

Surviving After Suicide



*A supportive and informational
newsletter for those impacted by the
suicide of a loved one.*

February, 2021



Surviving Suicide Loss, Surviving Traumatic Stress

by Jennie Marks

The terms trauma and traumatic stress do not apply only to survivors of war, natural disaster, physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, violent crime, or of a horrific accident. They also apply to those who have suffered a loss through the death of someone close to them. The trauma is even greater when the death is

due to suicide and especially if the person was nearby at the time of death, or was the *person who discovered the body of their loved one*. We know that these traumatic, stressful events can cause a person to experience powerlessness, feel overwhelmed, lack of connection and meaning, and may impact their ability to experience calmness and safety inside themselves. They can also impact their ability to have meaningful relationships, and sustain optimal functioning.

What we need to understand about trauma is that it is not the re-living of a traumatic past event, but

“AT THE MOMENT OF TRAUMA, THE VICTIM IS RENDERED HELPLESS BY OVERWHELMING FORCE. TRAUMATIC EVENTS OVERWHELM THE ORDINARY SYSTEMS OF CARE THAT GIVE PEOPLE A SENSE OF CONTROL, CONNECTION, AND MEANING.

JUDITH HERMAN, MD, *TRAUMA AND RECOVERY*

an experience in the present moment based upon a past event. According to Bessel van der Kolk, MD, one of the authors of *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society*, “Trauma is not the story of something that happened *back then*,” he says. “It’s the current imprint of that pain, horror, and fear living inside people.” This can be translated to trauma living inside our bodies and experiencing it *as if it is happening right now*.

How do we determine if we are experiencing post-traumatic stress?

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, “Symptoms of PTSD usually begin within 3 months of the traumatic incident, but they sometimes emerge later. To meet the criteria for PTSD, symptoms must last longer than 1 month, and they must be severe enough to interfere with aspects of daily life, such as relationships or work. The symptoms also must be unrelated to



medication, substance use, or other illness.” The following screening questions may help to determine whether you may be suffering from PTSD:

Have you experienced or witnessed a life-threatening event that caused intense fear, helplessness, or horror?

Do you have intrusions about the event in at least one of the following ways?

- Repeated, distressing memories, or dreams
- Acting or feeling as if the event were happening again (flashbacks or a sense of reliving it)
- Intense physical and/or emotional distress when you are exposed to things that remind you of the event

Do you avoid things that remind you of the event in at least one of the following ways?

- Avoiding thoughts, feelings, or conversations about it
- Avoiding activities and places or people who remind you of it

Since the event, do you have negative thoughts and mood associated with the event in at least 2 of the following ways?

- Blanking on important parts of it
- Negative beliefs about oneself, others, and the world and about the cause or consequences of the event
- Feeling detached from other people
- Inability to feel positive emotions
- Persistent negative emotional state

Are you troubled by at least two of the following?

- Problems sleeping
- Irritability or outbursts of anger
- Reckless or self-destructive behavior
- Problems concentrating
- Feeling “on guard”
- An exaggerated startle response

Self-Help

It is important to know that, although it may take some time, you can get better with treatment. According to the NIMH, here are some things you can do to help yourself:

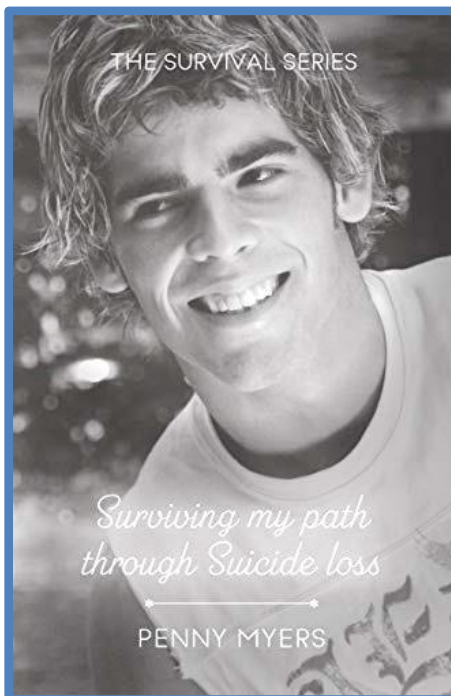
- Talk with your health care provider about treatment options, and follow your treatment plan.
- Engage in exercise, mindfulness, or other activities that help reduce stress.
- Try to maintain routines for meals, exercise, and sleep.
- Set realistic goals and do what you can as you are able.
- Spend time with trusted friends or relatives, and tell them about things that may trigger symptoms.
- Expect your symptoms to improve gradually, not immediately.
- Avoid use of alcohol or drugs.

Professional Help



Behavioral therapy, sometimes called “talk therapy,” includes a variety of treatment techniques that mental health professionals use to help people identify and change troubling emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. Mental health counseling can provide support, education, and guidance to people with PTSD and their families. There are several forms of cognitive therapy available which may be helpful. There are also medications that may be beneficial in treating PTSD. The American Psychiatric Association recommends that individuals consult with a mental health professional in order to obtain an accurate diagnosis and to discuss various treatment options. When you meet with a professional, be sure to work together to establish clear treatment goals and to monitor your progress toward those goals. Different individuals have different needs and therapies are not “one size fits all.” As with grief, healing comes over time. The most important thing to remember is that the effects of trauma CAN be improved to restore full functioning in your daily life.

