

"Tears are the silent language of grief." Voltaire



## Hope & Comfort

Surviving After Suicide (SAS) Loss Newsletter - Helpline Center, Sioux Falls  
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### **10 Tips for Celebrating the Holidays After Suicide**

Jeanne Dennis

City sidewalks, busy sidewalks, dressed in a holiday style can be very alienating for those who have recently lost a loved one. "I walk around the streets of New York - the Santas, the shopping, the bell-ringing - and I feel like I'm looking at a picture," says Lisa, whose husband died in August.

"The themes over the holiday season are gratitude, light and hope for the year to come. Those three things are rarely in the vocabulary of those of us who have lost someone to suicide. How you're feeling contrasts so sharply to the culture around you that many people tell me they just want to go to bed on November 1 and wake up January 2."

Here are several strategies for navigating the holidays after the loss of a loved one, especially during the difficult first year.

*1. Write out your schedule ahead of time.* Rather than dreading an anxiety-filled week, write a concrete schedule for yourself over the holidays. Include active and down time, time alone and time with others - and be specific. "Often when loss support groups reconvene in January," says Vince, "people note that the anticipation was worse than the holiday itself. It helps to see what you're facing."

*2. Mark the loved one's presence and absence.* After his father died, Vince's children set the Thanksgiving table and included a place for their grandfather, marked with a candle. Other families set a photograph at the table or a bouquet of her favorite flowers. Vince also recommends looking through photographs of the loved one that go back in time. This helps the family celebrate the life and not focus on the loss. Joan, whose husband Bill died recently, sent out this year's Christmas card with a family photo - herself and the couple's two children - along with a note of

gratitude from each, thanking friends and family for support after Bill's suicide.

3. *Reimagine gift-giving.* Lila and her husband always exchanged one special gift over the holidays. Last Christmas, after his suicide death, she shopped for that one special gift - then donated it to a charity organization. For young children, activities help to process grief. Here's an activity for children and adults alike: On a piece of paper, note the lasting gifts the deceased has given you over the years - gifts in the broadest sense, from a home to learning forgiveness. On the other side, write the gifts you have given him or her. Wrap the paper in some way, in a decorative envelop or a small box, and include it in your holiday gifts, perhaps on or under the tree.

4. *Accept at least one invitation.* While difficult, it is important to put yourself among people during the holidays. Be selective, however, and do not feel obligated to accept every invitation. Vince suggests listing two or three people who have been most supportive through your grief and making a specific request of them over the holidays - whether it is to accompany you to church, to join them for Christmas Eve, or to go for a walk in the park New Year's day.

5. *Take people up on offers of help.* Often, people want to help but are not sure what you need. When Carol lost her husband of sixty years, she wanted one thing over the holidays: to get a ride to his gravesite, since she didn't drive and he was buried outside the city. She decided to accept a general "if there's anything I can do" offer of help from a close neighbor and asked for a ride to the cemetery. "She was more than happy to do it," Carol reported. "The anxiety was my burden." They now make the trip every month.

6. *Don't try to do too much.* Break holiday tasks such as cooking, shopping and card-writing into smaller chunks, delegate to others, or allow yourself a break from them this year. For siblings coming together after the loss of a parent, be especially sensitive to dividing cooking and chores. After Vince's father died, his mother - "who could bake for an army" - no longer wanted the holiday-cookie assignment, so she delegated to other family members.

7. *Don't forget to ask the kids.* Doug was consumed with anxiety over how he and his teenage children were going to spend the first holiday without their mother, but he didn't want to burden them further. It wasn't until his older son, who had done community service in school, suggested they serve meals in a homeless shelter on Christmas that a family conversation took place. "It was the best way we could have gotten through the day," he said afterwards.

8. *Take care of yourself.* Grief takes a great physical toll. Take care this holiday season to get enough sleep and eat wisely (including alcohol and sugar in moderation). "A body in grief requires a lot more attention," notes Vince. "There's greater susceptibility to illness, greater requirement for nourishment and rest.

9. *One holiday season at a time.* The pull of tradition is especially strong around the holidays, but give yourself the liberty of taking one year at a time. Whatever you do this year does not need to be repeated next year, when you may feel differently. Leslie has decided to take her two children to Aruba for Christmas, the first after the loss of her husband. "They just want to avoid the whole thing," says Vince. "Nothing wrong with that, and nothing that says they have to do it again next year."

10. *Love does not end in death.* During the holidays and throughout the year, we keep our loved ones alive by the way we live our life, buoyed by the memories of their lives, fortified by their values and shepherded by their love.

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## You Are Not Alone

Don't be afraid to ask for help from those close to you when you need it. So much hurt and pain go unheeded during grief because we don't want to bother anyone else with our problems. Wouldn't you want someone close to you to ask for help if they needed it? Some relatives and friends will not be able to handle your grief. Find someone with whom to talk. Seek out an understanding friend, survivor, or support group member. You can always reach out to the Helpline Center 24/7. Call 605-334-6646 or 211.

