



# You are not alone

Support for people who have  
been bereaved by suicide



Connecting for Life



# You are not alone

## Support for people who have been bereaved by suicide

This guide is dedicated to those grieving the death by suicide of someone they love. It has been developed by a small group of people comprising individuals who have lost loved ones through suicide and HSE Resource Officers working in the area of suicide prevention. While producing this guide, group members shared personal, honest and heartfelt accounts of their experience of losing their loved ones through suicide.

During this time, the contributors have been remembering:

*David, Kenneth, Rory, Eddie, Pidge, Kathleen, Dan, Shane, Linda, Tom and Derry.*

This guide has been designed to help you to choose what sections are most appropriate for you. It is not intended as something you need to read through from cover to cover.

Your family, friends or colleagues may also find it helpful to look through this guide so that they can begin to try and understand a little of what you may be going through and how to find the right help.

Some sections focus on how you may be feeling, others on what may be happening, and information is provided on further sources of support. We have used the expression '***bereaved by suicide***' throughout the guide as this seems to be the most readily accepted term, but we recognise people will have their own preferred language. There is no simple way to describe the differing relationships people may have had with the person who died so the expression '***person who has died***' has been used throughout. This may sound impersonal but it is not intended to devalue the strength of the relationship.

Throughout the guide, there are messages from people who have been bereaved or who have supported people who have been bereaved by suicide. It is hoped that their words can provide some comfort and support to you.

## Contents

Introduction	3
1. Taking care of the practical matters	7
2. What you may be feeling	25
3. Your connection with the person who has died	37
4. Getting through and creating a new future	51
5. Help and support	65

# Introduction

When you first learn that someone has died in circumstances that may be due to suicide, you can experience a range of emotions. You could be feeling at a loss, and unsure about what you are thinking or doing.

We hope you will find it helpful to have information about what you might be feeling, practical matters you are likely to have to deal with and suggestions on further help and support in the weeks, months and years ahead.

This guide can only attempt to describe some of what you are going through. It is no substitute for talking things over with people; either those close to you or a person from one of the support organisations listed. It has, however, been put together with the help of people who have been bereaved by suicide and who may have experienced some of what you are now going through.

We would like to express our sympathy and hope that this guide will offer you support and reassurance so that you feel you are not alone.

## You are not alone

Death by suicide is an overwhelming loss that can leave families, friends and communities with a range of emotions and many unanswered questions.

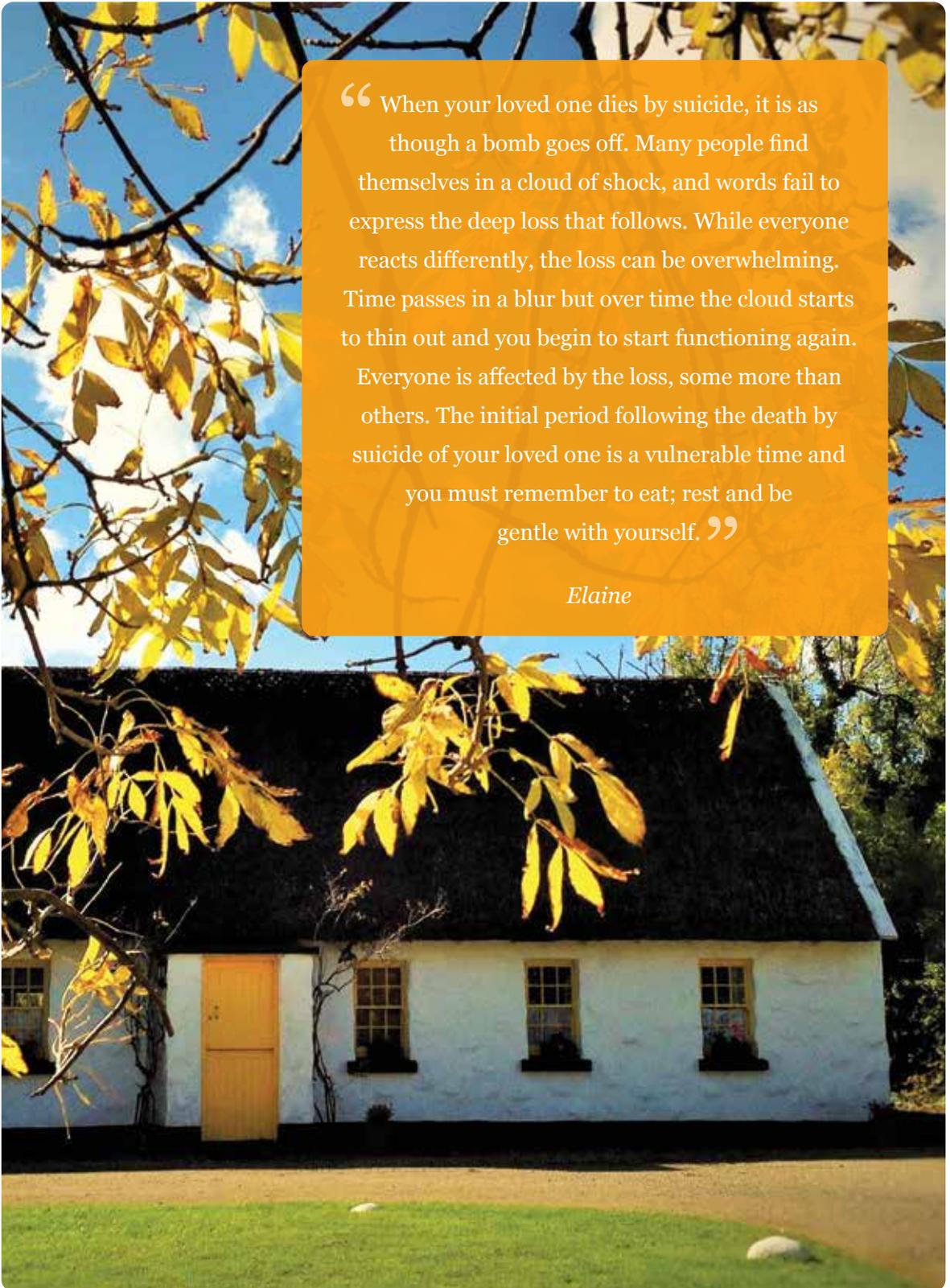
While the pattern of grief is unique to every individual person, many of those bereaved by suicide will experience similar feelings.

Everyone will respond differently when someone dies by suicide. How we grieve and for how long will vary from person to person. You may experience very different emotions from another person who was also affected and you may feel certain emotions more strongly than others. You will communicate how you are feeling in your own individual way. For example, you may not want to talk at all about the loss for a time, or constant talking may be your way of coping. However you react, it is your way of trying to make sense of what has happened, express your feelings, get information and deal with your inner turmoil and pain.

Over time, the intensity of the pain and loss usually subsides and you will learn to live in the world without the person who has died. There is no set amount of time to grieve and everyone will grieve in their own personal way. Talking your feelings through with a trusted friend or relative may be all the support you need. For some, meeting people who have had a similar experience creates solidarity in the loss and helps by providing relief, comfort and healing. Some may need extra support from their family doctor or a professional counsellor. If you do seek help from a support group, either professional or community based, it is very important to feel that you are free to cease the contact and change to another source of help if, for any reason, this support is just not right for you, right now.

“ When your loved one dies by suicide, it is as though a bomb goes off. Many people find themselves in a cloud of shock, and words fail to express the deep loss that follows. While everyone reacts differently, the loss can be overwhelming. Time passes in a blur but over time the cloud starts to thin out and you begin to start functioning again. Everyone is affected by the loss, some more than others. The initial period following the death by suicide of your loved one is a vulnerable time and you must remember to eat; rest and be gentle with yourself. ”

*Elaine*





# 1.

## Taking care of the practical matters

When you are faced with the sudden death of someone, and especially in the first few hours and days, there will be several practical issues that need to be taken care of. This section has information to help guide you through these matters.

“ In a state of shock, the help I received from close friends and family was invaluable. ”

*Brian*

## Letting others know

Letting others know what has happened is challenging; this may be family members, friends, work colleagues or neighbours. Identify who needs to know and try to let those that are important to you know what has happened, so as to avoid people discovering via word of mouth or social media. If you can, ask someone to help you with letting other people know what has happened. Know that you may not feel able, or may not want to answer other people's questions. Tell people when you are ready and say whatever you are comfortable with about how the person died.

“ I was away with my other son when I received the news of Dan's death. I received a call around 3pm but unknown to me, many of the people where we were staying knew Dan and knew about his death hours before me. They had seen it on social media, but they were very sensitive about it. Luckily, no one said anything to my other son and so I was able to gently break the horrendous news to him myself. ”

*Elaine*

It's OK to tell people when you are ready and to say whatever you feel is right about how the person died. Some say that they found it helpful to be honest from the start as it meant they didn't have to keep any secrets, or worry about how and when the truth might one day be revealed.

You are also not obliged to answer any questions from other people if you don't yet feel able, or you feel their questions are inappropriate.

Expect that the people you are telling could be at a loss about what to say to you and they may say or do thoughtless things in their shock. Here are some things you could say:

*[Person's name] has died...*

*...I'll tell you more when I feel able to*

*...It is too soon for us to talk about how they died*

*...I don't want to say any more at the moment*

*...I am not sure as to what exactly has happened*

## Telling children

It's completely natural for parents to worry about their children and to want to protect them; the best thing is to give them honest, age-appropriate information about a death. Someone who knows your child really well should break the news. Children process information by age and stage of development. How they grieve varies depending on their personality, age and level of understanding of death, but all children need clear information. Use words they understand, and be honest and reassuring. It's important to provide continuous reassurance to your children that they are loved.

*“A constant expression of love from me to my grandchildren was invaluable during this time.”*

*Brian*

## The practical matters

The time after someone close to you has died is the time when you may be feeling shocked, overwhelmed, confused and upset. It is hard to understand what needs to be done and even harder to do it. Accept any help you are offered from people you trust, for example, to send emails or letters, to look up relevant phone numbers or to sort through paperwork. Check what you actually must do and what can wait until later and use any energy you have on the 'musts'. There are many professionals who are there to help you through this time. You can talk to the Coroner, a member of an Garda Síochána, the undertaker or funeral director or your GP about any concerns you may be having and ask them to help guide you through the things you need to do. Your local area has support services for people who are bereaved through suicide, these services can also help in the early days. See Section Five for more information on supports and services.

### Contacting an undertaker or funeral director

A sudden or unexpected death, by its nature, means that you don't have the chance to say goodbye. The undertaker or funeral director can, in advance of the normal formalities, give you some time to be with your loved one. You may find comfort by taking time to come to terms with what has happened and being with the person who has died.

