

2W TEAM MEETING SERIES

SUICIDE LOSS SURVIVORS // FOR STUDENTS

When someone we know takes their own life, those of us that are left behind experience a variety of emotions and side effects. The loss might be of a classmate, a teammate, a friend, or even a sibling or parent. The loss of someone to suicide is unthinkable until it happens. In the aftermath, the ones who remain have to figure out how to go on and how to cope with their grief.

People respond to grief in different ways. Some of the potential effects of grief are:

- Fear of death
- Anxiety over possibly losing other loved ones
- Dissatisfaction with life
- Trouble sleeping or sleeping too much
- School trouble
- Being socially distant
- Low self-esteem
- Feelings of guilt or rejection

In addition to these side effects, people experience a number of different emotions: like anger, fury, sadness, discontentment, melancholy, guilt, regret, and confusion. Thinking about how your loss has affected you is a good first step to finding healthy ways to cope with your grief.

To help you sort through what's probably a storm of emotions, try this short exercise.

1. Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths in and out.
2. Focus your thoughts on your breath as you continue to breathe in and out evenly. Don't worry if your thoughts drift, just notice the thoughts and focus back on your breathing.
3. After a couple of minutes of just breathing, picture a ball of light coming from the center of your chest. Study the light without judgment for a moment. What colors do you see in the light? Is it a bright light or a dim one? Is it steady or flickering? Is it like a lightbulb or more like a ball of lightning?
4. Take a few minutes to describe the ball of light in detail to yourself, naming the specific colors, describing the light's intensity, and getting comfortable with speaking in descriptive language about something intangible.
5. If the colors that you see in the light were your emotions, what colors would relate to which emotions? Why do you think certain colors match with certain emotions?

There are no right or wrong answers to any of the questions in the exercise. This is an imagery-guided method of sorting through and naming your emotions.

The ability to do this matters for two reasons. First, knowing what you feel helps you to cope with those feelings. Second, naming what you feel helps you to communicate with others when they ask how you are doing or when you want to ask for help.

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CHOOSING HOW TO COPE

Naming your emotions is just the first step to establishing healthy coping mechanisms. Different strategies work for different people, so it's important to find what works for you and to try not to compare your coping style to someone else's. That said, you want to focus on healthy coping mechanisms. So, let's look at three UNHEALTHY and three HEALTHY coping mechanisms.

UNHEALTHY COPING EXAMPLES

Self-medicating through risky behaviors

Drugs (including everything from marijuana to nicotine to opioids) and alcohol have long been favored means of self-medication when people feel bad. The problem is that this "medicine" is really bad for you. It might alleviate your pain for a few moments, but there are always costs and long-term side effects.

Drugs and alcohol won't make you stop grieving. They'll just give you something else to grieve. Other risky behaviors include: unsafe intimate encounters, putting yourself in physical danger, self-harming, and taking your pain out on others. All of these risks are choices—just not necessarily good ones.

Pulling away from loved ones or relying solely on peers for support

Sometimes grief can cause you to retreat within yourself. This can be helpful in the short-term, but it is unhealthy for the long-term. Following a loss, especially due to suicide, you probably have a lot of questions to go along with the confusing emotions we already talked about. While you might come up with answers on your own, the process is a lot easier when you talk it out with other people.

Although talking to your friends is a great outlet for what you're feeling, if you rely too much on them, you cheat yourself of the good that can come from getting professional help and relying on your family, too. Loss can either pull you away from your family or bring you closer together. You get to choose which it is.

Taking care of others at the expense of self

After a loss, you might feel the urge to hold on more tightly to the people who remain with you. This is not a bad thing. But if taken to extremes, it can become bad for you. You can show empathy and care for others without putting your own needs aside. You are just as deserving of your time to grieve as others are.

Whether you knew the person you lost well or you only saw them around school, their sudden absence can be shocking. Let yourself be shocked if that is what you feel. Choose to let yourself feel, so you can begin to heal.

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HEALTHY COPING EXAMPLES

Talking to friends and family

At first, it may feel too painful to talk about your loss. But over time, talking with people who care about you can become a healthy avenue for expressing your grief. You may worry that others don't want to hear about it or that it will bring up painful things for them, too. But talking about shared loss is a good way to cope with that loss.

If you aren't sure how to start the conversation, here are a few ideas.

How are you doing?

I'm feeling (this emotion) right now. Can I talk to you about it?

Do you remember when...? (Share a positive memory of the departed.)

I've been thinking about ways I can honor their memory. What do you think about this idea?

Our loss has brought up questions for me. Can I talk to you about them?

Seeking professional help

You don't have to go through this alone. In addition to your friends, family, and support groups, there are trained professionals in your area that can help you deal with your loss. Finding help can be daunting, but you don't have to do that alone, either. Talk to your school counselor and your parents; they can help you get the help you need.