If you or someone you know is in immediate distress or is thinking about hurting themselves, call the [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) toll-free at 1-800-273-TALK (8255) or the toll-free TTY number at 1-800-799-4TTY (4889). You also can text the [Crisis Text Line](#) (HELLO to 741741). To find resources for mental health in South Dakota, call **211**.



A survivor in our community has read and suggested a book for other survivors. The title of the book is “Surviving My Path Through Suicide Loss” by Penny Myers. The book is about the suicide loss of the author’s son Nick 13 years ago. It was released on February 9, 2021 on Amazon for Kindle and is currently about a dollar, but the price may soon be going up. At 73 pages it’s a quick read and the reader commented, “I finished it in less than 1.5 hours, and felt it gave me some hope.” It recounts her shattered emotions upon learning of Nick’s suicide and her subsequent path of healing.

Here are some video clips of the author and her daughters speaking about loss and healing after Nick’s death:

Nick’s sisters: <http://t.co/W5jd6WVvEg>

Nick’s mother, Penny: <http://t.co/CXQjXIJ8jv>

Surviving After Suicide *Virtual* Support Group



7:00 p.m. – 8:30 p.m.

1st Thursday of Each Month – Next meeting is March 4th, 2021

The Surviving After Suicide Support Group is open to anyone over 18 who has lost a family member or friend to suicide. We are here to support you whether your loss is recent or even years ago. Feelings shared are kept confidential and discussed only within the confines of the group meeting. Thus, our SAS support groups provide a comfortable, non-threatening space to share our experiences and thoughts. Questions are encouraged to help in coping with the grieving process and with the feelings that are particularly intense in the aftermath of suicide. As there is a different group dynamic each month, we encourage you to attend more than one meeting to determine *if support group is a good fit for you*.

Join us on Zoom at

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/84063017302>

NOTE: During this time of pandemic, we will be offering monthly support group and our support classes online only until we can safely gather in person once again. If you have questions regarding Support Group, Support Class, or any other of our survivor services, please do not hesitate to call Jennie Marks, Grief Support Coordinator at (605) 274-1416 or email griefsupport@helplinecenter.org

Register Now for the April, 2021 Surviving After Suicide Support Class



The next Surviving After Suicide support class will begin on **Tuesday, April 6, 2021** from 7:00-8:30 p.m. The class will be held on **10 consecutive Tuesdays**, ending on June 8, 2021. At this time, it is anticipated that the class will be held virtually, on Zoom. If you are not within driving distance of the Helpline Center in Sioux Falls, this may be an important opportunity to benefit from the online class! Although the class and all materials are free of charge, **registration is required**. To participate, we highly recommend a firm commitment to attend the first 2 meetings and the strong intention to attend all 10 meetings.

The supportive mourning process is guided by participant needs and a handbook that addresses important topics and issues after a suicide loss. It includes straightforward information and practical strategies for coping and healing.



SURVIVOR VOICES

Survivor Voices: Sharing the Story of Suicide Loss is a two-day training designed to teach those bereaved by suicide how to speak safely and effectively about their experience and loss. Through the sharing of personal stories, survivors of suicide loss provide insight that goes beyond traditional suicide prevention training. These insights can promote healing for those who are newly bereaved, educate the public about how to support survivors of suicide loss, and increase awareness

and understanding of risk factors and warning signs for suicide. The Helpline Center will soon be offering this training to individuals that are interested in sharing the story of the person they lost to suicide and about their ongoing healing.

The training prepares each participant to tell their story safely and effectively to various audiences, enhances public speaking skills and the ability to respond safely to audience and media questions, and provides education about suicide prevention and resources for survivors of suicide loss. The process of sharing stories and messages is very personal and intense, and the training encourages and promotes mutual support and healing among participants. The small group size is intended to allow time for sharing and caring.



Developed by NAMI New Hampshire, specific best practices and guidelines found in the training include information on safe messaging, media recommendations for reporting on suicide, and memorial guidelines.

Survivors of suicide loss who complete the two-day training will have:

- Greater knowledge of how to safely and effectively tell one's story of loss publicly.
- Greater ability to hone one's message for a general or specific audience.
- Greater ability to safely respond to questions from audience members or media.
- Greater ability to familiarize others with suicide prevention resources and resources for survivors of suicide loss.
- Greater comfort with telling one's story after having practiced it in a safe environment.
- Greater ability to connect survivors of suicide loss to each other and to resources.

Former speakers who have completed the Survivor Voices program have gone on to speak to a variety of audiences and have served as the honorary speaker for Helpline's annual Step Forward to Prevent Suicide event. The Helpline Center is currently accepting interested individuals for the upcoming training. Since the training is offered in an intimate small-group setting, which will be held in person. Due to the small group size, space is limited and the two consecutive Saturdays will be scheduled based on participant availability. If you are interested, please contact Jennie Marks at (605) 274-1416 or griefsupport@helplinecenter.org or Sheri Nelson at (605) 274-1406 or sheri@helpinecenter.org.

Survivor Voices participants will be screened to ensure they are emotionally ready to tell their story without having a setback in their own healing.