The undertaker or funeral director will help you to plan the funeral. They can deal with the burial or cremation arrangements, such as the death notices, service, flowers and transport. They will also help you get any documentation you need, before or after the funeral.

## Choosing to see the person after their death

No one can make the decision for you about whether or not to see the person who has died; what is right for one person may not be right for another. Some people, with the best and kindest intentions may suggest you don't view the body. They may say 'it's better to remember them as they were'. You may feel this is right for you or you may feel you will not be able to accept that they have died until you have seen them and said goodbye. Funeral directors are experienced at supporting people who have been bereaved and will be able to talk to you about viewing the person who has died.

Some families who have experienced a death by suicide felt that it was very important for them to spend time with their loved one. Even if family members do not wish to view the body of their loved one, a vigil beside the closed coffin is often helpful. Other families emphasise the benefits of and comfort in having a public funeral so that adequate tribute is given.

## What to expect in the days and weeks after someone has died by suicide

Usually, when a person dies by suicide a post-mortem examination is required, and an inquest will be held later on to explore the circumstances of the person's death. This can often be a lengthy process that can take many months. The Coroner presides over the inquest on the day and the Gardaí will also have a role. All of this can be traumatic for families and the information here might make the process a little easier for you.

**The Coroner** is usually a doctor or a solicitor, who investigates the causes of deaths that are sudden or unexplained. The Coroner is helped to do this by the Gardaí. The Coroner will usually ask for a post-mortem and an inquest to help decide the cause of death.

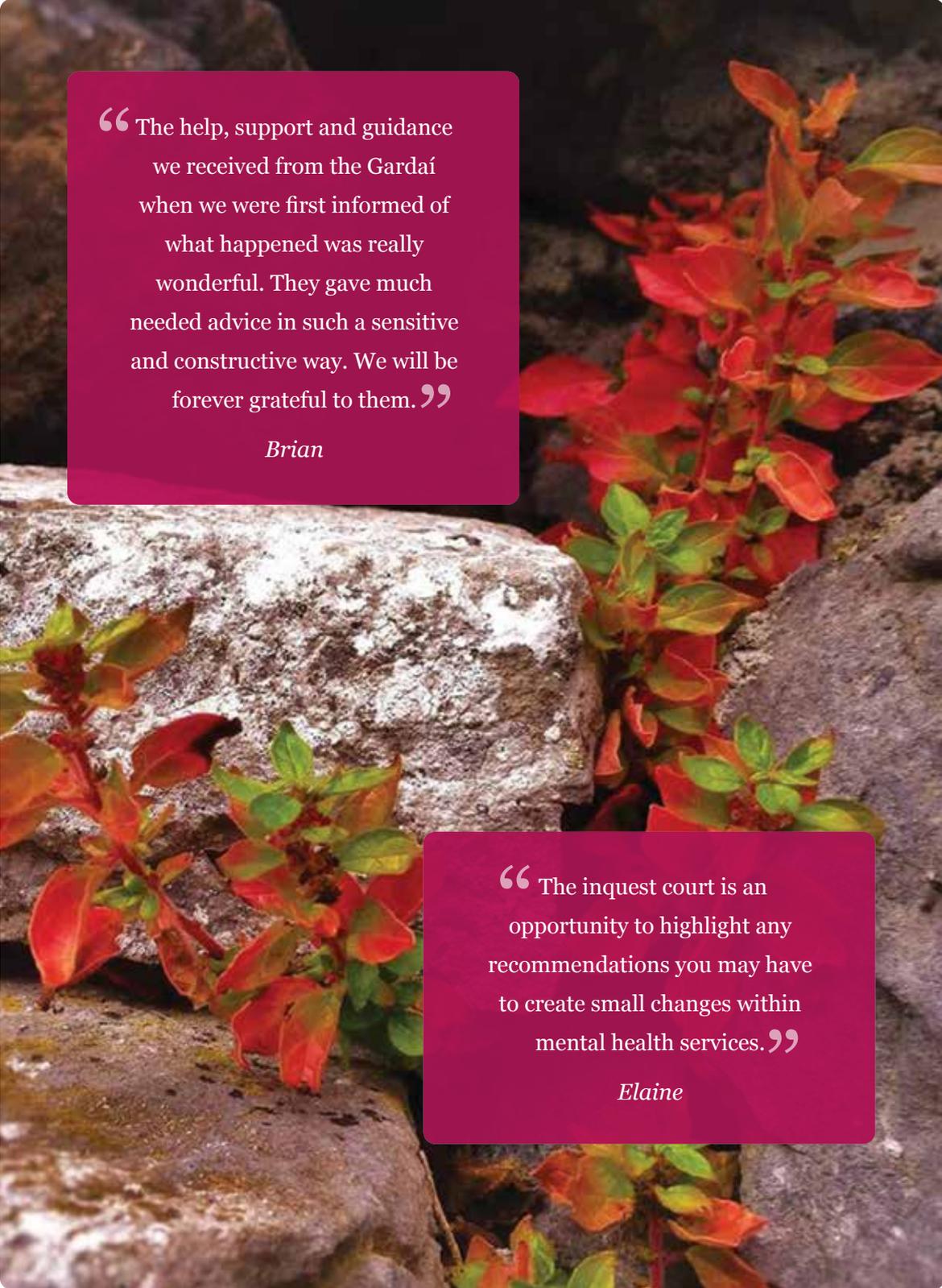
**Care of the body** of the person who has died will usually be looked after in a hospital mortuary or morgue, during the initial investigation. If you choose to do so, you will be able to see the body.

**A post-mortem** is an internal and external examination of the body of the person who has died to discover the medical cause of death. It is done in a hospital or morgue by a pathologist. It will be done in a professional and sensitive way. The body is usually released to the family immediately afterwards. If the Coroner decides a post-mortem examination is needed, then a family member may be asked to formally identify the body. They will be required to go to the mortuary and identify the body to a Garda who is acting on behalf of the Coroner.

**The Gardaí** visit the family to offer support, give advice and they will also give the Coroner information about what has happened. This does not mean that there is anything suspicious about the death. It is part of the procedure when a sudden death (not caused by an illness) happens. The Gardaí will ask questions about what happened and send a report to the Coroner. It can be really difficult to have to deal with their focus on finding out how your loved one has died. Even if the cause seems obvious, they have to do their job thoroughly. For some, this can feel intrusive and inappropriate but the professionals concerned are usually kind and sensitive when carrying out their work.

If your loved one died in a public place you may want to see where that was. This can be difficult if the Gardaí are investigating what happened, or if it is unsafe to do so. If it is in a dangerous or inaccessible place, you can discuss with the Gardaí to see if they can help you.

**An inquest** is an official, public enquiry into the cause of a sudden, unexplained or violent death. An inquest will not be held until at least six weeks after the death but generally takes much longer than this, sometimes up to 18 months. Family members may attend but they do not have to do so. Witnesses may have to give testimony on oath about the circumstances and cause of the death. Although this might feel like a criminal trial, the role of the witnesses is simply to give all the facts about the death. Nobody will be found innocent or guilty. The Coroner (or sometimes a jury) will give a verdict about the identity of the person who has died and when the death happened. They will also give the official cause of death. Causes include 'suicide', 'accidental death' or 'death by natural causes'. Inquests are often held in public where anyone can attend. They may be reported in local or national newspapers.



“The help, support and guidance we received from the Gardaí when we were first informed of what happened was really wonderful. They gave much needed advice in such a sensitive and constructive way. We will be forever grateful to them.”

*Brian*

“The inquest court is an opportunity to highlight any recommendations you may have to create small changes within mental health services.”

*Elaine*

Coroners in Ireland are very much aware of the tragic circumstances often involved in inquests and will try to treat each inquest sympathetically. Every attempt is made to ensure that the inquest proceedings are not unduly intrusive and painful on families and friends concerned. You may want to have a legal representative at the inquest, or perhaps a Garda Liaison Officer or Suicide Bereavement Liaison Officer (SBLO), so you have someone who can guide you through the process, give you advice and ask questions on your behalf. A copy of an Inquest Report can be obtained from the Coroner's Office after the inquest.

## Registration of deaths by suicide

When a death is sudden or unexpected or where a doctor wasn't involved in a person's care before their death, a Coroner has to give the official cause of death. The Coroner will then issue a certificate so that the death can be registered. A death will be automatically registered where an inquest or post-mortem was held by a Coroner and the Coroner's certificate has been received by the Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages.

## How to get the death certificate

Death certificates are available from any Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages Office (HSE). If a copy is needed for social welfare purposes, a letter from the Department of Social Protection is required to get the certificate free of charge. You can also apply online for a copy of a death certificate at [www.certificates.ie](http://www.certificates.ie)

If there is a delay in getting the death certificate because of the need for a post-mortem or inquest and you need to sort out social welfare benefits, the Department of Social Protection will accept a copy of the death notice from the newspapers in place of a death certificate.

## Dealing with legal and financial matters

Below are examples of some of the things that may be helpful in the early days. Dealing with practical issues can be hugely difficult, but unfortunately also necessary, for close family and friends of the person who has died.

### Legal

- The person's next of kin may need to be contacted, if they are not immediately present or available
- Notify the person's solicitor, if there is one
- Notify the executor(s) named in the will
- If there is no will or no named executor, an administrator will be nominated, this can be a solicitor or a relative and it will fall to them to administer the person's estate (Relatives who are entitled to be appointed as administrators follow this order: Spouse/civil partner, child, parent, sibling, more distant relative)

### Financial

- In most cases, a death certificate will be required by financial institutions (prior to the inquest, the Coroner's office can issue a letter for these institutions)
- Notify the bank, building society, credit union, post office and companies in which shares are held
- Cancel direct debits/standing orders in the person's bank or building society
- Notify insurance providers and cancel insurance policies if necessary e.g. health insurance/life insurance/car insurance
- Cancel subscriptions to clubs/groups/magazines
- Contact the Department of Social Protection if the person was receiving a payment
- Notify the person's employer if in employment, the school/college if in education or pensions office if retired
- Contact any hire purchase/loan companies
- Contact the tax office about possible tax refunds/credits

## Housing

- If the person held a mortgage, contact the mortgage provider for advice
- If the person was living in rented accommodation tell the landlord and arrange to have the name on the tenancy agreement changed, if necessary
- Notify utility suppliers e.g. gas, water, electricity, about the death and change the name on household utility bills, if necessary
- Contact An Post to re-direct post

## Health

- Contact the local health office of the person or voluntary organisation if they were getting community care health services
- Contact the doctor/hospital if the person was awaiting any appointments

## Personal

- Contact the travel agency, hotel, airline etc., if the person had made any travel plans

Because memory and concentration are not as good as normal and it is very easy to forget things, setting up simple filing and organisation systems can help; have files for different issues e.g. bills, will issues, financial issues. Keep notes of phone calls or discussions about business and financial issues and date them. Use a diary or reminders on your phone to remember appointments, use a to-do list or have a system for keeping important emails on your computer e.g. flagged emails folder.

