



BREAK THE CYCLE

## Life After Suicide Loss: A Toolkit



Name

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## Introduction

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### You are not alone

You may be reading this because someone you know has died due to suicide. This may have happened very recently, or it could be weeks, months or even years after your loss.

Losing someone in circumstances where they have taken their own life means that the grieving process can be complicated for those that were close to that person, and some of the feelings associated with this process can be intensified if a death was due to suicide. These feelings can persist for a long time after a loss and have a significant effect on the lives of people who have been affected.

The two most important facts about these feelings are:

- They are not wrong – even if your feelings include an intense anger (at the person you have lost, at other people who were close to that person, or at an organisation or institution you feel failed to help that person), they exist independently of any notions of right or wrong, strength or weakness, generosity or selfishness. This is also true if you are feeling a ‘numbness’, or an inability to grieve or feel any strong emotions about your loss – this is just as valid a reaction to loss as the most intense emotions. Going very quickly from one extreme of emotion to another is also a natural reaction to these kinds of circumstances, as is experiencing strong emotions a long time after. Finally, and most importantly, another natural reaction to someone’s death due to suicide can be to experience suicidal thoughts yourself. You can contact [The Samaritans](#) 24hrs a day, 365 days a year, or find an alternative at [Mental Health Ireland](#).
- You are not alone – you may or may not be sharing your experience of losing someone through suicide with family and friends. Even if you are, you may feel lonely, isolated or even abandoned after this kind of loss. It is important to remember that other people have been through, or are going through, something similar to what you are experiencing. Many of these people have created organisations, networks and resources that are intended to support people in your situation. Reaching out and asking for help is a difficult step to take.

## About this toolkit

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[Cycle Against Suicide](#) exists to break down the barriers around mental health illness. One of the ways we do this is by providing information and resources that increase awareness and support those affected. This toolkit is one such resource. It attempts to bring together a list of resources designed to provide help to people who have been affected by a death due to suicide. It is by no means an exhaustive list, due to the fact that there is no right or wrong way to cope with this situation, and no right or wrong way to seek help. Some people may wish to seek out peer support groups; others might want to read about similar experiences to their own and perhaps share their experience with others through writing; others might want to find out how to access professional counselling services; and still others might want to learn more about the subject of suicide. You might want to do two or more of these things, which is why this toolkit is designed to connect you with such a broad range of resources.

This toolkit is not intended to replace a conversation; if you are feeling overwhelmed, or if you can't find a tool or resource that resonates with you, you might want to consider talking with someone directly. You can contact [The Samaritans](#) 24hrs a day, 365 days a year, or find an alternative at [Mental Health Ireland](#). You DO NOT have to be at risk of suicide yourself to connect with these services.

The focus of this toolkit is on resources for people who are coping with the death of someone they know due to suicide, as well as resources to help people within an organization or institution who have been affected by suicide (sometimes referred to as 'postvention') As such, it does not contain a comprehensive list of resources to do with suicide prevention or suicide risk, though these areas are covered in the final section, since those who have been bereaved by suicide may be at an increased risk themselves. The National Office for Suicide Prevention provides a wide-ranging [collection of resources](#) focused on prevention.

## Strategies and coping suggestions

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There is no single way or “right” way to cope with a death by suicide. Everyone’s relationship with the person who has died is different. This means the loss will affect people differently and finding the right kind of information and support will also be a unique experience for every individual. However, common ground does exist, and the following resources have all been used by a range of people coping with loss through suicide

### Resources and Strategies to help cope with a death by suicide

#### Following a suicide

- The Support After Suicide Partnership publishes a series of guides free to read online or download) that cover the emotional experience of losing someone through suicide; practical matters such as funerals, post-mortem examinations and coroners’ inquests; and guidance for people with a specific relationship to the person who has died, such as partners, parents and siblings:
  - [You are not Alone](#) (Ireland)
  - [Help is at Hand](#) (England)
  - [Help is at Hand](#) (Wales), and in Welsh/Cymraeg: [Cymorth wrth law](#)
  - [Help is at Hand](#) (Northern Ireland)
  - [After a Suicide](#) (Scotland)
- The emotions felt by children following the death of someone they are close to due to suicide can be more intense than for other kinds of bereavement.
  - The document [Young people bereaved by suicide: what hinders and what helps](#) is a general guide to helping children in this situation.
  - The website [healthtalk.org](#) is devoted to people sharing their experiences, and has a page which deals specifically with [telling children and young people about a suicide](#).
  - The charity [Rainbows Ireland](#) is devoted to helping children who have experienced bereavement.
  - For children bereaved by suicide, [Barnardos](#) provides a face-to-face suicide bereavement service for children in Cork and Dublin, and a helpline (01 473 2110).
- The death due to suicide of a child or young person can have a profound effect on the school community of which they were a part. The Samaritans run a service called [Step by Step](#) designed to help staff and students to cope with the death of a member of their school community.
- Business in the Community (BITC) is community outreach charity that promotes responsible business, and they have published a [postvention toolkit](#) for businesses that wish to provide support for their staff after the loss of a colleague due to suicide.

