

Information and support for parents

who have lost a child to suicide

This booklet was prepared following a series of meetings with parents bereaved by suicide.



**Jesuit
Social Services**
Building a Just Society

**Support
After Suicide**

www.supportaftersuicide.org.au

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for parents
who have lost a child to suicide**

This booklet was prepared following a series of meetings with parents who have lost a son or daughter to suicide. They sat around a table at the *Support After Suicide* office in Richmond and shared experiences, thoughts and feelings so that we could put together this resource for other parents.

The booklet is in three sections: the impact, the impact on relationships and what helps. You may find it beneficial to dip in and out rather than read the whole booklet through.

We want this to be a source of information, comfort and hope and we wish you well if you find yourselves living with this tragic experience.

Finally, *Support After Suicide* expresses their heartfelt thanks to Chris, Estelle, Jim, Julie, Kathy, Lisa, Neil M and Neil S for sharing your experience. This resource could not have been developed without you.

“Our son died a little over three years ago. I still remember when we got the phone call. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I just thought, this can't be true, it felt like a bad dream; I'd spoken to him that morning and he seemed fine. He'd been a bit down and maybe a bit stressed about how things were going at uni, but we had no idea he was feeling that bad.”

“So many times I've thought, what did we miss? How could I not have seen that he was going to do this? I just didn't think he was having such trouble with things.”

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The Impact

Trauma and shock

Losing a child to suicide, most of the time, will come as a complete shock. This can be the case even if there has been a long period of difficulty due to severe mental health issues or substance use.

“Even though I’d been expecting it for years, nothing prepares you for the shock. The feelings of shock and numbness following the death initially can make you question your capacity to love.”

It is not uncommon to experience symptoms associated with trauma, such as not being able to eat or drink for several days, nausea, extreme difficulty with memory, concentration and taking in new information, feelings of numbness, anxiety, flashbacks and disturbing imagery or nightmares.

These feelings tend to be experienced within the first year, and counselling support can help to get through the worst of it. If trauma symptoms persist it’s important to seek further help and support.

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Guilt

The instinct to protect one’s child is strong and many parents described going through a stage of questioning what they could have done to prevent their child’s death; ‘What if..?’ and ‘If only I had..’

Eventually you come to a realisation that you’re not going to know the answers and you’ll be okay.

Parents described feeling intense guilt and a loss of confidence stemming from a belief that they failed as a parent because their child took their own life. It’s not uncommon to go over and over what happened in the past.

It can help to reframe guilt as a ‘sense of responsibility’, because, as a parent, it is natural to feel this way, it goes very deep. When we love someone, there is a bond and we want the best for those we love. This will naturally lead to

feeling a sense of responsibility.

This sense of responsibility is an expression of love, so it’s almost impossible not to feel some level of guilt. It’s good to remember that *feeling* guilty, does not mean you *are* guilty . It is more about love than culpability in their death.

It can help to remember that suicide is a consequence of multiple and complex factors. We often speak about it as a perfect storm; multiple contributing factors coming together creating a crisis. Some from years past, some recent events and experiences, but never one thing or one person.

A loss of meaning in life

The instinct to protect one's child was described as 'primal' and that it was difficult to imagine a future without this protective role as a parent. The death of a child suddenly challenges this deeply-cherished sense of meaning, purpose and identity in one's life.

The practical tasks

The immediate aftermath of a child's death often means parents are busy with managing their child's funeral/memorial service, possessions, finances, utility accounts, legal documents and the coronial investigation.

These tasks can feel particularly overwhelming when experiencing symptoms of grief and trauma. Parents have said that it is important to ask for help, or to accept help when it is offered.

Impact on family relationships and dynamics

Different grieving styles

Many parents spoke about feeling confused if their partner or other children were grieving differently to them. Some people tend to be more outward and expressive with their emotions, while others are less expressive and more internalised. This can create confusion and fear that their partner does not care or love their child as much as they do.

We had to learn new ways to understand each other.