## Other things to consider

**If the person died while under the care of HSE Mental Health Services** an incident review may be carried out. Incident reviews involve an analysis to determine what happened, how it happened, why it happened, and whether there are learning points for the service, for the wider organisation, or nationally.

A member of the mental health services team should make contact with you and ask for your views to be included in the review. You will be kept fully informed throughout the process, unless you ask not to be, and there should be an identified person within the mental health services that you can contact if you have questions or concerns. The HSE Incident Management Framework takes the needs of families and loved ones into account by promoting open disclosure and by appointing a family/service user liaison person to inform the family of the review process following a serious incident. You can download a service user information leaflet about HSE incident reviews [here](#).

In addition, the report [Improving suicide bereavement supports in Ireland](#) includes guidance on communicating with families following a death suspected to be by suicide occurring within a mental health service setting. The purpose of the guidance is to assist HSE Mental Health Services to reach out to families with an appropriate and consistent response and to ensure signposting to relevant bereavement supports. The guidance recommends that a letter should be sent to the bereaved family within two weeks of death and that this letter should include contact details for the local Suicide Bereavement Liaison Officer (SBLO).

**If the person died while in prison** the Irish Prison Service will offer support. The next of kin is notified in person by the Governor and the Prison Chaplain and a Liaison Officer will be appointed to the family of the deceased. The Irish Prison Service can make a discretionary contribution towards the funeral expenses of the deceased. An investigation will be launched by three different agencies, the Irish Prison Service, the Inspector of Prisons and An Garda Síochána. All deaths in custody are the subject of a Garda investigation and an inquest is held in a Coroner's Court.

The Irish Prison Service has a robust, internal review mechanism that assesses the circumstances of any death in custody. The aim of the review is to identify, where possible, measures which might be implemented to contribute to a reduction in the risk of deaths in the future. A high level of vigilance, awareness and care in the prevention of suicide exists in all institutions. Special arrangements have been developed for prisoners who have been identified as being at risk, including High Support Units and Safety Observation Cells. Prisoners who may have received bad news, e.g. a death in the family or loss of an appeal, are closely monitored. However, unless there is to be a total denial of all personal privacy to offenders at all times, the possibility of suicide in custody cannot be precluded no more than it can be in the wider community.

**When the death occurs in another county or country** the investigation, post-mortem investigation and inquest all take place in the location where the person died, not where the person lives. This can be difficult as it will mean that you will have to travel to the inquest. If you are the next of kin, the Coroner's Office will do its best to help you understand what is happening and when. It can also be a little more complicated and expensive to arrange for the person's body to be brought home for the funeral, and even more complicated if the death happens in another country. There is helpful information on [www.citizensinformation.ie](http://www.citizensinformation.ie)

## Visiting where they died

It may be that the person died at your home, which can make continuing to live there tough. If you live alone, or if you and your immediate family are finding this difficult, it may help to ask another family member or friend to stay with you for some time. Or it could be that you move out, even for a short time. It can be especially hard if there is no alternative place for you to go. On the other hand, it can be comforting to be at home if there are also positive memories.

You may feel you want to place flowers and messages at the place where the person died, if it was outside the home. This can be a way of expressing your grief. However, it's important to understand that care has to be taken in relation to such memorials, as there is a danger that they may encourage other people to take their lives at the same location.



“ If a family member found their loved one’s body, that image can stay in their mind. The fear is that it will always be there but it does eventually fade away.”

*Pauline*

### **Final messages from the person who has died**

Many people die by suicide without leaving a message. This can leave you feeling hurt and increase your intensity to try and understand ‘why’. If a final message has been left, the words may bring a measure of comfort; the person having taken one last opportunity to express their loving thoughts. Occasionally, the message may cause pain and other conflicting emotions if the person, in their distress and despair, is angry or accusatory.

Like the act of suicide itself, a final message allows for no reply. Some people find it helps to write a reply, either to keep or later destroy. Some decide that it feels right to destroy or erase any final message; others choose to keep it.

It is important to remember words left offer just a glimpse into what the person was feeling at that very particular time, and not what they represented throughout their relationship with you.

## Dealing with the media

For reasons that can sometimes be hard to understand, a death by suicide is often considered newsworthy.

You may be approached by journalists and photographers for details of the person who has died and the circumstances of their death. This may be the case particularly when the death has taken place in a public location, if it is a public figure or a young person who has died.

Despite the pressure that a journalist can try to apply, remember that you do not have to cooperate and you do not have to say anything about the person who died. If you've been bereaved by suicide and do agree to an interview, it's important to know that you can change your mind at any stage during the interview and stop it. Equally, you can ask the media not to report the person's death. On some occasions, this can be successful.

If media interest is expected, then some families prepare a written statement about the person who has died: both factual information (their name, age) and also what they were like (what they enjoyed, how they will be remembered). This can give you the opportunity to have a little more control over what is said or written. The statement could also include whether you are prepared to comment or be interviewed now or later. Before agreeing to speak to a journalist, it is always wise to consider the possible implications of making the information public. There is no guarantee that the media will use what you provide. They may choose to do their own research using information that is publicly available. This could include taking photos from social media accounts.

It is worth noting that once the media have a photograph, it can be used at any time (for example, at a later date in connection with a similar event). There may be no preparation for suddenly seeing a photograph of the person who has died reappear months later in connection with a different event. It's also worth noting that a radio broadcast referencing your loved one can be aired again at any stage without your consent.

Sometimes, appropriate media coverage, can feel like a way of sharing the life of the person with a wider audience. Some people choose to talk publicly about what has happened as a way of remembering the person, or to help raise awareness of the issue of suicide and to try to prevent other deaths. Remember, you have a right to decide what you feel comfortable with but those bereaved by suicide are encouraged not to go into excessive detail.

It is also important to be mindful of how other members of your family, as well as others affected by the death may feel about this publicity, or how it might impact on them or your relationship with them.

There are clear [media guidelines issued by Samaritans](#) on how to report appropriately on a suicide, and you should complain if you feel these have not been followed.

For more in-depth guidance and support in this area, you can contact Headline, Ireland's national media programme for responsible reporting, and representation of mental ill health and suicide, regarding any issue relating to mental health coverage.

You can also complain to the Press Council of Ireland if you have been subject to intrusive enquiries or if you are concerned that coverage may affect other people's safety. Occasionally, people can feel like the person who died was unfairly represented in the media.

## Online and social media

People who are recently bereaved by suicide also need to consider the role of social media and online content.

You might want to keep what has happened private, yet other versions may already be circulating online. On the other hand, you may want to post a message about the death on the social media pages of the person who has died.

Whatever you decide, always remember that before you share information online, take some time to think about how other people might be affected by it. You could potentially share material that is unsafe or harmful for others, without even realising it.

Suicide and self-harm are sensitive issues, so try not to trivialise the topics or make them seem less complex than they are. Remember that other people online may already be vulnerable or upset. They could also be grieving or recently bereaved themselves. Be mindful that everyone is entitled to privacy, including a person who has died.

[The HSE has put together a booklet which sets out how to report on social media content that promotes suicide or self-harm.](#)

If you decide to notify people online about someone who has died, consider if there is a more gentle way (preferably in person) to let them know. It can be very shocking for others to learn something online when they have no support around them.

You should also consider;

- Your privacy settings and the potential that the content or post could be shared widely, or go 'viral'
- Who will read it - both now and in the future
- How you could highlight supports and services that will be of help to the audience
- The length of time you should leave the content or post in place

Social media pages are often used to host memories and photographs of a person who has died. Many people talk about the comfort that sharing recollections can bring. It can be a helpful way to continue to mark birthdays and other important anniversaries. All the main platforms have different procedures for how to operate or 'memorialise' (leave untouched) the account of someone who has died.

For information on how to memorialise or remove a person's account from social media, visit the relevant platform's Help Centre.

If you are thinking about setting up a page or group to memorialise a person who has died by suicide, there are a few things that you can do to make it safe for others. For example, you could include a 'terms of use' for the page, outlining the rules for others who would like to participate or join. Plan how you would monitor comments for inappropriate, harmful or unsafe content. It's also important to think carefully about how you would feel about unsupportive comments and how you might handle them.



## 2.

# What you may be feeling

You may be reading this soon after someone has died, or it may be weeks, months or years afterwards. This section focuses on some of the emotions felt by bereaved people and the feelings that are intensified when the death may have been by suicide.

How you grieve is as unique as who you are, and as individual as your fingerprint. Each person will be affected in their own way because everyone is different - even in the same family. You have your own relationship with the person who has died; your own experience of other losses and differing levels of support available. Equally you have your own way of expressing feelings. You may find it helpful to share feelings and thoughts. You may find it very hard to cry or to put into words how you are feeling - it doesn't mean that you are not as distressed as someone who cannot stop crying.

You may find that people suggest how you should be feeling or tell you to grieve in a particular way e.g. 'you must be feeling very...' or 'you need to...' While this advice is intended kindly, remember that everyone grieves differently. So listen to yourself and find your own way. It is important to remember that there are no set rules or stages and there is no right or wrong way to be feeling.

People may make assumptions that only close family grieve - however, many people can be affected. You may be the close friend of the person, a work colleague, or maybe you have been professionally involved in helping before or after the person died. You may not have received the same recognition or understanding of your loss that family members have had, yet you may still experience any combination of the feelings described.

“ At the beginning you may want to repress the reality of the death rather than confront it. It can take weeks, even months to deal with such a loss. Because of this, the loss can be very isolating and lonely while waiting for the grief to manifest. ”

*Pauline*

## How are you feeling?

People often ask ‘how are you feeling?’ and it can be impossible to answer. When someone dies suddenly you can be left with an overwhelming array of feelings and thoughts. Here we explore some of the emotions that are commonly felt when someone you care about dies by suicide.

“ You may recognise some or many of these emotions as yours and you will likely realise that you feel different ones to a different extent as time goes on. Often there is just a single powerful emotion which can suddenly be replaced by another one depending on what you are thinking or experiencing at the time. Thoughts and emotions can swirl around and through you and it can feel like you are in a hurricane of unbearable misery. Whatever you are thinking or feeling keep in mind that there is every kind of support and assistance at hand. ”

*JP*

### Sadness

A feeling of deep sadness may be the most frequent feeling and this can last for years and sit alongside other feelings. You may feel you want the person back and long for life to return to how it once was. Sometimes it might feel like people are trying to tell you that you are angry, shocked or bewildered when what you feel is deep sadness.

