



Supporting Mental Health in First Responders:

Understanding and Supporting Survivors of Suicide Loss

SaskFirstRespondersMentalHealth.ca

Adjusting to a premature death always takes time. Suicide causes unpredictable and disruptive symptoms that leave family and friendship systems vulnerable. Those most affected usually include immediate family members, relatives, fellow students, co-workers, neighbours, and friends.

Grieving is a normal and natural life task that involves the acceptance of a significant loss. Grief often produces a range of emotions such as anger, guilt, denial, numbness, sadness, and powerlessness. The painful cycle of emotions ends when the reality of the loss is accepted and life is accordingly reorganized. Grieving the loss of someone who has died by suicide is often intense, enduring, and complicated. Sometimes the circumstances of the suicide can induce symptoms of trauma or anxiety.

It is normal for people experiencing the loss that comes with a completed suicide to experience bewilderment. Frequently they experience guilt, that somehow they could have done something to have prevented the suicide from happening, or that they are otherwise to blame. Anger is sometimes directed at the one who suicided, or at others who are perceived as responsible. Attempts to lay blame either on ourselves or others are often an attempt to reduce the anxiety of living in a world where sometimes events happen that are unpredictable and unpreventable. Supportive family and friends can help the affected public safety personnel to see things in balance, that there are loving and caring people, and that the world is mostly predictable (Hvid & Wang, 2009).

Everyone reacts differently with their own mixture of emotions, thoughts, and time frame. Talking with people who care can help grievers to identify, explore, and express their feelings about the loss, but there are times when the griever needs to silently explore their own thoughts and emotions. At such times, friends and family can help by recognizing the value of “the gift of presence.” Being with the person affected by suicide can help even when no words are spoken.

The ultimate task of all grieving persons, including those facing the more complicated grieving associated with suicide, is to find meaning or make sense of what has happened (Becker & Wong, 2012; Kim et al., 2011). To do that, the individual must take a fresh look at his or her own identity and relationships. Some existing relationships will gain in importance, and new relationships are developed. While the sadness associated with the death may never completely disappear, once grievers have a renewed sense of who they are and their place in the world, they become enabled to move on with their lives. It is a process that takes time.

The process of grief and recovery after suicide is aided by a supportive and caring community of relatives and friends. In addition, people are often aided by participating in support groups consisting of people who have had similar experiences. On the next page is a list of such support groups currently active in Saskatchewan.

Professional counselling is also available to help manage emotions and find personal meaning. (See http://www.skcp.ca/?page_id=39 for a list of psychologists available in Saskatchewan). The goal here is to experience the feeling of being able to move on with a happy and productive life. Some public safety personnel require counselling to deal with on-going anxiety, flashbacks, insomnia, or other symptoms of trauma but are reluctant to access professional help. Friends, family, and supportive colleagues can help reduce the stigma that is sometimes associated with accessing mental health services by equating them with those services available to protect our physical health. Everyone can benefit from help sometimes.

Please note that this material is not intended to replace the professional care of a therapist or physician.

Saskatchewan Suicide Survivor Support Groups

Supports Survivors of Suicide Support Group

Jones-Parkview Funeral Services 474
Hochelaga St. W.
Moose Jaw, SK S6H 2G9
Contact: Della
Phone: 306.691.4715
Email: jonesfamilycenter@wjonesandson.com

Survivors of Suicide 3227

MacLachlan Cres. Regina,
SK S4R 8H4 Contact:
KristaChristensen
306.545.1207
Email: rainbows.at.dawn@AccessComm.ca

Suicide Bereavement Group

St. Matthew's Anglican Church
1304-98th St.
Tisdale, SK S0E 1T0
Every 2nd Wednesday of the month at 7 p.m.
Contact: Joanne Nicholls
Phone: 306.873.3760

Suicide Grief Support Saskatoon

W.A. Edwards Family Centre
333 4th Ave. N.
Saskatoon, SK S7K 2L7
Contact: Cathy Campbell, Jen McGinnis Phone:
306.249.5666
Email: suicidegriefsaskatoon@gmail.com (meets weekly, over 14 weeks during the winter months)
Email: leftbehind@sasktel.net (meets the first Tuesday of each month; drop in)
Website: m.facebook.com/suicidegriefsaskatoon/

Please note that this material is not intended to replace the professional care of a therapist or physician.

References

- Beker, G. T., & Wong, P. T. P. (2012). Personal meaning in life and psychosocial adaptation in the later years. In P. T. P. Wong (Ed.), *The human quest for meaning: Theories, research and applications* (2 ed., pp. 433-456). Routledge.
- Hvid, M., & Wang, A. G. (2009). Preventing repetition of attempted suicide: Feasibility (acceptability, adherence, and effectiveness) of a Baerum-model like aftercare. *Nordic Journal of Psychiatry*, *63*(2), 148-153. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08039480802423022>
- Kim, S. H., Kjervik, D., Belyea, M., & Choi, E. S. (2011). Personal strength and finding meaning in conjugally bereaved older adults: A four-year prospective analysis. *Death Studies*, *35*(3), 197-218. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2010.518425>