Dealing with grief after a suicide is not something that everyone deals with, especially not before adulthood. You have experienced something out of the ordinary, and there is no shame in needing out of the ordinary help to carry on after that experience.

Taking part in online and real world remembrance activities

Remembering the person you lost hurts. But it also heals. Group remembrance activities provide an opportunity to give and receive social support while acknowledging the loss. These activities also help you to maintain a bond with the loved one who has passed on since you are working to retain memories of them.

Some examples of remembrance activities include: visiting places that had meaning to you and your friend, celebrating special occasions that you shared with them, and putting pictures or keepsakes from the friendship on display.

You didn't choose this loss. But you do get to choose whether your coping mechanisms to deal with the loss are healthy or unhealthy. Pain doesn't have to create more pain. Instead, find outlets that allow you to express your pain in ways that don't harm yourself or others.

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ASKING FOR HELP

When you're struggling with grief, it can be very difficult to accept or ask for help. But you don't have to deal with this alone. Let's look at three ways to get help when your grief or loss feels overwhelming.

Talk to your school counselor. The counselors at your school aren't just there to help you apply for scholarships or make sure that you take all the right classes to graduate on time. Those are important roles that they fill, but they are also trained to help students with other issues, including helping students to handle grief due to the loss of a friend or classmate.

Talk to your parents or guardians. This can be even more daunting than talking to a counselor at school, but your parents are an important source of support during difficult times. Even if they are struggling with the loss, too, they will want to help you cope in healthy ways. Try to be open with your parents about what you're going through and when you feel that you need help.

Reach out to a support network. There are different support groups and networks for different situations. A few resources are listed below. To find more, search online for "teen survivors of suicide loss support groups" in your area.

[Suicide and Crisis Center of North Texas](#) (Dallas)

[Touched by Suicide](#) (Denton, Flower Mound, and Oak Point)

[Grief and Loss Center of North Texas](#) (Dallas)

[The WARM Place](#) (Fort Worth)

[Survivors of Loved Ones' Suicides](#) (San Antonio)

[Crisis Intervention of Houston](#) (Houston, Harris County and surrounding counties)

[The Semicolon Group](#) (Houston)

Asking for help can be scary, but what's even scarier is facing something this big alone. You don't have to go it alone, and you don't have to rely solely on your peers for support.

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REFLECTION

JOURNAL QUESTIONS

Pick any of the following questions to help you write a bit about your emotions and thoughts during this difficult time. Take 5-10 minutes to just write without censoring yourself.

1. What did you feel when you first heard the news related to your loss?
2. What do you feel about the loss now?
3. How do you imagine or hope that you will feel about it a year from now?
4. What positive memories do you associate with the one you lost?
5. Who is part of your social support network during this time?
6. What do you think would help you cope with the loss? Is that a healthy or unhealthy coping mechanism?
7. What would make you feel most comfortable in seeking help or support during this time?
8. What emotions and associated colors did you experience in the imagery exercise?
9. How are your friends and family responding to your loss? How does that impact you?
10. How would you prefer to honor the memory of your friend or loved one?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are some emotions that you have felt since the loss?
2. What are some questions that this loss has brought up for you?
3. How are you coping with the loss?
4. How can others help you during this time?
5. Who are you relying on for support during this time?

GROUP REMEMBRANCE ACTIVITIES

Photo collage

Everyone brings two to three photos of the lost one. On a cork board or other surface, create a collage with the photos. Take turns putting your photos on the board. If you want to, share the stories behind the photos or other good memories that you shared with the person.

Candle ceremony

Everyone brings a candle. The candles can represent your friendship with the departed or remind you of a memory that you shared with that person. Each person lights their candle and shares why they chose the candle that they did or shares a memory of the person. The candles can be left together to burn out on their own (so long as proper safety precautions are taken). Or, everyone can blow out their candles together to symbolically say goodbye to the departed.

2W TEAM MEETING SERIES

SUICIDE LOSS SURVIVORS // FOR EDUCATORS

Losing a student to death is difficult. When that death is by their own hands, the loss deepens. And while we're coping with our personal loss, we are also trying to help our remaining students cope with the loss of their classmate, friend, or teammate.

Adolescents handle grief a little differently than adults, especially when that grief is a result of suicide. To prevent any additional tragedies following a student's suicide, we first have to learn how to help students handle their bereavement, grief, and mourning in healthy ways.

It might help to start by defining those three related terms. Bereavement is the loss itself. Grief is how we respond emotionally to the loss. And mourning is the outward expression of our grieving emotions. There's nothing we can do about the bereavement. The loss has happened. But we can help our students understand their grief and channel it into healthy mourning.

There are three key ways that we can help our students cope after the loss of a peer to suicide. Let's take a look.