### Numbness

You may find it hard to feel anything. For some, it can take a while for pain to break through. It can be hard to answer well-meaning questions such as ‘how are you feeling?’ when the answer is sometimes nothing.

## Anger

You may feel angry with the person for dying and leaving so much pain behind. Trying to find someone to blame for the death is a common response. Anger may occasionally feel overwhelming and can last, or come and go for a long time.

## Defensiveness

Uncertainty over how people will react can lead you to put up defences in case they avoid you or say something upsetting or ask you intrusive questions. Sometimes, it can be hard to talk openly about how you are feeling.

## Depression and anxiety

Sometimes, people feel they are losing control of their mental health because the grief is so intense. This may be a feeling that comes and goes. Sometimes, but not always, you may feel these feelings have become deep-rooted. It is important to speak to your GP or to contact one of the support organisations listed in Section Five if you think this may be happening to you.

## Despair and suicidal thoughts

You may question whether you can face living without the person who has died. For some, this may be a fleeting thought; for others, it can become a deep despair that leads to thoughts of suicide. If this is how it feels for you, please seek support from those around you, or contact your GP or organisations such as Pieta (1800 247 247) or Samaritans (116 123).

## Disbelief

It is natural to struggle to believe what has happened; while disbelief can fade as the reality of the death sinks in, you may still find yourself doubting what has happened for some time.

“ We felt shock, disbelief - this couldn't be happening to us.  
We cried so much at first and then the tears stopped and we  
felt numb. Over the coming weeks the stress built up and up.  
We felt so empty after the month's mind mass.  
It felt like we were walking around in a daze all the time.  
We couldn't concentrate on anything. We couldn't engage even with  
simple things. Watching TV felt like we were staring at a  
blank screen. We couldn't face walking to town - it felt like everyone  
was talking about us or going to ask us how we were. ”

*Eddie and Kathleen*

## **Fear**

You may feel frightened; a shaky uncertainty because everything has changed. Sometimes you may feel afraid about what life will be like without the person who has died. It can be difficult to imagine a different future. You may also feel fear for your loved ones – this is a natural feeling.

## **Regret**

You may feel regret for something you did or did not do, said or did not say. It may help you to remember that only your loved one who died knows why they could no longer bear to live.

## **Experience stigmatising behaviour of others**

You may find that bereavement by suicide marks you out and complicates the way in which people respond to you. People often say they experience stigma through judgement, in a way that would not happen if their loved one had died in a different way.

## Physical reactions

It is quite common to feel physically unwell with headaches, upset stomach and sickness. When you are feeling low, you may find yourself more prone to colds than usual. You may not take as much care of your eating and sleeping patterns as you did before.

“Losing a partner doesn’t just affect you mentally and emotionally, it can also bring on physical health problems where you find yourself having to attend the doctor, the dentist and the hospital. It all relates to your body being in physical shock because of the loss. As time goes past you will understand your grief will never go away, you will just learn to be stronger and carry it inside yourself but know that you will have days when you feel ‘off’ and your grief will come at you in waves.”

*Stacey*

## Longing

The particular sadness after someone has died may take the form of a desperate longing for that person. It can be a physical sensation: wanting to see, touch, hold or smell them and it can feel like a heart-breaking longing for them to return, even for just a moment.

## Questioning what if?

People who take their own lives may not have shown despair to those around them: everyone who has loved, supported, cared for and lost someone to suicide will ask themselves what they missed or could have done differently. You may continue to question yourself and those around you for days, weeks and years after the loss.

## Why?

You may be left with a huge unanswered question. The desire to find an answer may never go away entirely. The causes of suicide are usually complicated and the person who died is the only one who knew why it felt impossible to live.



“ I never thought that I would ever have to grapple so intimately with the consequences of suicide. That evening life as I had known it was changed forever. Ahead of me were long and many months of suffering so intense and intolerable that I was in wonder that I could still exist, that my being didn't just spontaneously give up the ghost. I longed for her day and night, my mind constantly inflamed with the quest for understanding why she did it. How could she even conceive of doing such a thing? Was it my fault? It astounded me that this unrelenting self-interrogation could persist day and night. It seemed that I hardly ever slept, that when I awoke from some rare fitful slumber my mind immediately recommenced its endless circling round the same questions...Why? How could she? What was going on for her? ”

*JP*

“ My siblings and my parents and I talked together day and night about him, why did he do it, how we loved him and missed him so much. We shared our broken hearts and became so much closer as a family, walking the road together to a kind of healing and acceptance. ”

*Elisha*

## Rejection

However much you are trying to understand what happened, you may feel rejected and also that your love and care was disregarded by the person who died. Sometimes people around you may seem unable to cope with what has happened and withdraw when you need them most, leaving you feeling isolated.

## Shock

Feelings of shock can insulate you in the beginning, can last a long time and you may experience them in many ways. You may feel as if you have lost your ability to complete daily tasks and that you are detached from what is going on around you.

“ I had never experienced anything like this depth of grief before and was dumb-founded that I had the capacity to suffer so much and for so long. How could an ordinary human being continue living with such pain through every waking moment and not just implode with the impossibility of it. I literally wanted to leave my body, could not see how to continue to exist – but, somehow I did, somehow I was looked after throughout, although I could not see that at the time. It was something I had to live through to become who I am today. ”

*JP*

## Searching

You may want to go to where the person used to spend time (work, school, or a favourite place) in case they will be there or you may want to avoid such places. It is also quite natural to think you have caught a glimpse of the person who has died, for them to appear to you in a dream or to find yourself calling their name.

## Relief

When the person you love has been in deep distress and pain, or if you have spent a long time worrying that they might die, relief can be a natural response after a period of ongoing distress and deep emotional pain.

## Acceptance

You may accept the person's death as the choice they made given the situation that they were in. When a friend or relative has been suffering, you may feel some sense of acceptance that they decided to end the pain, alongside your own sadness at what has happened.

“ Grief isn't linear, it comes in waves and those waves have been very rough and turbulent over the past eight years since my wonderful 20 year old son died by suicide. They have stripped me of every assumption and expectation I've ever had. But, during this turbulent time, I've changed my priorities in life and have discovered supports and resources to help cope with this awful turmoil:

- The importance of self-care, both physical and mental
- The importance of talking and sharing with people who understand/can empathise
- Spirituality and an appreciation of the wonder of this universe

The waves still come, sometimes strong and sometimes just a ripple... but that's okay. ”

*Marie*

## Learning to live with grief and loss<sup>1</sup>

The all-consuming depth of feeling associated with grieving affects all aspects of your being: mental, physical, emotional and spiritual. In just a short period of time, you can use up your energy and feel overwhelmed and exhausted. During this time, it is important to remember to nurture yourself on your grief journey.

- Know you can survive. You may not think so but you can.
- Struggle with “why” it happened, until you no longer need to know “why” or until you are satisfied with some, or no answers.
- Know that you may feel overwhelmed by the intensity of your feelings but that all your feelings are normal.
- Recognise that anger, guilt, confusion and forgetfulness are common responses when you are in mourning.
- Be aware you may feel inappropriate anger at the person, at the world, at God, at yourself. It's okay to express this anger in a safe way.
- Accept that you may feel guilty for what you think you did or did not do.
- Know that having suicidal thoughts is common. It does not mean that you will act on these thoughts. However, seek help if you have frequent suicidal thoughts or if you are thinking of acting on them. Go to your GP or to the Emergency Department of your nearest hospital.
- Remember to take one moment or one day at a time.
- Find a good listener with whom to share. Call someone if you need to talk. If you don't want to talk to friends or family, you can contact Samaritans (116 123).
- Don't be afraid to cry. Tears are healing.
- Give yourself time to heal.
- Remember the choice was not yours. No one is the sole influence in another's life.
- Expect setbacks. Emotions can return like a tidal wave but you may only be experiencing a remnant of grief, an unfinished piece.

- Try to put off major decisions.
- Give yourself permission to get professional help.
- Be aware of the pain of other family and friends.
- Be patient with yourself and with others who may not understand.
- Set your own limits and learn to say no.
- Steer clear of people who want to tell you what or how to feel.
- Know that there are support services that can be helpful.
- Call on your personal faith to help you through.
- Expect physical reactions to your grief, e.g. headaches, loss of appetite, inability to sleep. Your GP can give you advice about coping with these reactions, if needed.
- Be willing to laugh with others and at yourself; it can help you to heal.
- Wear out your questions, anger, guilt, or other feelings until you can let them go. Letting go doesn't mean forgetting.
- Know that you will never be the same again, but you can survive and even go beyond just surviving.
- Be kind and gentle with yourself.

1 Adapted from: Bolton, I. (1983). *My Son...My Son...A Guide to Healing After Death, Loss or Suicide*. Bolton Press Atlanta.



# 3.

## Your connection with the person who has died

You may have particular responses and reactions to a death by suicide depending on your connection with the person who has died. This section seeks to help you depending on your particular connection with the person who has died.

## Partners

If your partner has died by suicide, you may feel as if the ground has disappeared from under your feet. Feelings such as shock, frustration, exhaustion and even relief may follow the loss of your loved one especially if you have been supporting them for a long time through their mental illness, and possibly through previous attempts too.

It may feel as if your life together has been rejected. Unanswerable questions go through your mind such as: 'wasn't I enough reason to stay alive?' or "why wasn't he/she able to talk with me about what was going on in her/his mind?" It may be hard to remember the good times spent together because a death by suicide seems to dull the positive memories, at least for a time.

“ I slept in a friend’s house most nights for months after she died and I had dinner every night in a different house - both friends and family. All the time I was talking about what had happened and how could it have happened. People were so kind and attentive; they really helped me through the worst time of my life. ”

*JP*

You may feel that others treat your loss differently. You may feel others place blame on you, or that you are in some way responsible for the death. This can sometimes be the case with your partner’s relatives who are also grieving. You are not responsible for your partner’s decision to end their life.

Your grief can be compounded if you and your partner have children, as you try to protect and care for your children, it can have the effect of suppressing your own grief. You may feel extremely hurt and angry especially if left with financial worries.

The death of an ex-partner can hurt unexpectedly. You may feel you are not entitled to grieve – but that won't stop it happening. You shared parts of your lives together and you are allowed to grieve for the person you knew.

Your grief might not be easily recognised and accepted by others. You might find yourself excluded from funeral arrangements and support, either deliberately (for example, because you were in a same sex relationship that your families have felt unable to accept) or unintentionally (because your connection was unknown and had perhaps been kept secret from your partner's family).

Sometimes you may feel blame or you may actually be blamed for what has happened. Emotions can run very high after a tragic death and blame within and between families can sometimes occur. You may even be unwelcome to attend the funeral. It is important to try to understand that those who blame are in shock and may be avoiding their own feelings of guilt. Blame can be seen as guilt in reverse. Do not take blame on board; the person who has died came to their own decision.