They spoke about how important it is to educate oneself about grief, and understand that grief may be expressed in different ways. Bringing a curious attitude to their partner's style of grieving helped to reduce judgements and tensions from arising.

Stress on the relationship

Many parents described their relationship with their partner moving through new and unknown territory after the loss of their child.

"The relationship had never been tested in this way".

Some said it could be very hard at times to see their partner grieving. They wanted to help but didn't feel they could because of their own struggles with grief. One parent said that this can change with time and that there are still times when you can support your partner.

"We had fights in a way we hadn't before"

There can also be a tendency for parents not only to blame themselves, but also to blame each other. This can lead to conflict. It can be helpful to talk about these feelings and if necessary seek professional support to facilitate discussion and help resolve them.

“We had to learn new ways to understand each other”.

There is a common idea that grieving couples will inevitably separate. This is a myth. There is some evidence that a relationship that is already having difficulties may end.

However, we know that many relationships become stronger due to a shared love and loss of a child.

Siblings

Some parents said that because their own grief was so consuming at times, they didn't realise how much their other children were impacted by the death.

“They (surviving children) have lost the parent that you were – you basically re-form as a parent. I had help to support myself and by supporting myself I could be stronger to support them.”

“I didn't understand the impact.. It's hard to know what life is like for another person unless you've actually been in that situation... I haven't lost a brother to suicide.”

One mother described having an angry exchange with her surviving son on the day of his brother's death. She understood that the anger between them arose from a shared distress.

“I realised how confused and bewildered he was, and so was I.”

In relation to his surviving daughter, one father said:

Your kids seeing you take care of yourself and seeing you doing the best you can to get through it, is really important. Your kids need you too, as a parent..

“There's nothing wrong with quietness as well... you can still connect in different ways such as doing gardening together and making a point to go and watch them play sport. She knows I'm not a talker, I'm there supporting her still, but I'm not the father I used to be – the joy, the laughter... I'm still with her, but I don't push the issue. We hardly say a word together, but there's love. I can see the hurt in her. Sometimes you've just got to be with the person... you can take comfort from the fact that when you're together, you're together.”

Another mother said that sometimes she saw personality traits of the son she had lost in her grandchildren, such as his sense of humour and playfulness. While this brought her a sense of delight, she felt nervous because of how it might be for the parents of her

grandchildren.

She was concerned it would make them fearful of losing their own children to suicide because they had similar traits to the deceased. Having to hold back from saying what she observed felt painful.

Anxiety about other children

After losing a child to suicide some parents can begin to feel an even deeper sense of responsibility for their surviving children. This can sometimes manifest into anxiety and fear that these children will suffer similar issues. One parent said that, prior to his child's suicide, he always assumed his kids would be fine, that tragedies never happened to him. His child's death brought home the reality of such tragedies and the scary possibility that it could happen again.

Grandparents

Quite a few parents spoke of their own parents being very affected by the loss of their grandchild, but not necessarily being able to talk about it, or openly display their emotions. At Support After Suicide we sometimes think of grandparents as experiencing a double loss. Not only do they lose a beloved grandchild, they also witness the deep grief of their own child.

Grandparents may not say this, but some will have a wish that they had died rather than their grandchild. Overall, the parents in our meetings found their own parents to be very supportive.

Other people's responses

Sometimes parents felt let down or surprised by comments from people they usually trusted. Parents said that people can say very insensitive things. One said the death of a child can "*expose strengths and weaknesses in everybody*". They found it helpful to remember not to expect too much from people. It's better to let go of hurtful comments and accept that people cannot possibly understand something they have never experienced.

What helps

Connect with other bereaved parents

Most parents found that attending a parent-specific support group was very comforting and more helpful than a generalised support group because they could connect with others who understood their experience. However, some parents felt overwhelmed when they attended such groups and heard the stories of others. They found one-to-one counselling more helpful.

Professional support

"Finding out about Support After Suicide was mind-blowing for me. I needed someone to talk to who knew specifically about suicide".

