

# HELP & HOPE

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FOR SURVIVORS OF SUICIDE LOSS



## WHY HAS THIS HAPPENED?

This may be the most traumatic loss you face in your lifetime. Facing it may be difficult – but you can and will survive this.

You are now a “survivor,” or what is called a “survivor of suicide loss” and you are not alone.

You may have many questions – Why has this happened? What will happen to my loved one after death? Was my loved one suffering when they died? Was the suicide my fault?

Suicide occurs when a person’s problem-solving skills are overwhelmed by intense emotional pain. Research shows that 90% of people who take their lives may have been suffering from a mental health issue, which can cause enormous suffering and irrational thinking. When hopelessness and challenging life events are added to the mix, some people may become so emotionally or psychologically overwhelmed they see no other way out. Their death by suicide is not your fault.

Every year about 40,000 people die by suicide, which means that thousands of families, friendship networks, schools, workplaces and faith-based organizations are left to make sense out of such a shocking and tragic loss.

Suicide can be difficult to talk about. Stigma and shame surround the topic, which is often why someone thinking of suicide does not reach out for help. Unfortunately, the stigma surrounding suicide also occurs after a suicide death. You may find that talking about it is tough, for you and for the people around you. For the fear of saying the wrong thing, people may not say anything at all.



For more information about suicide prevention and awareness contact  
STOP Suicide Northeast Indiana at 260-422-6441

# GRIEF AND COPING: WHAT DO I DO NOW?

Life as you know it has changed forever. You may feel numb and lost, not knowing where to turn. Experiencing a range of emotions is common: fear, anger, relief, abandonment, guilt, shame, and perhaps even responsibility for your loved one's death. These can change rapidly and family members may have different reactions at different times which sometimes can lead to conflict.

Know that others have walked this difficult path before you. Reach out to those who have survived a suicide loss. Move forward step by step at your own pace and do not allow anyone to rush or criticize your grieving process.



**YOU ARE NOT ALONE.** There are many ways to connect to others—staying in contact with others can help you through your grief.

## **Reach out for support:**

- Attend a support group for suicide loss survivors (in person or online)
- Talk to a professional grief counselor
- Seek a licensed mental health provider, if needed
- Talk with those you trust (family, friends, faith leader, neighbors) to share your loss and pain
- Continue to ask the “why?” questions as long as you need to

## **Grieving can take over your life, so taking care of yourself is important:**

- Try to get plenty of sleep, rest, and be gentle with yourself
- Eat healthy food and drink water
- Keep yourself busy by doing something you enjoy
- Continue your exercise routine

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## TIPS FOR TELLING FAMILY AND FRIENDS

Talking about suicide can be difficult for a variety of reasons. Sometimes people are not comfortable discussing it because they have a fear of hurting you or saying the “wrong thing.” Another roadblock can be social stigma. Stigma can stem from a lack of understanding, religious or cultural beliefs, or personal experiences. It is easy to take these reactions personally and assume they are judging or blaming you. Try to remember that they just don’t understand. It takes courage to be willing to talk about your suicide loss with your loved ones or friends. Here are some tips for talking about what happened:



- You don’t need to share details with everyone who asks you about what happened. It’s your decision who to talk to and when. There is no need to force it; wait until you feel ready to have these conversations. Feel free to say “now is not a good time for me.”
- Be open about the fact that it was a suicide. Keeping secrets can make grieving more difficult and prevent deep connection with those around you, which can make you feel alone without support. Not being open about the cause of death may force friends and family to “pretend” the death was not a suicide when it may be obvious (or known) to all involved. Other families who have survived the suicide of a loved one may not feel they can come forward to help until you are open about your suicide loss.
- If possible, avoid people who tell you “not” to feel certain ways, who easily share their opinions, or those who tell you that you should be over your grief. Instead, move towards those who are good listeners, who allow you to be yourself, honor your unique way of grieving, and don’t tell you what to do.

*People are funny around the whole topic of suicide,  
it makes them uncomfortable and they don’t know what to say or do.*

—Heidi Bryan, survivor of suicide loss and author.

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# TALKING TO CHILDREN/YOUTH ABOUT SUICIDE

You and your children are beginning a journey together. You may be wondering what to tell your children—be honest. If you lie, they may hear the truth from someone else, which may cause confusion, anger, distrust, or the belief it was their fault.

