelings of shame and remorse persist. A sense of complete despair prevails. There will always be 'if onlys'.

WHY? WHY? WHY? It is reliving the experience and disputing with yourself about what happened. Could anyone have done anything to stop it? You just wish it was the day before they died.





I'm different

Your identity changes as a person, as a parent, a spouse, a child or a relative or friend. The 'roller coaster ride' of emotions makes it difficult to behave naturally.



How should I behave? What is expected of me?

Relationships become different and some difficult, even within the family. Allow respect, time and space for each other. One's confidence is lost even in making simple decisions. Living feels automated. It's like being in a vacuum.

You feel fragile and may act out of character. You hear a baby cry, or a piece of music and break down completely. You may be irritable and irritated by things you consider trivial compared to the suicide.



Am I going mad?

Confusion and disbelief make you sometimes forget they have died. Shopping is difficult, 'that shirt would look so good with these pants, maybe I should buy...' or at the supermarket – 'those favourite cereals' and then suddenly realising. It feels devastating. Sometimes you have to abandon shopping midway.

It may feel difficult to focus on a task or to remember chores – filling the car, buying milk. It seems too hard.

The constant despair that you just can't fix it!

You're not going mad, you are intensely sad and grieving.





Dealing with anniversaries

Anniversaries are hard to deal with, particularly the weeks and months leading up to them. You may feel more agitated and apprehensive. You feel the emptiness, the void 'on my birthday, I just wanted the present from him, it was always so special'.

Plan ahead for activities for remembrance and special days. This can help to give a sense of connection and achievement, such as writing a card to them, buying or making something to mark the day.



Friends and relatives

It may be hard to tell friends, relatives and others that the person has died by suicide, and to talk about it. Preparing what to say may help, something simple such as 'he died by suicide, that's all I feel I can say'.

Well meaning friends and relatives can be painful to deal with. They often won't listen to you and try to rally you 'out of it'. They just want to talk about how they feel and maybe some have their own gruesome experiences to share, when you least feel like it.

It's almost as if they are invalidating your feelings, as if they're saying 'it couldn't possibly happen to me'. You feel like being left alone.

You may become more selective about the people you include in your life.

This time may become a re-evaluation of priorities in your life.





Go gently with yourself and each other and believe it will get better. It will never be the same.

Live a day at a time.

Take time over funeral arrangements. Ask the funeral director for a lock of your loved one's hair (if that's what you'd like).

Think about asking for a photograph – for those not able to come to the funeral.

Delay making major decisions. You may regret it afterwards.

Have courage to hang in there, even during the darkest days. Reach out and ask for support when the load gets too heavy. Best friends and sometimes strangers also touched by suicide can bring you care and comfort. Don't discount professional support.

Talk and cry openly about your loved one, their life and the times you had with them.


Speak aloud or write down what you would like to say to them. It may be words of love, anger, hurt at being left behind, regret for things said or not said, done or not done.

This may cause you pain but with repetition it does decrease.

Crying seems to ease the hurt.

The healing takes time.





We understand and respect that at this time no words, no reading material, no person can offer anything to ease the pain. When you feel ready they may become helpful, impossible as it seems. We have all screamed in our heads – ‘not me, I’m different, I know it will never get better! I just want him/her home’.



One surviving mother says

‘We survivors are like amputees. We know that a part of ourselves is gone but our minds and our bodies haven’t compensated for this loss yet. So we have to rehabilitate like the amputee and accept that we do it in stages, over time. Be fair on ourselves by knowing that we will have to do some of our living differently using what we have left.’

Further copies are available from:

Better Health Centre
Locked Mail Bag 5003
GLADESVILLE NSW 2111
Tel (02) 9816 0452
Fax (02) 9816 0492
Website www.health.nsw.gov.au

© NSW Department of Health
SHPN (CMH) 980024

Reprinted July 1999
Reprinted May 2004
Revised October 2007

Educational institutions are permitted to copy the whole or part of this and shall not be liable for the payment of fees to the author/publisher in respect of copyright.

