

Coping with Suicide

This content is provided as a support resource and is not intended to replace recommendations from a physician or licensed mental health professional. Dial 911 for life threatening events.

Coping with the Suicide of a Coworker

- Your coworkers are like a second family. One of the most difficult emotions to manage is guilt, and suicide can lead you to question the “If I . . . could have . . . should have.” This is a normal reaction, but do not dwell on hindsight. The difficult reality is that the person who took their life was in control.
- Coworkers in mourning can be a natural support system for each other. There is comfort in knowing that everyone is going through the same thing and experiencing the same emotions.
- Recognize that the emotions after a suicide may be more intense and beyond the limits experienced in other types of deaths.
- Consider a memorial service or appropriate workplace event to honor your coworker’s life.
- Eventually you will be able to sort through the various emotions associated with the suicide, but not everyone will arrive at this place at the same time. Remember that people grieve in different ways. Allow your coworkers to reach this stage in their own time, while reminding each other that you can best honor a person’s life by the way you carry on with your own life.

How to Help Someone Who is Grieving

- Let them know that you are available to listen and provide support. This is important after the first few weeks. If you are unsure of how you can help, you can simply ask.
- Be patient, understanding and compassionate. Understand that the survivor’s intense emotions may be beyond those experienced in other types of deaths.
- The bereaved may isolate due to the stigma, guilt and blame they feel so follow their lead. If they can discuss the loss as a suicide, acknowledge it as a suicide. If they are unable to discuss it as such, use the same language that they are using to discuss their loss.
- Provide continuous and unconditional support without making judgmental statements about what could have or should have been done differently. Listening without judgment is the best support you can provide and will help the bereaved move past their feelings of guilt.

Common Reactions to Suicide

Shock: This is usually the first reaction and can be paired with a feeling of physical and emotional numbness. This is the mind’s way of protecting you from emotions that are too overwhelming to deal with all at once, and allows you to deal with the pain in more manageable steps.

Confusion: Only a few suicide victims leave an explanation, and even if they left a note, many questions remain for the survivors. One of the hardest things to accept is the possibility of never knowing the answer to the most haunting question . . . “Why?”

Anger: Reactions to suicide can be complicated by feelings of anger. Survivors need to acknowledge these feelings and accept them as a normal part of the healing process.

Guilt: Survivors are left with repetitive thoughts of “What if/If only” scenarios. “What if I had done this; If only I hadn’t said that; Why didn’t I notice the warning signs...?” In time, survivors need to understand that they had no control over the situation and that it is not their fault.

Despair and Depression: Feelings of sadness and despair can affect a survivor’s mental and physical health. These feelings can lead to depression and stress reactions associated with trauma, such as flashbacks and nightmares.

Stigma and Shame: Societal, religious, and personal beliefs can all contribute to survivors feeling uncomfortable talking about the situation. For this reason, and/or out of respect for the deceased, families may choose to publicize a death by suicide as “accidental.”

Relief: In many cases, suicide occurs after years of coping with emotional/physical pain and suffering on behalf of the victim. A feeling of relief for survivors is a normal, acceptable emotion and not worthy of any extra guilt.



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