## Here are some guidelines for talking about suicide to children and youth:

- Use direct and simple language that is appropriate to the child's age. Use words such as died, death, and suicide. With younger children, explain that suicide is when a person ends their life.
- Answer questions as best you can. It is okay to say "I don't know." Some questions will not have answers. Children may continually ask questions to try to make sense of what happened, and this is normal.
- Do more listening than talking, and reassure them that it was not their fault or anyone else's fault. Nothing they did, or didn't do, caused the suicide death.
- Listen to and respect their feelings, whether you agree with their feelings or not; it's important that they express their feelings openly without being judged. They need to know you are there to support them emotionally during this time.
- Explain that there is always a better way to solve problems and help them to seek help whenever they are struggling with this death or other issues. Have them identify at least 3 trusted adults they could turn to when they are struggling.



## How Children/Youth Grieve

Children and teens may not know how to make sense of, understand, or express their feelings about death. Depending on their age, children and youth may show grief in different ways. They may be **irritable, withdrawn, angry, clingy, have physical complaints (headaches, stomach aches), cry easily, or overreact** to small or minor things. They may go back to child-like behaviors. These are normal reactions to traumatic loss. It's important to:

- Keep them informed of changes that occur because of the death.
- Keep up their regular schedule, including meals, sleep, school, and exercise. This helps children/youth cope, control, and/or reduce confusing or frightening feelings.
- Help them return to routine activities with their peers.
- Plan family time together.
- Involve them in youth focused support services e.g. Erin's House for Grieving Children

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# HOW TO HELP SOMEONE AFTER A SUICIDE LOSS

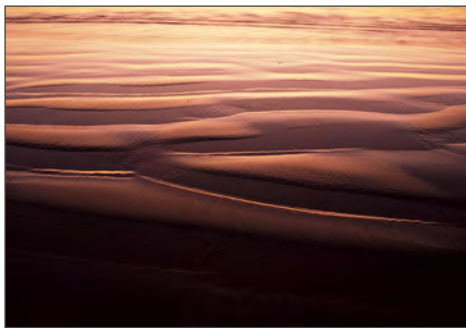
## Here are some tips for helping your friend, colleague, or family member through a suicide loss:

- Talk to them about the person who died in the same way you would about someone who died from any type of death.
- Support them in the same ways you would support others who have experienced deaths (home cooked meals, etc.)
- Offer to help with thank you notes, funeral or estate planning, phone calls, etc.
- Allow them to talk freely—they may need to tell their story over and over again.
- Accept their feelings, however intense they are.
- Recognize and accept their own pace of grieving. Be patient with yourself and others.
- Don't try to provide answers to their unanswerable questions. "I don't know" is preferable than trying to guess.
- Avoid clichés ("they are in a better place," "time heals all wounds") or compare their grief to yours.
- Unless you know the person's spiritual or religious background, don't use religion to help explain the loss.
- Reach out and help them return to normal activities when they are ready.
- Offer to help them find support in their grieving process (support groups for survivors of suicide loss, professional grief counseling, or other counseling).
- Avoid using common phrases such as "committed suicide" since "commit" unintentionally communicates sin or crimes, and "successful suicide" since it implies taking one's life is a good thing. Instead use "died by suicide," "ended his/her life," or "completed suicide."
- People who have had suicide losses can sometimes have suicide thoughts themselves. Please refer to the insert, "Identifying Suicide Risk in Yourself and Others."



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# HOW TO REMEMBER A LOVED ONE



Memorials and funeral services are important rituals of grief that help survivors begin to heal and to begin the journey of life after suicide. It is not an easy journey. There may be times when you will be overwhelmed with emotions, and there may be times when you don't feel anything at all. You are in the process of mourning and it will take time and energy to heal.

## **Here are some things to consider when planning a service of remembrance:**

- Take time to honor your cultural and religious traditions.
- Remembering your loved one is an important process. Try not to minimize the grief process by thinking you just need to 'get through it.'
- Ask questions of those you trust when you don't understand something. There may be questions that are not easily answered. Be patient with yourself and others.
- Honor and reflect on the achievements and qualities of the one being remembered as well as the struggles that they faced in their life. Focus on how they lived rather than how they died.
- You don't need to provide all of the details about how they died, but being open about the cause of death can make your grief easier and support more available. It can also be helpful to others to name the cause of death. If you do this, be sure to emphasize that help is available and that when they are struggling they should seek help.