Offer help on an ongoing basis. For some students, the immediate aftermath of the loss will be the toughest. But for others, they may not fully experience the loss until months later. Everyone responds to bereavement differently. A student may appear completely unaffected on the outside, but their internal world can be a whole other story. Make sure that students know how to seek help right after the loss, but also remind them of the help available as time goes on.

Make help as accessible as possible. There can be major hurdles to receiving professional help in coping with grief, such as lack of money, lack of reliable transportation to sessions, and not knowing where to start. Educators can help students and parents find resources that are affordable and nearby. Also, schools can partner with local professionals to provide educational materials on grief and bereavement to students and parents.

Acknowledge the student's agency. Every student is going to respond to loss differently, and they are going to need different ways of coping, too. The most successful coping strategies are ones that the student has a say in implementing. A student who doesn't want to go through talk therapy is probably not going to benefit from talk therapy, but they might get something out of art therapy or another creative avenue. Avoid prescribing coping mechanisms. Offer possibilities and opportunities, but don't try to force anything.

When students experience bereavement, educators can help them cope in healthy ways.

Some effects of grief and mourning in teens include:

- Fear of death
- Anxiety over possibly losing other loved ones
- Dissatisfaction with life
- Trouble sleeping or sleeping too much
- School trouble
- Being socially distant
- Low self-esteem
- Disconnection from social groups
- Risky behaviors like drug or alcohol use
- Depression
- Feelings of guilt or rejection

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SUICIDE LOSS SURVIVORS // FOR PARENTS

If you're reading this, then your child has experienced the loss of a friend, classmate, or teammate due to suicide. Even if your child was not personally close with the departed, they are likely experiencing a variety of emotions, which can lead them to do dangerous things. Parents are one of the crucial factors in whether teens turn to healthy or unhealthy coping mechanisms when dealing with the loss of a friend or peer.

There are three main things that parents and guardians can keep in mind while helping their teens cope with the loss of a friend or loved one due to suicide. Let's take a look.

Expect distance. During the teen years, adolescents are seeking their own identity. That means they want to figure things out for themselves. This can lead them to distance themselves from family when they are grieving. It's natural for teens to turn to their friends and social groups to help them cope with life's difficulties, and that includes losing a friend to death. While some distance is to be expected, teens still need opportunities to talk to their parents about the loss. Ask if they are okay, and let them know they don't have to go through this alone, but don't try to force your presence or conversation on them.

Wrestle with Why. Death brings up a lot of questions for anyone touched by it. For survivors of suicide loss, that often means struggling with feelings of guilt and rejection, as well as asking Why questions. Why did this happen? Why would they leave me? Why didn't I see this coming? These questions are difficult because there often are no answers, or at least, not concrete answers. Teens need guidance from caring adults when wrestling with questions like this.

Remember the lost. Remembrance activities are important for the healing process after bereavement. Sometimes these will be online activities, like posting on social media, either speaking to the departed or telling others of their loss. Others will be in the real world, like going to a wake or displaying keepsakes and photos of the departed. These actions help the survivors to support each other in their loss, to acknowledge the life and death of the departed, and to maintain a bond with the lost one.

Losing a friend to suicide is a difficult experience. Your kids are going to need your support, love, and empathy in the coming days and months. With you by their side, they can learn to cope with the grief of their loss, and they can begin to heal from it, too.

Conversation Starters:

Did you know the student who passed away? Were you close?

What can I do to help you right now?

Do you want to talk about this? If not now, I'll be available later, too.

What questions or concerns does this loss bring up for you?

What can we do to honor your friend's memory?

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SUICIDE LOSS SURVIVORS // RESOURCES

Survivors of Suicide Support Groups in Texas:

[Suicide and Crisis Center of North Texas](#) (Dallas)

[Touched by Suicide](#) (Denton, Flower Mound, and Oak Point)

[Grief and Loss Center of North Texas](#) (Dallas)

[The WARM Place](#) (Fort Worth)

[Survivors of Loved Ones' Suicides](#) (San Antonio)

[Crisis Intervention of Houston](#) (Houston, Harris County and surrounding counties)

[The Semicolon Group](#) (Houston)

Article: "[Loss Survivors](#)" 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline

Article: "[Coping after suicide loss](#)" American Psychological Association

PDF: [Survivors of Suicide: A Support Group Leader's Handbook](#), UPMC Western Psychiatric Hospital

Video: "[I Saw Myself as Deadly: Healing After Loss by Suicide | Erica Lennon | TEDxUNCCCharlotte](#)"

YouTube

Video: "[Helping Suicide Loss Survivors: New Directions in Suicide Postvention](#)" YouTube

Fiction Book: [After](#) by Francis Chalifour, Goodreads

Non-Fiction Book: [After a Suicide](#) by Susan Kuklin, Goodreads

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