



The Aftermath of Suicide

The suicidal death of a family member, close friend, classmate, or student has a powerful and upsetting impact on us. Many of us are left feeling confused, shaken, and vulnerable. It is difficult to imagine how someone could come to feel that death is the only alternative to living with extreme emotional or physical pain. Suicidal feelings are difficult to understand unless you have suffered from them. They can leave an individual with overwhelming feelings of helplessness and hopelessness.

The aftermath of suicide can be anguishing for many of us. We can often end up with a jumble of emotions which can include sadness, helplessness, guilt, and even anger. Frequently, we find ourselves wondering whether these feelings are "normal", or acceptable. Sometimes it can be helpful to have something concrete at hand to provide us with a reference about what to expect in this process. In response to this, the following summary outlines some of these typical reactions and ways to cope with this loss.

It is important to recognize that we all deal with grief and loss in different ways, and at an individualized pace. There is no one "right" way to respond. It can be very helpful during this time to reach out to others in whatever ways feel comfortable. This might include connecting with friends and family, or perhaps trained professionals. We at the Counseling & Testing Center want you to know that we will be available to help people heal through this process in any way that we can. Please don't hesitate to contact us.

Common Reactions to Loss

When a tragic loss occurs, there are many normal reactions you may experience. These might include:

- Denial, shock, numbness.
- Fear and anxiety - "How can I go on?" "Can I survive this terrible pain?"
- Sadness and depression - feelings of loneliness, isolation, hopelessness, self-pity.
- Sorrow, pain and longing.
- Anger - "This shouldn't have happened."
- Guilt - "I should have been more caring." "I should have told her/him I loved her/him." "My life is going on and hers/his isn't."
- Confusion and lack of concentration.
- Grief spasms - intense periods of emotional release, usually with a lot of crying.
- Search for meaning.
- Withdrawal from social relationships.
- Physical symptoms - decreased appetite, energy, motivation; difficulty sleeping; weight loss or gain; lethargy; chest pain, pressure, or discomfort; feeling that something is stuck in your throat, and many other physical sensations. You also may be more vulnerable to physical illness.

When the loss is by suicide, some reactions may be more intense:

- Shock – you may initially not react and may have difficulty accepting the reality of the suicide.
- Guilt – you may feel you could have done something differently. “If only I had done (or hadn’t done) this or that, the suicide might not have happened.” This is a common reaction but it is important to keep in mind that there is no single event that would cause someone to kill themselves. There are many things that must come together in order for someone to make this decision.
- Anger at the person – you may feel angry at the person who killed her/himself. “How could she/he do this to me?” “Why didn’t they try harder?”
- Search for reasons – you may find yourself continually asking “Why?” and not finding satisfactory answers.
- Blaming – you may look for someone to blame. “Why did they let this happen?”
- Anxiety – some people begin worrying about themselves. “If she/he could kill her/himself, maybe I (or my friends) could too.”
- Questioning spiritual beliefs – “How could God let this happen?”

These are normal reactions and, although painful, are part of the healing process. There's not a lot anyone can do to take away the uncomfortable feelings, but there are things you can do to manage your reactions and make the healing process more bearable. Remember, there is no timeline to the grief process.

Things To Do

- WITHIN THE FIRST 24-48 HOURS, periods of strenuous physical exercise alternated with relaxation will alleviate some of the physical reactions to stress.
- Structure your time - keep busy.
- Talk to people - talk is the most healing of medicines.
- Beware of numbing the pain with overuse of alcohol or other drugs. You don't need to complicate your healing with a substance abuse problem.
- Reach out - people do care.
- Keep your life as normal as possible.
- Spend time with others.
- Help your friends and colleagues as much as possible by sharing feelings and checking out how they're doing.
- Give yourself permission to feel rotten.
- Keep a journal, write your way through those sleepless hours.
- Do things that feel good to you. Don't feel guilty about enjoying things.
- Don't make any big life changes.
- Do make as many daily decisions as possible that will give you a feeling of control over your life, i.e. if someone asks you what you want to eat - answer them even if you're not sure.

Need Additional Help?

The University of Idaho Counseling & Testing Center offers free counseling for these and related issues for full time UI students. For more information or to schedule an appointment, call the Counseling & Testing Center (Mary E. Forney Hall, Rm. 306, 1210 Blake Ave.) at 208-885-6716.
Website: www.uidaho.edu/ctc All appointments are strictly confidential.