For additional tips for memorial services see "Resources" insert.

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# HOW TO MANAGE SOCIAL MEDIA

For many people, social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) plays a big role in their lives. For youth, it may be the main way they express thoughts and feelings. If the person you lost to suicide had social media accounts, you may want to change their page to a “memorial page” to remember and honor the person who died.

## **Some guidelines about the memorial page include:**

- A memorial page should be short-lived, 30-60 days after the death, then you should remove and replace it with a message thanking those who responded for their support and care and any other suggestions to honor your loved one.
- If you see any messages or pictures that suggest someone is struggling or might be thinking of suicide (see “Identifying Suicide Risk in Yourself & Others” insert), be sure to either reach out to that person, tell that person’s family, or contact the social media company (e.g., Facebook) to let them know what you saw and why you are concerned.
- Share the free, confidential National Suicide Prevention Lifeline on their memorial page with a statement such as “If you or someone you know is struggling with thoughts of suicide, contact 800-273-TALK (8255)”.
- Report people on social media who make mean statements or bully people. You can ask the social media site to remove these statements.



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# FINANCIAL CONCERNS AFTER A SUICIDE LOSS

After a suicide loss you may have many questions about personal finances. While money is the last thing you want to worry about after a loss of a loved one, money issues may get worse if ignored. Unfortunately, there are not a lot of financial resources available.

## Here are some tips:

- Gather all the information you will need (bank statements, insurance policies, social security card, credit card statements, loan documents, paycheck stubs and copies (the death certificate). Look at your income and expenses to determine how much money you may need in the coming months. Pay the minimum payments until you know if additional money will be available. Seek help from a financial counselor if your expenses are more than your income (Money Management International, 866-531-3765.)
- Contact your loved one's employer to find out about possible life insurance policies and final paychecks. If you or your loved one happens to have a lawyer, financial advisor, or accountant, they may be able to help you understand what financial resources are available and what will happen to your loved one's money and property.
- If the cost of final arrangements are a concern, you may be able to receive financial assistance through your local trustee's office and funeral homes can help you work within your budget; if eligible, Medicaid may pay for cremation.
- If your loved one had a life insurance policy, contact the insurance company to find out if you are eligible for death benefits. Some may cover the death if it occurs 1-2 years after the start of the policy. Before that time period, the insurance company may return the premiums paid to the family.
- If you have home owner's insurance, it may help with cleanup services if the death occurred in the home.
- If you find you need a lawyer but cannot afford one, law firms may provide free or "pro bono" lawyers. The Volunteer Lawyer Program may also be able to help (260-407-0917).
- If your loved one paid into Social Security, you or your dependents may be eligible for death benefits. See more information online: [www.ssa.gov/pubs/EN-05-10008.pdf](http://www.ssa.gov/pubs/EN-05-10008.pdf)
- Be sure to take notes of conversations you have. If you have meetings or appointments, consider taking a family member or friend with you to listen, take notes, and to help keep track of what you learned.



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# IDENTIFYING SUICIDE RISK IN YOURSELF AND OTHERS

Those who have experienced a suicide are at greater risk for suicide themselves. It's important to be able to identify your own risk or the risk of others for suicide and get help. **Warning signs for suicide can be organized with the acronym:**

## **F A C T S**

**F**EELINGS such as hopelessness, worthlessness, despair, emptiness, and feeling anxious or trapped.

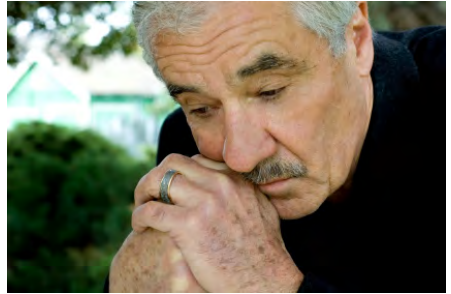
**A**CCTIONS such as seeking access to a gun or pills, reckless behaviors, increasing drug or alcohol use, fighting or getting in trouble, arranging one's funeral or getting their affairs in order, etc.

**C**HANGES in attitude, moods or behaviors. People may become withdrawn, quit teams or withdraw from groups, stop paying attention to personal appearance, sleep all the time or not at all, or show other changes.

**T**HREATS—Written or spoken statements suggesting death or suicide like “I’m tired of living” or “I’m thinking of killing myself.”