“From a legal perspective, because we weren't married, I was not her next of kin and so I was shocked to find that I had no say in the funeral arrangements and ended up actually excluded from the ceremonies. Family and friends helped me with a parallel ritual in a location some distance from the main event, and this was an important first step in my long road to recovery.”

*JP*

## Parents

To have a child die, whatever their age or whatever the cause is devastating for parents.

Parents can tear themselves apart with questions such as ‘why?’; ‘what could I have done to stop this?’; ‘why didn’t I notice?’; ‘if only...’ You may feel that others are judging you – and your child – in a way they would not if your child had died in other ways. Even if your child had grown up and left home many years before their death, you may endlessly wonder if there was anything you could have done that would have changed what happened.

Parents may grieve in particular ways. You may find it impossible to talk about what has happened and try to keep yourself busy or you may need to talk, to cry and to express feelings and pain. Parents may feel a sense of being estranged from each other at a time when you most need each other’s support, and this may lead one parent to think that the other does not care. Single or separated parents may feel very alone and unsupported.

“ Small things can suddenly trip you up and leave you with this overwhelming feeling of being consumed in a huge dark cloud. It’s at times like these that you have to be kind to yourself and allow the grief to come out. ”

*Elaine*

It can be especially difficult to support your other children while you are grieving; you know they need you but you may feel you have nothing left to give. You may end up hiding your feelings and not talking about the enormity of what has happened. Parents bereaved by suicide worry that their other children will also consider suicide as a result of their trauma. This can be particularly stressful and you may need professional help. See Section Five for more information on supports and services.

If your adult child has died by suicide, you may feel that you have to support your child’s partner and your grandchildren first. This risks putting your grief ‘on hold’. Parents can feel responsible for their child causing pain to others.

If your only child has died, you may struggle with how you now define or describe yourself. One parent described it as being ‘a mother without a child’. As you try to come to terms with this you might find it helpful to reach out to family, friends and/or seek professional help. See Section Five for more information on supports and services.

“ Sometimes, when you think of your loved one, you can only see parts of them, their hands, the back of their neck; it can be really hard to see their eyes or face. Then there are other times when suddenly out of the blue, you can see and feel them in your mind’s eye. It is lovely but shocking as all you want is to touch and hug them. All these things are normal, awful but normal. ”

*Elaine*

## Children and young people

For children of any age, the death of a parent by suicide brings particular challenges. They are likely to feel abandoned and it can be very hard for children and young people to avoid feeling that somehow they are at fault.

Talking to children and young people about how their parent has died will depend on the child’s age or level of understanding.

For young children who have lost a parent or sibling to suicide, a natural response is to want to protect them from knowing what has happened, and to think up an alternative explanation for the death. However, because of the likelihood of overheard conversations, media coverage, gossip and visits from the Gardaí, it is hard to keep the cause of death from them. It is better for children to hear the truth from people who love them than from someone in the playground or on social media; this is a time when they need to feel there are people around them that they can trust.

Talking about what has happened is a chance to answer any questions (within the limits of their age and level of understanding) and to check that they have understood what has been said. It is also a chance to reassure them they were

not to blame. Ideally, a parent would be the best person to tell the child or young person what has happened – if this is not possible, ask someone they trust to explain what has happened.

If the child has already been given a different explanation for the death, it is possible to go back and change it. For example you could say something like: 'You know I told you that your Dad had an accident and that is why he died. Well, I've been thinking about this and I would like to tell you a little more about how he died. I didn't know what to say when it happened, it was such a shock. Now I'd like you to know what actually happened that day.'

You may be wondering whether children should view the person's body or whether they should attend the funeral. These decisions will depend on your knowledge of the child's level of understanding. Children and young people appreciate being given the information to make a choice.

If children wish to see the person's body, and you feel this is appropriate, prepare them in advance for what they will see and suggest they bring something (e.g. a flower, a card) to leave with the person. If they decide to attend the funeral, consider offering them a role (e.g. choosing some music or reading a poem). Further information is available at [www.childhoodbereavement.ie](http://www.childhoodbereavement.ie)

Children and young people will have the same range and intensity of feelings as adults but may need help identifying and expressing their emotions. It may be the first time that someone they know has died and even the concept of death is new to them. Understanding suicide can be difficult and confusing.

They may find it very hard to cry; it doesn't mean they aren't as distressed as someone who can't stop crying. The way children grieve is often described as 'puddle-jumping'; moving rapidly from great distress to physical activity, for example. This is normal.

It is natural for a child to be afraid that someone else in the family may also die by suicide. Reassure them of your support and love, and be honest about your feelings of sadness and distress.

It is important to support and encourage children and young people to talk about what has happened and to share how they are feeling. It can also help to explore with them ways of coping with difficulties and the belief that suicide may be an option. In addition, it provides an opportunity to talk about the importance of seeking support, if they need it.

Children and young people may also need help on how to answer questions from others; their friends may be very direct and inquisitive. Help them prepare something they are comfortable saying, for example: 'My sister died at the weekend. It is very sad. It was suicide. Please don't ask me for any more information. If I feel I can talk about it, sometime, I'll let you know.'

If the person who died was a friend, young people may need intense support; they may have shared things together and they will wonder if there was more they could have done. Their friend may be someone they knew online and other people may not understand the intensity and importance of that connection.

It can help if young people know there are places (such as support and youth organisations, school counsellors, help lines) where they can talk about their feelings, as sometimes they may struggle to share their thoughts with other members of the family.

There are organisations who can give you more guidance on supporting children and young people bereaved by suicide. See Section Five for more information on supports and services.

“ Your mother is your first love. Everything I ever did was to please her and make her proud. Losing Mum was like losing a part of who I was, who I am now, and who I wanted to be. Knowing that I will never be able to get that back, is the hardest part. Although I missed Mum's physical presence, I knew that no matter where I went or what I did, I felt her with me and guiding me. This gave me the courage to go forward in life without her. ”

*Kathryn*

## Siblings

If your brother or sister dies by suicide, you suddenly lose someone who you have grown up with, laughed with, argued with, and with whom you share a lot of memories. Each sibling will be affected in their own way because everyone is different. You have your own relationship with the person who has died; your own experience of other losses and differing levels of support available.

While you have your own grief and confusion, you can also feel responsible for supporting your parents with their grief. You may find that people enquire after your parents without recognising that you are also grieving. Sometimes, it may feel as if you have lost all your family at once because each family member withdraws into their grief.

“ It didn’t work that everyone was telling me to be strong and I had to be the strong one for my parents. I was strong but this really irritated me. I felt I couldn’t show any emotion. So I dealt with a lot of my grief on my own. This isn’t a good thing. I got through it but shouldn’t have to do that. My whole life changed; every element of it. Luckily I became a much stronger person as a result. But I do think there needs to be help out there for people in a similar position to me. ”

*Elisha*

If your sibling has their own family, you may be worried about maintaining your future relationship with them. It can be helpful to talk through how you are feeling with your wider family and friends.

“ So I decided to do a scrapbook of his life. Although it was very hard looking at his pictures while doing this, it helped me so much! It also helped my parents; it has so many beautiful memories in there that it makes you feel at peace when you look through it. ”

*Elisha*

## Friends

You may have lost a friend through suicide with whom you have shared many experiences and who you considered as close as family. As a friend, you may sometimes feel that your grief and needs are less important than those of the family, and it may be difficult to seek support. Maybe you confided in them about your troubles in the past, perhaps they knew things about you that no one else did – and now, does.

It can be hard not to be closely involved in planning the funeral or other arrangements. Losing a friend to suicide can be hard especially if you knew they were feeling low. You are not responsible for your friend's decision to end their life.

Friends can sometimes feel that they are not entitled to any support after someone dies. It is important to remember that what matters is how this loss affects you, not whether you were related to the person who died. If you are grieving, you deserve to be supported in your grief. Find someone you trust; there is strength to be found in simply talking – as much as you need, as often as you want.

## Older people

Older people may grieve for the person who died and for the grief being felt by other family members. They may feel they should not express their grief, feeling it is in some way 'less important' or that they need to 'stay strong' for others in the family. Some older people may feel that the natural order of life has altered (i.e. they are alive while someone younger has died).

Older people may be at risk of developing depression or having their physical health suffer after a family death by suicide and yet be reluctant to seek medical help or support. It is important to remember you are experiencing something very tough and there are supports that may be of help to you.

## People with learning difficulties

People often underestimate the capacity of a person with learning difficulties to feel grief and understand death. Your relationship with the person with learning difficulties is likely to help you to know how best to support them. It can feel particularly difficult if the person who died was one of the people who could best understand them and their needs.

Sometimes, because people may not be able to express their grief, those around them may assume they are not grieving when they are actually feeling profound distress and pain.

Any death can be difficult to explain, and a death by suicide may be even harder to understand. Simple, clear, repeated explanations of what has happened will help. People with learning difficulties may struggle to understand concepts such as 'lost' or 'passed away' and may prefer a more literal explanation such as 'died'.

## When you have been affected by the suicide of an acquaintance or stranger

Any individual death, especially a death by suicide, can affect many, many people, like ripples on the surface of a pond.

Many people are sad and distressed after a death by suicide, and you don't have to be a family member or friend of the person who has died to be deeply affected. For instance, you may be one of the following:

- Member of the local community or a neighbour
- Member of local community or voluntary group, sports group, etc.
- Work colleague (including ex-work colleague, fellow volunteer)
- School, college or university student or staff
- Emergency services (e.g. paramedic, ambulance, fire, Gardaí) – you may have been first on the scene and tried to save them

- Health professional (e.g. nurse, mental health staff, doctor, counsellor) – you may have developed a very close relationship to the person, especially if you supported them through crises
- Clergy and faith based organisations
- Other professionals who may have come into contact with the person who died, e.g. prison staff, railway staff
- Social media contact (e.g. Facebook friend, Twitter follower) – just because your contact was through the internet, it doesn't mean it wasn't important
- Members of the public – you may have witnessed the death, or seen the immediate aftermath

It may also be that the impact of this death has brought other deaths you may have experienced previously more sharply into your mind. You may wonder if there was something you could have done to have prevented this person from dying.

Whatever your connection to the person who has died, you can talk about how you are feeling and how the death has affected you. See Section Five for more information on supports and services.

## The role of culture, faith and spirituality

After a death by suicide, you may benefit from the help and understanding of your community (whatever that community is to you). For some, spiritual support can make a significant difference in dealing with emotional distress.

