

With Grief Following a Loss to Suicide

Why is death by suicide difficult for survivors to manage?

Suicide is an interpersonal act—“... *murder of oneself by oneself*,” as someone once said. While the emotional pain experienced by the victim is ended when he takes his life, it continues to live on in those left behind to grieve the loss.

When the death of a loved one by suicide is not completely unexpected—as in situations where the depressed person spoke of his intentions—survivors may navigate the grieving process with less difficulty than survivors of an unexpected suicide. Anticipatory grief acts as a buffer and protective force in the months that follow the loss. Survivors who had the chance to communicate with their depressed loved one and to listen to their concerns and fears may be comforted in knowing they provided any help they could.

However, when suicide occurs unexpectedly, it is common for survivors to feel betrayed by—or feel anger toward—the departed.

This type of grieving is a slow and painful process, and those left behind may harbor unresolved feelings of guilt, self-doubt, or self-loathing for not recognizing “the signs” or for ignoring their loved one’s efforts to communicate their intentions. The confusion and anger over why a loved one “chose” death over life—or over them—takes time and understanding to work through.

What is loss?

Loss is a severing of an attachment to someone resulting in a changed relationship.

What is grief?

Grief is a normal response to loss. It is a universal, human experience that may be experienced physically, behaviorally, socially, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. “Normal” grief symptoms that are common after a loss include a broad range of behaviors and feelings.

What is bereavement?

Bereavement is the total reaction to a loss, including the process of healing and recovery from the loss. It is the state of having suffered a loss.

Important Disclaimer: This information is meant for educational purposes only and should not be considered medical advice. It is meant to support, not replace, the advice of a licensed health care or mental health care professional. It should not be used to make a diagnosis or replace or overrule a qualified health care provider’s judgment.



Characteristics of “Normal” Grief

Physical Sensations:

- Tightness in chest or throat
- Breathlessness
- Weakness
- Lack of energy, fatigue
- Aches, pains in joints
- Dry mouth
- Nausea
- Diarrhea
- Constipation
- Heart palpitations
- Vertigo
- Change in appetite
- Change in sex drive
- Lack of energy, sluggishness
- Sleep disturbance
- Restlessness
- Tearfulness, sighing

Behavior:

- Forgetfulness
- Difficulty concentrating, delayed thinking
- Confusion
- Depersonalization, sense of unreality
- Dreams of the deceased, longing for the deceased
- Seeking means to communicate with the deceased (*tarot cards, mediums*)
- Calling out, searching for the deceased
- Avoiding discussion of the deceased
- Taking on the mannerisms or speech of the deceased
- Needing to retell the story of the deceased's death
- Absent-mindedness
- Absence of reminders or treasuring reminders

Social:

- Withdrawal from friends, ending friendships
- Avoiding family, friends, and colleagues
- Dependent on others
- Hypersensitive to comments about suicide
- Relationship difficulties, frustrations
- Caring more for others, neglecting self
- Increased drug/alcohol use
- Increased risky activities (*reckless driving*)

Important Disclaimer: This information is meant for educational purposes only and should not be considered medical advice. It is meant to support, not replace, the advice of a licensed health care or mental health care professional. It should not be used to make a diagnosis or replace or overrule a qualified health care provider's judgment.



CRISIS HOTLINE (415) 781-0500 • [sfsuicide.org](https://www.sfsuicide.org)

SFSP  **Felton**
institute

Thought Process (Cognitive):

- Disbelief
- Confusion
- Preoccupation
- Hallucinations
- Sense of the deceased's presence

Emotions:

- Shock
- Changes in mood
- Numbness
- Sadness, sorrow
- Fear
- Anger
- Guilt
- Anxiety, panic
- Abandonment
- Loneliness
- Apathy, disbelief, denial
- Helplessness, meaninglessness
- Yearning
- Irritability, oversensitivity
- Relief

Spiritual:

- Anger at one's God or faith
- Doubting one's belief system
- Loss of faith
- Feeling betrayed by one's God
- Renewed interest in spirituality

Important Disclaimer: This information is meant for educational purposes only and should not be considered medical advice. It is meant to support, not replace, the advice of a licensed health care or mental health care professional. It should not be used to make a diagnosis or replace or overrule a qualified health care provider's judgment.



CRISIS HOTLINE (415) 781-0500 • sfsuicide.org

SFSP  **Felton**
institute

What is “Complicated” Grief?

Complicated grief refers to a sense of overwhelming, long-lasting, and severe emotion. It results when prior losses remain unresolved. This protracted and debilitating form of grief prevents individuals from moving on with their lives.

Symptoms of Complicated Grief Include:

- An extreme focus on the deceased and reminders of the deceased
- Intense longing for the deceased
- Problems accepting the death
- Emotional numbness (6 months following the suicide)
- Preoccupation with one’s sorrow
- Bitterness about one’s loss
- Sadness
- Inability to move on with one’s life
- Difficulty maintaining usual daily activities
- Viewing life as meaningless
- Agitation, irritability
- Lack of trust in others
- Isolation, avoidance



Important Disclaimer: This information is meant for educational purposes only and should not be considered medical advice. It is meant to support, not replace, the advice of a licensed health care or mental health care professional. It should not be used to make a diagnosis or replace or overrule a qualified health care provider’s judgment.



CRISIS HOTLINE (415) 781-0500 • sfsuicide.org

SFSP  **Felton**
institute



IF **YOU** OR SOMEONE YOU KNOW
IS IN CRISIS, CALL OUR **24HR HOTLINE**



(415) 781-0500

sfsuicide.org ♥ [@sfsuicideprevention](https://twitter.com/sfsuicideprevention)