**S**ITUATIONS— events that could trigger suicidal thoughts. This can include having trouble at home, school or work; personal loss of relationships, opportunities, or self-esteem; or any other overwhelming change like moving, a death, and layoff or termination.

If you are having thoughts of suicide, go to a behavioral health unit of a hospital or an emergency room of a hospital or call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (800-273-TALK [8255]). If you see any of these warning signs in someone else, have a conversation with that person and ask directly about suicide. If they are thinking of suicide, make a plan to keep them safe until you can get them professional help. If you can't work out a plan to help them stay safe, take them to the nearest emergency room, a behavioral health unit of a hospital, or call 911.



# RESOURCES

## LOCAL RESOURCES

- **Erin's House for Grieving Children:** [erinshouse.org](http://erinshouse.org) **260-423-2466**
- **Mental Health America of Northeast Indiana:** [MentalHealthFrontDoor.org](http://MentalHealthFrontDoor.org) **260-422-6441**
- **STOP Suicide Northeast Indiana:** [stopsuicidenow.org](http://stopsuicidenow.org) **260-422-6441**
- **Visiting Nurse:** [vnfw.org](http://vnfw.org) **260-435-3222**
- **We the Living:** [wethelivingfw.org](http://wethelivingfw.org) **260-450-1702**
- **RemedyLive:** [remedylive.com](http://remedylive.com) **888-807-2226**

## MATERIALS FOR SURVIVORS

- **A Fierce Goodbye** (video): [fiercegoodbye.com](http://fiercegoodbye.com)
- **Alliance of Hope:** [allianceofhope.org](http://allianceofhope.org) **847-868-3313**
- **American Association of Suicidology:** [suicidology.org](http://suicidology.org) **202-237-2280**
- **Suicide Prevention Resource Center** [sprc.org](http://sprc.org) **877-438-SPRC (7772)**
  - **After Suicide: Recommendations for Religious Services & Other Public Memorials**  
[sprc.org/sites/sprc.org/files/library/aftersuicide.pdf](http://sprc.org/sites/sprc.org/files/library/aftersuicide.pdf)

## PREVENTION RESOURCES

- **American Foundation for Suicide Prevention:** [afsp.org](http://afsp.org) **888-333-AFSP (2377)**
- **Families for Depression Awareness:** [familyaware.org](http://familyaware.org) **781-890-0220**
- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:** [suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://suicidepreventionlifeline.org) **800-273-TALK (8255)**
- **SAVE:** [save.org](http://save.org) **952-946-7998**
- **Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide:** [sptsusa.org](http://sptsusa.org) **732-410-7900**
- **Suicide Prevention Resource Center** [sprc.org](http://sprc.org) **877-438-SPRC (7772)**
  - **Lifeline Online Postvention Manual** (managing social media): [sprc.org/sites/sprc.org/files/library/LifelineOnlinePostventionManual.pdf](http://sprc.org/sites/sprc.org/files/library/LifelineOnlinePostventionManual.pdf)
  - **Safe and Effective Messaging for Suicide Prevention:** [sprc.org/sites/sprc.org/files/library/SafeMessagingrevised.pdf](http://sprc.org/sites/sprc.org/files/library/SafeMessagingrevised.pdf)
  - **After Suicide: Recommendations for Religious Services & Other Public Memorials**  
[sprc.org/sites/sprc.org/files/library/aftersuicide.pdf](http://sprc.org/sites/sprc.org/files/library/aftersuicide.pdf)



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**National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:**

**1-800-273-TALK (8255)**

(Available 24/7)

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**[stopsuicidenow.org](http://stopsuicidenow.org)**

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THANK YOU TO THE FOLLOWING PARTNERS FOR THEIR SUPPORT



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FAMILY STUDIES INSTITUTE**  
INDIANA UNIVERSITY—PURDUE UNIVERSITY FORT WAYNE  
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**visiting Nurse**  
**GRIEF SUPPORT**

Epiphany Lutheran Church · Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide · We the Living  
First Hope: First Presbyterian Church Suicide Grief Support Group  
Lea Ann Gebhard Powers (Graphic Design)

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*\*This material is not intended to provide medical advice and is not a substitute for professional advice, diagnosis, or treatment. If you feel you are experiencing a potentially life-threatening problem, please call 9-1-1 or the Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255).*