There are some cultures and faiths with strong views on suicide that may complicate grief and mourning for those bereaved by suicide. For some people bereaved by suicide, the fact that their religion does not seem to join them in loving and respecting the person who died can create a feeling of exclusion.

It can be particularly hard when your personal faith opposes suicide. You may feel certain that your God understands and loves the person who died, even if others find that hard to accept.

## A Sign from a Loved One

“Our son was a few months dead and I was going to the grave as Cemetery Sunday was a week away, so I got a couple of bags of moss peat and put them in the back of the van. I remember driving towards the cemetery; I wasn't feeling great because it happened to be my birthday that day and I was thinking to myself that I should be out celebrating my birthday and instead I was going to the cemetery to tidy my son's grave. The tears just started to flow, and I was feeling very low. Then, all of a sudden, a little white butterfly appeared in front of the windscreen of the van, flying back and forth across the windscreen. This lasted for about a minute, flying back and over. I was travelling at about 60km and the little butterfly kept in front of the windscreen and I kept thinking: “How come I am not hitting it?” I kept looking at the butterfly and I got this feeling that is hard to describe, an overwhelming feeling that my son was letting me know he was alright and happy. That little white butterfly lifted a great black cloud off me that summer's evening. I went and tidied the grave and I felt good.”

PS. The little butterfly just vanished.

Mike, a father's story

## For The Family and Friends of a Suicide<sup>2</sup>

As you huddle around the torn  
silence,  
Each by this lonely deed exiled  
To a solitary confinement of soul,  
May some small glow from what  
has been lost  
Return like the kindness of  
candlelight.

As your eyes strain to sift  
This sudden wall of dark  
And no one can say why  
In such a forsaken, secret way,  
This death was sent for ...  
May one of the lovely hours  
Of memory return  
Like a field of ease  
Among these gravelled days.

May the Angel of Wisdom  
Enter this ruin of absence  
And guide your minds  
To receive this bitter chalice  
So that you do not damage  
yourselves  
By attending only at the hungry altar  
Of regret and anger and guilt.

May you be given some inkling  
That there could be something  
else at work  
And that what to you now seems  
Dark, destructive and forlorn,  
Might be a destiny that looks  
different  
From inside the eternal script.  
May vision be granted to you  
To see this with the eyes of  
providence.

May your loss become a sanctuary  
Where new presence will dwell  
To refine and enrich  
The rest of your life  
With courage and compassion.  
And may your lost loved one  
Enter into the beauty of eternal  
tranquillity,  
In that place where there is no  
more sorrow  
Or separation or mourning or tears.

<sup>2</sup> ***To Bless The Space Between Us***  
**(a.k.a. *Benedictus*)**  
**by John O'Donohue (C) 2007**



# 4.

## Getting through and creating a new future

Rebuilding your life can seem like an enormous challenge;  
this section has advice from people who have been  
bereaved by suicide.

When a person dies by suicide it has a devastating impact on family, partners and friends. The bereaved often feel that the pain is unbearable, that they would prefer not to go on living themselves. In spite of these initial feelings, the actual experience of many people bereaved by suicide who have travelled this path is that they eventually learn to embrace life again. They can even do so with increased appreciation for its richness and wonder.

“Grievous loss can and often does result in greater wisdom and massive growth of the individual. Coming through is not necessarily just about surviving and being a bit more miserable for the rest of your life; many of those bereaved by suicide say that coming through the hard process of making peace with their loss has made them more empathic and more conscious of the preciousness of life; they feel they have become better persons.”

*JP*

## Taking care of yourself

After someone dies, it may be that you look after everyone except yourself. This can be especially true after a death by suicide, partly because the world has been shattered around you and partly because you feel you can't allow others to look after or support you. Some people have said, after a death by suicide, they feel that they are not entitled to sympathy. Or you may be the type of person who has a reputation for coping and it is important to you not to show the world how you are feeling.

It can sometimes be tempting to become very busy, and to exhaust yourself with tasks so that the tiredness can blot out some of the pain, even for a moment or two. In some cases you can become so busy trying to protect others, such as your children, that you don't protect yourself. In other cases you might be immobilised with shock, unable to look after yourself and others or even to accept support.

Taking care of yourself may mean time spent in the company of friends with whom you can be open, or it may mean choosing to be alone: and you may want different things on different days. It is important to recognise your needs and to make sure you care for them.

## Finding a listener

People who have been bereaved by suicide say that the most helpful thing is to find someone (or more than one person) who can listen. They may not be the most obvious people, friends may not be as easy to talk to or as available as you might hope. Look out for people who will simply listen and let you 'be you'.

Having a listener who is on your side does not mean you have to talk to them about how you are feeling. Sometimes the best support offered can be for someone just to sit in silence with you.

“ Being able to rely on an empathic listening ear, or many of them, is the most vital component of recovery. Words of sympathy and messages received from friends and relations, especially ones that knew the deceased can be really important. Often, the messages that are most supportive are from friends or family that have lost loved ones themselves. ”

*JP*

## Meeting others

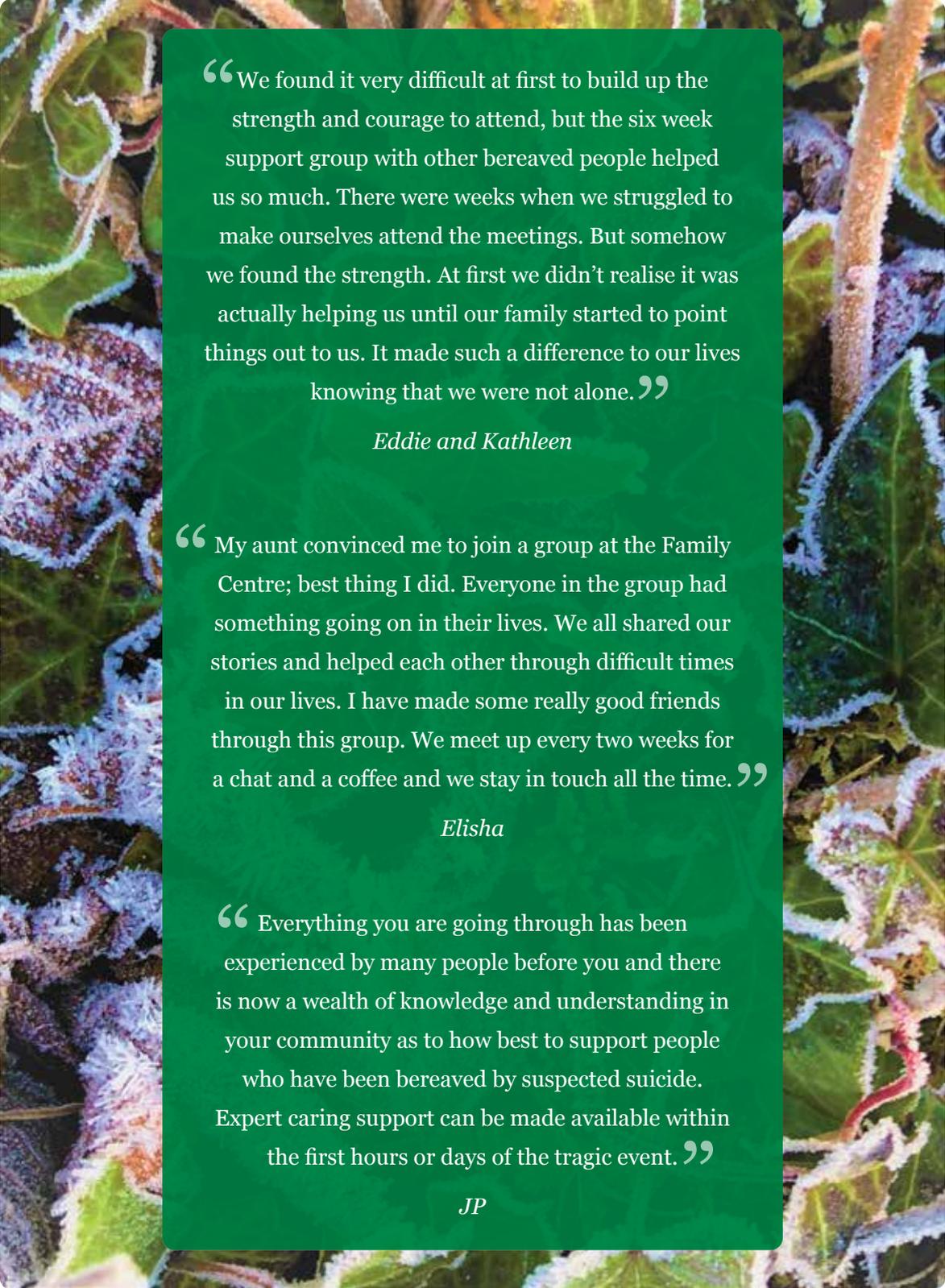
Some people who have been bereaved by suicide find it helps to connect with others who have been bereaved similarly. It may be helpful to connect with their feelings and perhaps you may feel you are not alone. This could be through attending a support group or one to one support for people who have been bereaved by suicide. It may be daunting to imagine walking into a room and joining other people who have been bereaved or affected by suicide. Some people fear they will not be able to face other people's pain. However, support groups are designed to do just that, to support people, and they will do all they can to help people attending for the first time to feel accepted, less isolated and under no pressure to talk about their experiences. You might prefer not to attend a group and instead find support in one to one sessions/meetings, or you might choose to wait a while before taking this kind of support.

## Additional support

You may feel you need or would like some professional support. See Section Five for more information on supports and services. You could also ask your GP if counselling is available, for example, through the HSE. It is worth asking if it is possible to see someone who has some experience supporting those bereaved by suicide. Try and avoid saying to yourself 'I'm not ill, I'll be fine, and I don't need any help'. Losing someone through suicide is unbelievably tough. It is not a sign of weakness to ask others to help you through this difficult time.

## Self-help resources

Some people who are bereaved find it informative to read books on a broad range of topics such as the psychology of suicide; the experiences of people bereaved by suicide; spirituality and self-help. There are also online supports and forums as well as various podcasts available that may be useful for you. See Section Five for more information on supports and services.



“We found it very difficult at first to build up the strength and courage to attend, but the six week support group with other bereaved people helped us so much. There were weeks when we struggled to make ourselves attend the meetings. But somehow we found the strength. At first we didn’t realise it was actually helping us until our family started to point things out to us. It made such a difference to our lives knowing that we were not alone.”

*Eddie and Kathleen*

“My aunt convinced me to join a group at the Family Centre; best thing I did. Everyone in the group had something going on in their lives. We all shared our stories and helped each other through difficult times in our lives. I have made some really good friends through this group. We meet up every two weeks for a chat and a coffee and we stay in touch all the time.”