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## When You Are Considering Counseling

By Diane Louise, MAMFT

Those of us who have lost a loved one to suicide know first-hand how devastating this type of grief is. It was not a "natural" death. We were not prepared for it. We experience a broad range of emotions which may include tremendous sorrow, disbelief, anger, guilt, shock, and even sometimes a sense of relief. This is by no means an exhaustive list of the feelings that we as survivors of suicide loss may experience.



Because of the unique nature of suicide grief, it is likely that the bereavement period and the work of healing will take longer than one may expect. Fortunately the Helpline Center exists to provide support to survivors. Sometimes people decide to seek counseling for additional support as they struggle with the intensity of their feelings. Survivors may be overwhelmed by grief or depression. Parents and other adults may not know how to talk to children about the death. Additionally, there may be other traumatic experiences associated with the death of a loved one by suicide.

How does one go about choosing the right therapist at such a tender time? A practical consideration is to be certain that the therapist has the proper credentials, including bereavement training and experience. Psychologists, Licensed Clinical Social Workers (LCSW), and Marriage and Family Therapists (MFT) are some of the most common types of mental health professionals who are qualified to treat bereaved individuals.

When seeking a therapist, there are questions to first ask yourself, such as:

- Do I want to work with a male or female therapist?
- Does the therapist's race, ethnicity, culture, or spiritual beliefs need to be the same as mine?
- Does it matter if the therapist is older or younger than I am?
- Do I want to be seen for individual counseling, or as a couple or family?
- What are my goals for therapy?

When first calling a therapist, ask about his or her approach to treatment. Is psychotherapy (also known as "talk therapy") the primary modality used, or does the therapist also incorporate creative expression such as art therapy, or play therapy for children? Ask about the fee schedule, and if the practice accepts insurance.

One good way to find a therapist is to ask for referrals from people you know and trust. However, even then, you may or may not "click" with the therapist. It is important to find a professional with whom you feel safe, and who provides empathy along with solid therapeutic support. Seeking help when you need it is a sign of strength and courage. When you connect with the therapist who is right for you, it is one more helpful resource to move you further along on your healing journey.

## Finding Peace During the Holidays

By Jenni Klock Morel

Hold love in your heart. Understand that deep love and gratitude can live side by side with deep grief, deep pain. Know your true north. Your lost loved one loved you, as you loved them. They would want you to do your best to find joy in life again, even if only in small ways to start.

Acknowledge the little things. It is the little things that matter most. A knowing smile from a family member. A supportive hug from a friend. An act of thoughtfulness. Being seen, being heard by another. Moments of peace can be found in the smallest of places, if only we remember to look.

"For in the dew of little things the heart finds its morning and is refreshed." -Khalil Gibran



## Surviving After Suicide (SAS) Support Group & 8-Week Class

By Barbara Bettelyoun, Director of Suicide Prevention & Postvention Services

### SAS Monthly Support Group

Here at the Helpline Center, our SAS meetings are held in an atmosphere that is warm and friendly and nonjudgmental. Anyone who has lost a family member or friend is invited to attend. Feelings shared are kept confidential and discussed only within the confines of the group meeting. Thus, our SAS support groups provide a comfortable, non-threatening setting to share our experiences and thoughts.

Questions are encouraged to help in coping with the different stages of the grieving process and with the feelings that are particularly intense in the aftermath of suicide-denial, shock, disbelief,

sadness, anger, relief (for some), guilt and shame. We end our discussion sessions by sharing something positive that has recently taken place or something good you are anticipating. There is no fee and no registration required. The SAS Support Group is held at the HLC- 1000 N. West Ave; Suite 310 on the first Thursday of every month (or the 2nd if the 1st falls on a holiday).

#### SAS Class & Support Group

The Surviving After Support Class & Support Group is held on 8 consecutive Tuesday evenings from 7-8:30pm at the HLC and facilitated by a mental health professional. Registration is required and we ask that you commit to attending all of the 8 sessions, beginning on January 17th as class size is limited to 10. The last group in this session will be held on March 7th.

The supportive mourning process is guided by participant needs and a handbook organized chronologically to follow the days, weeks, and months after a suicide loss. It includes straightforward information about psychiatric disorders, when to seek professional help, and practical strategies for coping and healing.

To register, visit our website at <http://helplinecenter.org/suicide-and-crisis-support/survivor-services/> and click on the Event Brite registration link under Support Classes or call the HLC at 605-334-6646 or 211 and ask for Barbara.

"Peace is a journey of a thousand miles and it must be taken one step at a time." Lyndon B Johnson

#### **Helpful Websites**

Helpline Center of Sioux Falls <http://helplinecenter.org/>  
American Association of Suicidology [www.suicidology.org](http://www.suicidology.org)  
Compassionate Friends [www.compassionatefriends.org](http://www.compassionatefriends.org)  
Suicide Prevention Resource Ctr [www.sprc.org](http://www.sprc.org)

Helpline Center  
1-800-273-TALK  
[www.helplinecenter.org](http://www.helplinecenter.org)

*Making lives better by giving support, offering hope and creating connections all day, every day.*

STAY CONNECTED:



Helpline Center is proud to be a United Way agency.