

SUPPORT AFTER SUICIDE

“WHEN IT FEELS
LIKE IT’S NOT
GOING TO GET
BETTER, REMEMBER
THAT IT WILL.”



Losing someone to suicide is intensely traumatic, difficult and complex. There is something unique about a death where a person ends their own life and that has implications for those left behind.

We talk to psychologist Louise Flynn...

A good starting point is to recognise the complexity of suicide and to have understanding and deep compassion for the people involved. This requires a caring attitude and some knowledge about not only the complexity of grief, but also the trauma involved when that death is suicide.

The level of grief and trauma can be quite devastating for a long period of time. Because of the sudden and unexpected nature of the death, it's not only very disruptive to people's lives but also to their sense of self.

WARNING: This story contains themes of suicide. If this raises issues for you, call Lifeline on 13 11 14

THE LEVEL OF GRIEF AND TRAUMA CAN BE QUITE DEVASTATING FOR A LONG PERIOD OF TIME.

I don't know if recovery takes longer than other traumatic deaths, but it certainly is more disruptive than many deaths. I think we can say that for sure: the level of disruption to people's lives is more than some other deaths.

Still unfortunately, for many people, suicide is still a stigmatising experience. People can feel, it can really have an effect on people's sense of self, sense of place in a community, sense of belonging. I think it's very important to recognise that and to be providing adequate support because there is the potential for this experience to really impact on people's mental health over the long term and to impact on their ability to really stay engaged with their employment and with their social networks. It is an area that does need to be addressed and to be responded to, as I said with some expertise, but also with compassion and care and understanding.

Louise comes into contact with people at different stages of the recovery journey following suicide – often within days after a death through the Victoria Police referral system but also in the months and years following. People can access the Support After Suicide service through the police process, website or simply by calling.

What happens when I make contact?

If it's very soon after the death, many people aren't ready for any kind of support. They're just in a state of shock and wanting to be with family and also needing to make arrangements. It's often after a little while, maybe a few weeks or a few months that people will be looking for some kind of support.

This may be receiving information and resources or meeting others via support groups. Others really benefit from having individual, family or couple counselling. We work to try to provide whatever support people need including offering practical assistance and support around coronial and family issues (the coroner is always involved in investigating a death by suicide).

What did I do wrong?

Another complexity is guilt - this is almost unavoidable. When we love someone, we have a bond with them, a sense of responsibility and we want the best for them. So, when they take their own life, it's almost inevitable to feel guilty and like we've let them down. But feeling responsible and guilty doesn't mean that we are – it simply means that we love them.

I think one of the things often said about suicide is that people did the best that they could with the information that they had at the time. If people had known this was going to happen, they would have done something different, they would have done anything they could to stop it, but they didn't know. So, it can take a long time to really take in what has happened and that we weren't in a position to stop it – even though we desperately wanted to be able to.

Louise Flynn is a psychologist and pioneer in supporting people after a suicide. For the past fifteen years in her role with Jesuit Social Services she has started an honest conversation and set up support networks for families and friends to navigate and support the extremely complex circumstances that surround a death by suicide.



Ongoing care in times of crisis

The impacts the Gippsland bushfires and COVID-19 will last for many years. So, as a community we all need to recognise that people will need support for the long term. People who were affected by the 2020 Gippsland bushfires may feel quite forgotten when COVID-19 took over. In a sense, COVID-19 will be compounding and complicating their recovery. So, we mustn't forget that the people who were affected by the bushfires will still be feeling the effects and they are now also feeling the effects of COVID-19 – it will be complicated for them. We need to recognise that, remember it and continue reaching out, caring and letting people know that they aren't forgotten.



REACH OUT TO THOSE YOU KNOW ARE SUFFERING.

Step by step

I can say that with time and support, people do recover and lead enjoyable and productive lives again. People can feel initially like they will never recover, yet little by little, step by step they do. The loss of the person to suicide remains meaningful and important and sad, but people do rebuild their lives, no doubt about it. The impact of it for many will be lifelong, but people's lives are not destroyed, they can live enjoyable and productive lives again – I've seen it over and over again.

Help for those bereaved by suicide

Jesuit Social Services is available for anyone who is bereaved by suicide. They offer counselling by phone, Facetime and Zoom and are very happy to assist people with any technology to make it possible for people to connect with them. They are also offering some of our support groups online as well.

326 Church Street Richmond Vic 3121
Phone 03 9421 7640
www.supportaftersuicide.org.au

Louise's key messages

You are not alone. Even when you feel isolated and alone and that people don't understand, there actually are people who do. Reach out and find those people who care, they are there.

When it feels like it's not going to get better, remember that it will. You may feel that you won't recover, but slowly, slowly you will. Because you still love the person, the grief remains, but it is possible to pick up your life again.

Reach out to those you know are suffering. A person bereaved by suicide may not have the energy to reach out themselves. Don't just say: "Let me know if you need some help." Offer very specific, practical things that will be helpful. Say what you can do and when: "I'll come over on the weekend and help you with that." The person will be much more likely to say okay.

#storiesstrong

WHO TO CONTACT

Lifeline 13 11 14
Suicide Call Back Service
1300 659 467
Emergency 000

LEGAL DISCLAIMER: Please note that the information provided in this article is for general information only. It is NOT intended to be a substitute for professional medical advice from qualified practitioners. If you have concerns regarding your mental health please seek professional advice.

This article is part of the #storiesstrong suicide prevention campaign which highlights a series of twenty articles developed by a diverse range of people with lived experience of suicide and experts in the field.

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For more information visit www.gphn.org.au

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Gippsland PHN acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the traditional owners of country throughout Victoria and their continuing connection to land, sea and community. We pay our respects to them, their cultures and their elders past and present. We also recognise, respect and affirm the central role played in our work by people with lived experience, their families and/or carers. Gippsland PHN is committed to providing inclusive services and work environments where people of all backgrounds, sexualities, genders, cultures, spiritual beliefs, age, bodies and abilities are valued, supported and celebrated.

