This holiday season, survivors of suicide are invited to find comfort and support at a special remembrance service focused on healing and hope.

The Helpline Center will hold its first ever Survivors of Suicide Luminary Remembrance Service on December 8 at the Augustana College Chapel. The event will include a luminary walk, a brief service and fellowship.

“The holidays are a particularly difficult time for people who are grieving the loss of a loved one to suicide,” said Sandy Parham of the Helpline Center. “This service will help survivors of suicide cope with the holidays as they draw strength from one another and remember the lives of those they have lost.”

The event will begin at 4 pm when survivors of suicide are welcome to create a luminary in remembrance of their loved one. The bags and supplies for decorating the luminaries will be provided. Families are invited to bring personal items to decorate the bags if they wish.

The luminaries will be placed along a pathway by volunteers during the Remembrance Service, which will take place at 4:30 pm. Pastor Chris Croghan will offer a message of hope and healing at the service, which will also include music by vocalist Deb Rhoer.

Information will also be available for survivors about handling grief during the holidays.

“There are a number of ways you can honor your loved one during the holidays, and we will be talking about them at the service. We hope to help survivors find something that feels right for them,” said Parham. “We want survivors to know it is okay to change traditions or do things a little differently to take some pressure off.”

After the service, survivors will be invited to join the Luminary Walk and remember the lives of those lost to suicide.

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PROGRAM OFFERS VOICE, HEALING FOR SURVIVORS

A new program in Sioux Falls will give voice to those who have often felt silenced in their grief.

Survivor Voices, a training developed by NAMI New Hampshire, teaches survivors of suicide to safely and effectively share their stories of loss with community groups, the media, friends and family.

The focus of the program is to empower survivors of suicide to help prevent suicide, and offer resources to other survivors, by sharing their personal stories. Six volunteers recently completed the training, offered by the Helpline Center and learned the power of their voice in helping others.

“Survivor Voices was a great class and an incredible learning experience. I participated for my own personal development but more importantly with hopes that sharing my story will have a positive impact on other survivors or those in a time of need,” said survivor Jerry Cook.

The two-day training equipped the volunteers to tell their stories, using personal information blended with messages about suicide prevention and survivor support.

Lori Montis, the Suicide Crisis and Support director at the Helpline Center, said the agency invested in this training as a way to mobilize volunteers to help prevent suicide.

“Research shows that the right words and messages in presentations about suicide can influence people in a positive way. We are hoping our Survivor Voices volunteers can share their stories to educate others about suicide, reduce the stigma and even inspire those who are struggling to reach for help,” Montis said.

The training specifically highlights the following:

- How to safely and effectively tell one’s story of suicide loss publicly and privately
- Best practices and guidelines on safe messaging, media recommendations for reporting on suicide, and memorial or funeral services
- Greater comfort in telling one’s story after having practiced it in a safe environment
- How to shape one’s message for a general or specific audience
- How to safely respond to questions from an audience or the media
- Familiarity with suicide data, risk factors and warning signs, and resources for survivors and suicide prevention

By the end of the recent training, each volunteer had developed an initial version of “their story” related to their loss, and had the opportunity to practice telling their story in a safe environment.

Janine Harris participated in the Survivor Voices training and found that it made her feel more confident in her ability to help others by sharing her story.

“I lost my daughter, Nikki, to suicide in 2005. I’ve spoken to high school and college students and business organizations. As I share my story about Nikki, I want to be sure that I am not only talking about a traumatic event but also the struggles of loved ones left behind and the strong resources we provide in our community,” Harris said.

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With 1,000 South Dakotans lending their feet to preventing suicide at three recent events, raising over $63,000 for the cause in the past six months.

A Step Forward To Prevent Suicide walk and run took place in Sioux Falls in June, with an additional walk in Gregory that same day. A third Step Forward walk and run took place in the Pierre area in September.

The dollars raised at the events will support suicide prevention and survivor of suicide support services of the Helpline Center, St. Mary’s Foundation in Pierre and Connect!, a community task force in the Gregory area.

Janet Kittams-Lalley, the executive director of the Helpline Center, said participants raised both money and awareness.

“Watching the hundreds of people walk and run in memory of lost loved ones showed that our communities want to talk about this issue, that we want to work together to prevent suicide and that survivors don’t need to remain alone in their grief,” Kittams-Lalley said.

The Helpline Center answers the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline for all residents of South Dakota, taking about 1,000 suicide-related calls annually. The Helpline Center is the only accredited suicide crisis center in the state and also offers the following services to survivors.

