

Complicated Grief after a suicide

Suicide is a very painful way to lose a loved one and it is not uncommon. In 2013, there were more than 41,000 deaths by suicide in the United States. Someone dies by suicide about every 13 minutes. Suicide is the 10th leading cause of death. If you lost someone to suicide you are not alone.

Over the course of a lifetime, over 20% of us will lose a family member to suicide, and the grief we experience can be especially intense and difficult. When loved ones die by suicide, those they leave behind often have an especially difficult time. Sometimes they personalize the suicide and feel abandoned or rejected. More often they blame themselves even if they know it isn't rational. Bereaved loved ones can be plagued by unanswered questions about the death, worry about how they might have let their loved ones down, and contemplate all the ways they could have prevented this from happening. Suicide bereaved people sometimes feel a sense of shame or guilt by association. They may think others see suicide as wrong and that they have done something wrong because they were close to the deceased person.

However, it is important to understand that we have learned a lot about suicide and we know that up to 90% of those who die by suicide are suffering from a mental disorder, most commonly depression. They are also often in a state of mind that makes it difficult to see that they have options. Some people have called suicide a "heart attack of the mind." This can help a bereaved loved one to understand that a person who dies by suicide may be in an altered state of mind and not seeing things clearly.

If concerns about why or how the person died become a distracting focus, this needs to be addressed. Focusing excessively on how or why a person died can complicate grief and prolong the healing process. People need to resolve these difficult questions in order to allow their grief to progress. The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention www.afsp.org is an excellent resource. Suicide bereaved people who experience complicated grief have symptoms that are very similar to those experienced by those with complicated grief who have experienced other losses. Complicated grief treatment offers a way to get help.