*Elisha*

“Everything you are going through has been experienced by many people before you and there is now a wealth of knowledge and understanding in your community as to how best to support people who have been bereaved by suspected suicide. Expert caring support can be made available within the first hours or days of the tragic event.”

*JP*

## Spirituality

Daily spiritual practice, including visits to the person's grave or a place that was meaningful for them can provide great solace. Equally, reassurance from clergy and other faith leaders may be helpful in the early days following a suicide.

You may find spiritual support in many places; for example, through support groups for those bereaved by suicide, online or through an interfaith or different faith bereavement group.

Meditation can be really helpful in coping with the stress of bereavement as it is essentially about training the mind and giving us some measure of control over our thoughts. Learning to control your thoughts can help to prevent, or recover from, the downward spiral of negative and repetitive thinking that can lead to despair. Training in meditation techniques is available through many outlets.

Self-care strategies such as relaxation, yoga and mindfulness can help - even short exercises that focus on our breath and body can help to stop our minds wandering back to sadness, loss and worry.

“When we got the news about our son we were devastated and could not believe it. Without our faith we would not have been able to get through the terrible weeks, months and years ahead. The support of our good friends was so important, who were there to listen to us.”

*Kathleen*

“To help us cope with our son's death we would console ourselves knowing our son was happy and at peace, peace he did not have here in this world. That brought peace to ourselves and helped us to keep going, knowing that he was happy and at peace.”

*Mike*

## Helping others

Some people who have been bereaved by suicide may feel they want to get involved in helping others. You may find you would like to add your support to one of the organisations that work to reduce suicide. Some of these are particularly aimed at supporting young people to find resilient ways of handling overwhelming feelings. Some provide support to those who are thinking of suicide. Some provide training to doctors and teachers to help them better identify those who may be at risk of suicidal thoughts.

In time, you may feel that you could support others by volunteering for one of the support organisations offering support to those bereaved by any cause or particularly suicide. You may also be willing to share your story publicly to raise awareness of suicide and encourage others to get help or to get involved with suicide prevention work.

It can feel as if you have to do something in order to make some tiny bit of sense out of what has happened; action can be comforting. However, it is also very understandable if you feel that you cannot handle anything to do with suicide or other people's grief.

## Volunteering following bereavement – are you ready?

Being bereaved by suicide is emotionally devastating. The grieving process is usually more complex than grieving for someone who died from natural causes.

It is generally recommended that someone who has been bereaved by suicide waits at least six months to one year before making a commitment to any new initiatives or training courses. Waiting a while doesn't downplay how passionate you might feel about highlighting awareness of suicide in the community – but it allows you time to grieve and work through your loss.

Remember that the grieving process is different for each person. It is possible that getting very involved in a project or getting intensive training on suicide prevention before you are ready might delay your healing process.



“Future events and milestones can be tough but believe you can get through them with the help and support around you.”

*Pauline*

“You can hold on to the memories whilst allowing them to go freely on their new journey, also by giving yourself permission to move forward in life. Walk with suicide rather than sitting with it.”

*Phil*

## Anniversaries

There may be days when it is especially difficult to deal with what has happened. These might include the birthday of the person who died or your own birthday; the anniversary of the day they died and maybe the anniversary of the funeral; Father's Day or Mother's Day; and occasions such as Christmas.

Sometimes people say the first time that an anniversary comes round is the worst, others find it isn't until future anniversaries that it hits home that the person won't be able to share these days again. These days will always have a special resonance and it may help to find a way of marking them. This may be something as simple as lighting a candle or visiting a place that has a connection for you to the person who died. Or it could be bringing out the photo album and telling stories while eating their favourite food and listening to their favourite music.

## Creating a new future for yourself

Nobody can tell you how you should grieve; if anyone tries to do so, you can remind them that everyone grieves differently. Grieving for someone has a definite starting point but no definitive end. The truth is that you will always carry what has happened inside you.

You may find that some days all you can think about is the loss and some days you are able to do some tasks or think a little about your next steps in life. You may switch between these on an hourly basis, this is natural. Sometimes it can feel as if grief takes over. But people bereaved by suicide report that one day, perhaps against expectations, you may find that there is space for something else – a plan, a hope. And one day, maybe there is a little more space. It isn't so much that your grief is growing smaller; it's that your world is growing around the grief.

There will be days when on waking up you will forget what has happened – and feel guilty for having done so. Letting go does not mean forgetting them. Then there will be days when, for a while, you can laugh with a friend, enjoy a programme on TV or admire a view. One day, you will find that you remember and think more about the life of the person who died than about how they died. You won't forget that, but it will seem less vivid than who they were and what you shared with them while they were alive.

“ In the aftermath of our tragedy the whole dynamic of our family changed, life as we knew it just vanished. For me as a mother I suppose you could say that initially shock intermingled with fear and hopelessness took over, I was not equipped with the mechanism to fight this monster that had entered my home and snatched away my lovely young son.

So how did I get through? Well first and foremost I forbid the emotion of anger to play any part in the turmoil that surrounded me.

Whilst I was trapped in the midst of many emotions, I was blessed with a sense of calm that enabled me to surge through whilst we as a family made the necessary arrangements for the most heartbreaking funeral.

I have for the better part in life always been a strong person but when suicide came I never knew how strong I was until I realised that being strong was the only choice I had if I were to accept the reality of what had happened.

I found when the dust settled and people went back to their own lives and routines that I became plagued with “Whys” and “If only”. I really became a tortured soul, all that had been hidden in my unconsciousness then resurfaced into consciousness; I just felt that life died inside of me whilst I was still alive.

One day I got a call inviting me to join a support group, within that setting the clouds of darkness which had blurred my vision for some time began to unroll and bit by bit glimmers of light began to brighten my day, I found immense healing in talking to two listening ears, for me time is not a healer but a space giver, it gave my mind space to develop the skill of overpowering my torturous pain (reverse control), it took some time for me to dump the unrealistic guilt which I in soul-searching had involuntarily laid on my shoulders, having dealt with the guilt I felt empowered enough to work upon creating a new sense of normality out of an abnormal situation both for myself and my family.

I firmly believe had my son sought two listening ears to express his inner turmoil he may not have succumbed to suicide. I spent some time trying to fit into his wounded brain, visualising the invisible cancer that had eaten him up and I came to the conclusion that possibly inwardly he tried and tested all avenues to escape his inner demons (his lack of inner peace) which had been stolen from him at some point in his short life but was unable to retrieve same, when he lost the fight his mind went into meltdown and so suicide became for him an escape route.

I spend a lot of time now facilitating individuals and groups and encouraging them to seek healing through talk. To those who are contemplating or those have been bereaved by suicide I now say work through your pain or grief through Talk Therapy (you are an important cog in the wheel of life). With talk comes freedom, with freedom comes hope and with hope comes renewed Life. ”

*Phil, a mother's story*

## To the newly bereaved after suicide<sup>3</sup> (Adapted from LaRita Archibald)

Grieving is a unique, lonely, extremely painful process with each individual working through it at their own pace, it is comforting to know what helped others who have experienced anguish in the aftermath of a loved one's death by suicide.

- Talk! Talk! Talk! Speak of your pain and loss for as long and as often as you need to speak of it.
- Be with your grief. Don't suppress, avoid, or postpone grief's expression. Let yourself feel it! Don't suppress your grief to spare others' distress. If you are reluctant to express your pain in others' presence, provide uninterrupted time each day to reflect upon the life shared, your loss and grief...a time to weep.

- Let your friends give what they offer...to be with you, to share a meal, to run errands, to listen to your heartbreak. When you feel the times of being alone are unbearable call upon them. By calling on friends when you need help, you give them an opportunity to share your burden.
- You may not feel like accepting invitations from friends or family to social events, often for a long time, but these events can provide the mind with momentary respite from what has happened.
- There is nothing funny about suicide or the death of someone you love but there is healing power in humour. It's okay to laugh. Laughter is healthy and healing. It releases chemicals that enhance your sense of wellbeing. Laughter relaxes and rests us. Laughter reassures our wounded psyche. Provide an opportunity for laughter by being with fun-loving people, watch a good comedy show or rent a nonsensical movie.
- Re-establish routine in your life as soon as possible. Doing so is a major, necessary step in reaffirming life's continuance and future wellbeing.
- Acute grieving depletes energy, leaving little time for your physical appearance. It may take great effort and determination to shower, shave, arrange your hair, makeup and dress each morning but caring for your physical appearance is a critical step toward restoring wellbeing and a sense of balance in your life.
- Provide the best opportunity for restful sleep by avoiding stimulants throughout the evening. Exercise is nature's anti-depressant and enhances sleep opportunity. Caffeinated foods, including chocolate and most carbonated drinks, are stimulants which can affect your sleep. Alcohol is a depressant that magnifies an already depressed state of mind; it does not contribute to restful, uninterrupted sleep. It masks feelings, lowers inhibition and deprives you of control. Alcohol consumption should be avoided during acute grief.
- Take the best possible care of yourself...of your emotional being, your mental, spiritual and physical being. Eat properly... often we experience a gnawing, empty feeling that we mistake as hunger and seek to fill that void with food that may be hard to digest or upsetting. Pace yourself. This process is aptly called "grief work" and it is truly the most exhausting task

your emotions, mind or your physical body will ever be called upon to do. You may experience some physical symptoms, grief often manifests itself physically. Do not dismiss physical symptoms...see a doctor.

- Return to work. For many people who are bereaved, it is an economic necessity to return to work as soon as the funeral is over. Others return to work soon as a means of keeping mentally occupied and find solace in their work. Some postpone returning to their job fearing the additional stress created by work. Work can be helpful in restoring routine in your life. Most employers are compassionate and sympathetic. It is advisable to discuss your limits and concerns with your employer, perhaps arrive at a compromise whereby you are allowed to work a few hours a day in the beginning.
- Suicidal thoughts are scary. When someone you love dies you are overwhelmed by the pain of loss and by fear of the future without them. You may believe you cannot endure the intensity of the pain. For a time, you may not wish to. After suicide the bereaved have been shown the worst possible example of how someone can end pain and problems and may view ending their life as a way to stop hurting. It is normal to want to escape the pain of loss and grief and not abnormal to think of ending your life to escape it. But there is considerable difference between having suicidal thoughts and acting upon them. If you are obsessed with thoughts of killing yourself, begin to seriously consider means of ending your life or you believe you don't deserve to live due to some circumstance surrounding your loved one's death, see a mental health professional without delay.
- Grief, as we are taught to understand it, is intensely distorted when suicide is the cause of death. You may question whether your feelings are normal. Most likely they are and you are experiencing normal emotional reactions to an abnormal occurrence...suicide. Grief after suicide is often very effectively addressed within the safe, understanding environment of a suicide bereavement support group. Never hesitate to seek professional counselling.