- Outreach visits to those who have lost a loved one to suicide immediately following a death
- Information and resource packets for survivors of suicide, plus books to help adults when discussing suicide with children
- A monthly support group for survivors of suicide and a nine-week series of classes for suicide survivors focusing on survivor grief
- Prevention trainings for the community and for schools

The Step Forward events also helped reach survivors of suicide who are unfamiliar with the Helpline Center’s services.

“We had people attend who had losses as recent as that month, and even that week. We were able to connect with those families through the walk and offer all of the Helpline Center’s support as they go through their grief journey,” Kittams-Lalley said.

The 2013 Step Forward To Prevent Suicide walk and run will take place in Sioux Falls June 22, with an additional Step Forward walk taking place in Gregory that same day. The 2013 Step Forward To Prevent Suicide event in Pierre will take place September 7.

The next Surviving After Suicide Education and Support Class starts January 8. This is a nine-week series of classes for survivors of suicide held at the Helpline Center. Registration is required. Classes are free and open to all. Dial 2-1-1 or call 605-339-4357 for more information.
HOLIDAY REMEMBRANCE SERVICE DECEMBER 8

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“This walk will give survivors the chance to be together and remember those they have lost. Survivors can draw strength and gain support from others who can relate to what they are going through. It is a way to keep the memories of our loved ones alive and provide comfort to those left behind,” Parham said.

The event will conclude with a time of fellowship at the Augustana Commons and a performance by the Augustana Choir.

“Anyone who has been touched by the life of someone who died by suicide is welcome to attend. Even if your loss was years ago, this service can be a comfort and provide continued healing especially during the holiday season,” Parham said.

This event will be held at the Augustana College Chapel, located at 2001 S. Summit in Sioux Falls. Parking is in the lot on the corner of Summit Avenue and 31st Street. There is no cost to attend, and survivors are welcome to take their luminary home at the end of the event. For more information, call Lori Montis at 274-1406.

HANDLING THE HOLIDAYS

There are many ways to honor the memory of a loved one and still include them in the holiday festivities. It is important to find something that feels right for you, include your family in the planning and, most importantly, speak openly about your departed loved one.

Survivors have shared the following ideas for remembering a loved one during the holidays:

- Light a candle
- Display a picture of your loved one near where the family is gathered
- Make a donation to a local charity in your loved one’s name
- Organize a volunteer project with your family
- Have your family write down memories of your loved one and put them in a Christmas stocking to share at Christmas time
- Write a special poem or letter to your loved one
- Make a scrapbook filled with pictures and mementos of happy times
- Allow yourself alone time to remember your loved one

HOLIDAY POTLUCK AT DECEMBER SURVIVOR SUPPORT GROUP

The Surviving After Suicide Monthly Support Group is holding a holiday potluck during the first half of its December meeting. The group will be gathering from 6:30 to 8:30 pm on Thursday, December 6 at the Helpline Center in Sioux Falls.

This meeting will allow time for group members to share the ways they cope with the holidays, while also grieving the loss of a loved one. At a time that may seem hopeless, this meeting will offer ideas to comfort and empower you. Survivors who have experienced holidays without their loved ones are encouraged to attend and share what they have done to make the holidays more bearable. Did you change traditions? Start new ones? Find special ways to memorialize your loved one? Come and share what has worked for you with others new in their grief. You may also email suggestions for reducing stress and handling grief during the holidays to sandy@helplinecenter.org, and those suggestions will be shared with those who attend the meeting. Names will be kept confidential unless otherwise specified. Don’t forget, the meeting starts early! Come at 6:30 pm and join in the holiday potluck. Bring a main dish, salad or dessert to share. The Helpline Center will supply the plates and utensils.
SURVIVORS SHARE STORIES OF LOSS TO HELP, INSPIRE

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Now, the survivors will volunteer their time speaking to a variety of groups across the Sioux Empire about their experiences and their hopes for the future. This may include presentations to mental health professionals, first responders, faith groups, school groups, educators and community groups.

Montis said the survivors who attended the training also took a step forward in their own healing journey by participating in the class.

“Survivors often report that an important component of healing for them is to connect with others who have lost a loved one to suicide. It encourages others to reach out for help and support on this most difficult journey. That definitely happened during the Survivor Voices training.”

To request a presentation by a Survivor Voices volunteer and a Helpline Center staff member, please call 274-1406.

International Survivors Day

Survivors of suicide will come together for support and guidance in honor of International Survivors of Suicide Day for an online conference hosted by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention at noon on Nov. 17. You’ll get to hear from other survivors about how they cope with their loss and grief. The program also features experts sharing what is known about suicide and grief. Pre-registration is required at www.afsp.org.

Support Survivor Services

The Helpline Center is here all day, every day to help those at risk of suicide and those impacted by the loss of a loved one to suicide. Please consider making a donation to the Helpline Center to support our services. Call 605-274-1418 or go to helplinecenter.org today.