

Legal issues

Grief may be inhibited to some extent until all legal processes are complete. This “holding back behaviour” seems to be part of a fairly large need to assure survival and safety before feeling safe enough to grieve with all of our being.

The police will need to investigate what happened. They may need to question the family and friends and you may be asked to make a statement. While the cause may seem obvious it is still necessary for the coroner to act as an advocate for the deceased and rule out any other possibilities for example, murder, accident or misadventure.

It may be some time before full details of the coroner’s report are available to you. When that time comes it is usually helpful to read it in the presence of a sensitive and compassionate person; If the details are too distressing, read only as much as you can tolerate in any one sitting, and come back to it later when you feel ready. You may of course, choose not to read it at all, and that’s fine; having a real choice is important and empowering.

Contact Us

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Telephone Grief Support Line

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Suicide

Grief reactions associated
with a death by suicide

Grief Reactions Associated with a Death by Suicide

Someone you love has chosen to end their life and you are left to deal with the consequences: the pain of unbearable sadness; dismay and confusion; empty feelings of abandonment; anger; guilt; and the relentless persistence of unanswerable questions.

You may have to bear the additional burden of trauma if you were the person to find your relative, friend or colleague after their death, or have witnessed the death occurring. You may be left with persistent memories of images, smells or sounds that make it difficult to concentrate on anything else, and make you long to remember the person who died, to remember them as they were.

Initial reactions

You may initially:

- feel stunned and in disbelief, barely able to move;
- feel confused;
- behave in an agitated manner and have difficulty staying still;
- experience a range of physical sensations including increased heart rate, difficulty breathing, nausea, sweats and a feeling of pressure in your head;
- cry, show anger or appear super controlled.

Later reactions

You may experience some or all of the following as initial numbness recedes:

- increased feelings of anxiety, occasionally as severe as panic;
- difficulty sleeping, eating, concentrating, or remembering simple details;
- yearning and pining for the person who has died, often experienced as a physical ache or a hollow feeling in the stomach;
- anger at the deceased for the choice they made and its effect on you;
- overwhelming feelings of helplessness;
- questioning of previously held beliefs about the person who has died and the nature and strength of your relationship with them;
- loss of confidence in your ability to “read” signs of distress or to solve problems;
- a crisis of faith;
- shame and embarrassment;
- loneliness and despair;
- overwhelming tiredness;
- desire to be with the person who has died, to be dead (or asleep) and free from pain coupled with a fear that in fact, you may die;
- a feeling of being trapped in incessant circles of unanswerable questions;
- inability to care deeply about anyone or

anything, to give anything, especially to oneself;

- fluctuating feelings of guilt or blame;
- a sense of futility and meaninglessness; and
- if your relative/friend/lover/colleague had been suicidal for some time, you may experience initial relief, sometimes followed by guilt. Your feelings may be more intense at particular times of the day or week, for example: the time of day at which you believe the death occurred; sunset, when most families are returning home; Sundays, often another family time; and special dates such as birthdays, anniversaries and significant celebratory occasions.

Immediate needs

- simple, clear, truthful information;
- an advocate – someone who knows you and your needs well, who will absorb information that may be overwhelming for you, and who will help you deal with the police, the Coroner’s Court or the media. Ideally, this would be a friend or relative, but a sensitive support worker or other health professional may be good as well;
- NALAG can give support with the reading of the Coroner’s report;
- access to the person who has died;
- love, sensitive understanding and support;
- safety.