3 Adapted from: Archibald, LaRita. (2012). Finding Peace Without All the Pieces, After a loved one's suicide. US: Larch Publishing.



# 5.

## Help and Support

In this final section we want you to know that there is help and support available for you and your loved ones. As we have already mentioned every person is unique and how you cope with your grief will be different from someone else. Some people like to talk to others about what has happened while others prefer to turn their grief into actions. Whatever way you cope, it is really important to have good support in the form of people with whom you can just be yourself, whatever way that is.

Most of the time, friends, family and colleagues can provide this support but sometimes, particularly with suicide, you may need some extra help. If you are finding that you are feeling overwhelmed, experiencing nightmares or flashbacks, unable to eat or sleep, feeling isolated, having suicidal thoughts or finding yourself unable to cope, then seeking extra support can be helpful.

There are people, groups and organisations available to help; they will accept how you are feeling and recognise the difficulties that you are facing. There are also organisations that can give you some support with the practical issues that may arise.

If you or someone you know needs help right now, in the first instance contact your GP or your nearest “Out Of Hours” GP service. You can also go to, or contact the Emergency Department of your nearest hospital ([www.hse.ie](http://www.hse.ie)) or call the Emergency Services on 999 or 112. If you are being supported by a mental health team, or have been in the past, don’t be afraid to contact them for support.

If you want to talk to someone about how you are feeling, then the following list of organisations might be helpful for you. There is also a list of the services located in your area included with this booklet. The Resource Officer for Suicide Prevention (ROSP) in your area can also provide you with further information on what is available to you locally.

## Helplines

**Barnardos Helpline** offers information and support relating to bereavement from 10 am to 12 pm Monday to Thursday.

**Helpline:** 01 473 2110

[www.barnardos.ie](http://www.barnardos.ie)

**Childline** is Ireland's 24 hour national listening service for young people aged up to 18 years.

**24 Hour Free Phone Helpline:** 1800 666 666

**Text:** TALK to 50101

[www.childline.ie](http://www.childline.ie)

**50808** is Ireland's free 24 hour anonymous messaging service for people in crisis.

**Text:** YMH to 50808

[www.text50808.ie](http://www.text50808.ie)

**Irish Hospice Foundation Bereavement Support Line** is a national bereavement support service available Monday to Friday, 10am to 1pm.

**Free Phone Helpline:** 1800 807 077

[www.hospicefoundation.ie/our-supports-services/bereavement-loss-hub/](http://www.hospicefoundation.ie/our-supports-services/bereavement-loss-hub/)

**Pieta** provides free individual counselling, therapy and support for people who have been bereaved by suicide and for people who are thinking about suicide.

**24 Hour Free Phone Helpline:** 1800 247 247

**Text:** HELP to 51444 (standard message rates apply)

[www.pieta.ie](http://www.pieta.ie)

**Samaritans** provide emotional support to anyone who is struggling to cope and needs someone to listen. Local branches can be visited during the day.

**24 Hour Free Phone Helpline:** 116 123

**Email:** jo@samaritans.ie

[www.samaritans.ie](http://www.samaritans.ie)

Below is a list of additional national organisations that provide information and support specifically around bereavement:

**Anam Cara** supports parents after bereavement by signposting to services and providing information evenings in the community throughout the country.

[www.anamcara.ie](http://www.anamcara.ie)

**Barnados** deliver a specialist bereavement service where children and young people are supported to grieve. They also have a huge amount of information on grief in children, adolescents and families. Free e-books can be downloaded from their website.

[www.barnados.ie](http://www.barnados.ie)

**HUGG** provides information and support groups to anyone over 18 years who has lost a loved one to suicide. All services are provided by people who themselves have been bereaved by suicide and you will find resources and signposting to services throughout the country on their website.

[www.hugg.ie](http://www.hugg.ie)

**The Irish Childhood Bereavement Network** provides information on grief in children, adolescents and families. On their website you can find a list of resources and tools to help and support you and your family.

[www.childhoodbereavement.ie](http://www.childhoodbereavement.ie)

**The Irish Hospice Foundation** provides information on grief in children, adolescents and families. They have a range of leaflets, booklets and videos available to download and order as well as shared personal experiences.

[www.hospicefoundation.ie](http://www.hospicefoundation.ie)

**The Suicide Bereavement Liaison Service** is a free, confidential service that provides assistance and support to families and individuals after the loss of a loved one to suicide. The Suicide Bereavement Liaison Officer can meet with a bereaved family (at their request) as a group or individually. Perhaps you may have specific questions about some of the difficult practical issues following a death by suicide. You may want guidance or assistance in accessing a therapeutic service, or even just to talk with someone locally, about what has happened. In some cases, there may be a specific concern about the reactions and emotions family members or the wider community are experiencing. In any case, the service will welcome your call.

This service is provided by different agencies throughout Ireland.

[www.pieta.ie](http://www.pieta.ie)

[www.vitahouse.org](http://www.vitahouse.org) (Roscommon)

[www.thefamilycentre.com](http://www.thefamilycentre.com) (Mayo)

Other useful resources that have been mentioned throughout this document include:

[www.certificates.ie](http://www.certificates.ie)

[www.citizensinformation.ie](http://www.citizensinformation.ie) or call 0761 07 4000

[www.headline.ie](http://www.headline.ie)

[www.healthpromotion.ie](http://www.healthpromotion.ie)

[www.hse.ie](http://www.hse.ie)

[www.presscouncil.ie](http://www.presscouncil.ie)

[www.yourmentalhealth.ie](http://www.yourmentalhealth.ie) or call 1800 111 888

## Reading Lists

### Books for children

**A Special Scar** by Alison Wertheimer

This book is a discussion of suicide from an adult perspective. It is an invaluable resource for those helping children and families bereaved by suicide.

**All Kinds of Feelings** by Emma Brownjohn

This is a short “lift the flap” book that is helpful to teach children that there are lots of different feelings and that all feelings are okay. It lists different feelings (e.g. happy, sad, and angry) but does not go into detail; it is a useful starting point to encourage children to talk about their feelings.

**Beyond the Rough Rock: Supporting a child who has been bereaved through suicide** by Winston’s Wish

This is an excellent resource for helping parents to talk to children about suicide, especially if the child had not been told at the time of death.

**Finding a Way Through When Someone Close Dies** by Pat Mood and Lesley Whittaker

This is a workbook for children and teenagers who have experienced the death of someone close to them. This book discusses feelings and provides tips on how to cope. It is also helpful for adults in relation to how to support children going through bereavement.

**I Miss You, a First Look at Death** by Pat Thomas

This reassuring picture book explores the difficult issue of death for young children. Children's feelings and questions about this sensitive subject are looked at in a simple but realistic way. This book helps them to understand their loss and come to terms with it. Books in the series give advice and promote interaction between children, parents and teachers on a wide variety of personal, social and emotional issues.

**Red Chocolate Elephants** by Dr. Diana Sands

This is a wonderful activity book and DVD to help children bereaved by suicide. In a world where children are often forgotten mourners, this unique combination of text, pictures, and voices, all in the words of bereaved children themselves, creates a treasured safe haven for young people to hear their fears, questions, and difficulties put into words by other children just like them.

**Up on Cloud Nine** by Ann Fine

A story about the friendship between two boys, one of whom is in hospital after a serious 'accident', the implication is that this has been a suicide attempt. The subject is handled with warmth and appropriate humour.

**Young People bereaved by suicide: What hinders and what helps** by David Trickey, Childhood Bereavement UK

## Books and resources for adults

### **A Voice for Those Bereaved by Suicide** by Sarah McCarthy

This is an honest, moving and valuable book. Suicide has been denied and hidden for too long; Sarah McCarthy's decision to tell her story provides a voice for all those bereaved in this tragic way.

### **Cry of Pain: understanding suicide and the suicidal mind** by Mark Williams

A sensitive and thoughtful consideration of suicidal behaviour from various perspectives: social, historic, biological and psychological.

### **No Time to Say Goodbye: surviving the suicide of a loved one** by

Carla Fine

A powerfully written, honest account of the author's experiences after her husband died by suicide and the experiences of many other people, written to open up awareness and discussion of suicide bereavement.

### **Overcoming Grief** by Sue Morris

This is a practical, helpful book that outlines realistic expectations about bereavement and gives advice on how to manage challenges such as dealing with grief triggers.

### **Silent Grief: living in the wake of suicide** by Christopher Lukas and

Henry Seiden

Lukas draws on his own experiences (several members of his family died by suicide) as well as those of many other bereaved people to explore the experience of being bereaved by suicide.

### **Suicide: the 25 most commonly asked questions by the suicide bereaved**

by Pauline Cahillane

This book explores the tormenting questions that bereaved families struggle with in the aftermath of suicide. The author's hope is that anyone who has lost a loved one to suicide might get some answers here.

### **The Web of Life** by Phil Robinson

A collection of poems, meditations and prayers that will inspire and console readers, with emotional, sensitive and at times jovial content, providing food for thought.

## Acknowledgements

Special thanks and acknowledgement must be given to:

- Members of the Working Group that have given their time, energy and expertise to the development of this guide, particularly those with lived experience of losing a loved one through suicide. The Working Group members are: Elaine Clear, Brian Dunne, Mary Foudy, Rory Hogan, Loretta Kenny, Marie Keogh, Rita Madden, Stacey Quinn, Phil Robinson, James Ryan, Eileen Whelton
- The HSE Resource Officers for Suicide Prevention: Mary Kennedy, Mary McGrath, Emer Mulligan, Tracy Nugent, Sandra Okome
- The National Suicide Bereavement Support Coordinator, Ollie Skehan
- The National Office for Suicide Prevention
- HSE Mental Health Operations
- The Support After Suicide Partnership in the UK who willingly shared their resources with the Working Group
- Headline
- Irish Hospice Foundation
- Samaritans Ireland
- The Irish Prison Service
- Photos: © Ann Cahill. All Rights Reserved. [www.johnodonohue.com](http://www.johnodonohue.com)

While developing this guide the following publication was used extensively for reference:

[Help is at Hand](#), Support after someone may have died by suicide (The Support After Suicide Partnership, Public Health England and the UK National Suicide Prevention Alliance).



This guide is available to order on  
[www.healthpromotion.ie](http://www.healthpromotion.ie) and has  
been produced by:

**The National Office for Suicide Prevention**

HSE Community Strategy and Planning  
Stewarts Hospital, Palmerstown, Dublin 20  
Tel: 01 620 1670 / E: [info@nosp.ie](mailto:info@nosp.ie)

Version 1 printed March 2021 / HSP00493



Connecting for Life



Seirbhís Sláinte  
Níos Fearr  
á Forbairt

Building a  
Better Health  
Service