Many parents spoke of how much their recovery depended on the professional support from counsellors at Support After Suicide. For some parents, the 8 week 'Early Bereavement' Group, for people who have become bereaved within the last 3 months to 3 years was a real turning point ‘

“Support groups were a rock solid help for me.”

Allow yourself to grieve

Everything takes time, you won't get better overnight but one day the grief won't feel as sharp as it does.

“You need to give yourself permission to break down...It is okay for your kids to see you sad.. You will regrow into a new person but you need to be patient with yourself and not expect things to get better too quickly...Nourish yourself and let yourself be sad.”

*Couples counselling
was the best thing we
ever did.*

Being in shock doesn't mean you're depressed

Sometimes parents wonder if they are depressed because of the shock they are experiencing. Often, this isn't depression but instead you are feeling depressed because you are so sad. Shock and grief at the beginning is very strong and intense *'but hang on and hold on.. take small steps and have patience with yourself and others'*.

Allow others to support you

It's important to let people help you:

“It's good to give yourself permission to be indulged.”

One parent said that allowing his other children to support him was good because it helped them too.

Experiencing gratitude

While some people will let you down, others won't.

“This is vital for your own healing.. if you can look outside yourself and feel grateful (for the kindness of others), it's a sign that you're healing.”

Establish a support network

Not everyone is going to be helpful. Some people won't know how to respond and will say unhelpful things. It's good to establish a support network and know who are the right people to talk to about your grief.

Try not to isolate yourself

Sometimes it can feel as though all you want to do is be alone and not be around others, but isolating yourself too much can make things worse.

“You have to find a way to participate in life, little steps, little ways, whatever you can. But some people can't do this and don't want to do this initially and that's okay’.”

Sleep is important

Grief can be exhausting. It is very common to have trouble falling asleep and staying asleep. Many parents required help with sleep in the first year, and sometimes medication is needed. Doing more exercise can help too.

“Riding to work every day helped me to release pent-up grief. It gave me a sense of purpose when I was feeling helpless.”

Support for your relationship

It is really important to make time for self-care because taking care of yourself gives you the strength to support others who are also grieving, especially a partner.

“You can be strong and reach out and support them, but you can’t fall in the river with them.”

Grief is a rollercoaster

Often people have been told that grief unfolds in distinct stages, however this has not been the experience of many parents.

“The grief doesn’t go away wherever you go, but you grow around it. Years after your child has died, you might experience a day when it comes back really strong and you feel like it was just yesterday. But the pain gets less sharp, and it is not as long lasting.”

You will regrow into a new person but you need to be patient with yourself and not expect things to get better too quickly...

Staying in bed / Going back to work

For some parents, going back to work quite soon can be a relief because it can be a distraction from the pain. For others, getting out of bed can be difficult for weeks/months and this is okay too. It is important to be kind and to be gentle with yourself. Everyone is going to be different.

Educate yourself

If you can, or when you’re ready to, it can be really helpful to read books or information guides about grief, loss, trauma and suicide.

“Being able to sit and read the information was validating and an acknowledgement that suicide doesn’t just happen to you but to other people too.”

Closing comments

Some of the parents who contributed to this booklet wrote a closing comment for you:

“Nothing about the grieving process for a parent whose son or daughter has suicided is going to be easy. However, with the loving support of special people around you, including those who you reach out to and those who reach out to you, somehow your inner strength very slowly is restored.”

“You think this will never happen and that your guilt as a parent will never fade. I was sure of that. But somehow it has! As a parent I have had to learn to accept, but I will never understand, and I am content with that.”

“I lost my son far too soon and in a way I could never have imagined. When I feel overwhelmed by grief, I try to think of his life as a gift; I remember all the good things and feel so grateful to have known him.”

“There are days when you will find me revisiting the past or temporarily stuck in it, and so I honour the fact that I live with sadness and that I’m okay being revisited by sadness, especially when I hear other parents’ stories. I don’t intend to eradicate those difficult feelings, but instead accept that they are now incorporated into my life.”

Dedication

We dedicate these words to our sons and daughters, who we remember with love.

May these words give hope to other bereaved parents.



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