#### Grief and suicide

Grief is not a single emotion, but a multifaceted response to loss, and the response to losing someone who has taken their own life has been described as ‘grief with the volume turned up’, meaning that the grieving process is further complicated. Reactions to a suicide loss will be different for every person, but some of these reactions may include:

- Shock and numbness
  - Deep sadness
  - Anger and blame
  - Guilt
  - Shame
  - Relief
  - Denial
  - Why questions
  - Fear
  - Depression
  - Leaning on spiritual or religious beliefs
  - Thinking about suicide
- Mental Health Ireland has 92 Mental Health Associations throughout Ireland. This [interactive map](#) can help you find a resource close to you.
  - The [Psychological Society of Ireland](#) provides a list of specially trained psychologists and psychotherapists who specialise in bereavement on its website.
  - You can find out more about the different facets of grief in the booklet [Has Someone Died? Restoring Hope](#) published by the charity [Cruse Bereavement Care](#), which also runs the website [hopeagain.org.uk](#) specifically for young people coping with grief.
  - The website of the UK charity [Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide](#) has a section that outlines [how suicide bereavement can be different](#) from other forms of loss.
  - Although the article [Suicide Bereavement and Complicated Grief](#) is not aimed specifically at people who have suffered a loss due to suicide, people who are experiencing this kind of loss may find comfort in the level of detail with which the article treats the unique experience of bereavement by suicide.
  - [A list of books on bereavement](#) compiled by the UK charity [Widowed and Young](#). The list is not just for widows and includes books for children.

### About peer support

Peer support can be an invaluable source of strength for people who have lost someone to suicide. Peer support can include face-to-face support groups and online forums, which can provide a wider range of potential contacts and sometimes a greater feeling of security and anonymity. Peer support can have the following benefits:

- Universality – Although everyone’s experience of bereavement by suicide is different, you may well find that you share similar feelings, experiences and struggles with the other members of a group or a forum.
- Hope – By attending a group or joining a forum, you may well come into contact with people who are further along in their grieving or healing process than you are. This can be a great source of hope and comfort.
- Information – Groups and forums can be excellent places for exchanging information, including advice and suggestions, resources and insights into the grieving process.

- Giving support – Many people seek out groups and forums when they are at their most vulnerable and in need of support, but then later find that they find a lot of comfort in offering support to other members. This then becomes a part of their own healing process.

It's important to remember that peer support is not for everyone, and that there are potential problems, including limited availability, misinformation, bad advice, and the potential for judgmental or prejudiced behaviour. Joining a group with a trained facilitator, or a forum with trained moderators can reduce the potential for problems caused by a tiny minority of participants, and it is always worth remembering that you are not under any obligation to attend meetings or to make contributions.

### Finding peer support

- [Cycle Against Suicide](#) can help you get connected with other affected people from all walks of life.
- [Find bereavement support services](#) in your region.
- [Find a support group](#) run by Facing the Future, a joint venture between The Samaritans and Cruse Bereavement Care.
- [Find a support group](#) run by Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide, [apply to join](#) their online peer-to-peer support forum, or consider [setting up a new group](#)
- [Preventing Suicide: How to start a survivor's group](#) (2008) is a document produced by the World Health Organization (WHO) that describes in detail the importance of support groups and provides practical advice on how to set up such groups.
- The Psychological Society of Ireland provides a list of specially trained psychologists and psychotherapists who specialise in bereavement on its website.
- Many people find that it is not necessary to share the same culture in order to share their experiences of bereavement by suicide, and that looking overseas can increase the chances of finding support and common ground with someone whose feelings, experiences and struggles closely reflect their own.
  - The Alliance of Hope runs one of the [largest and most active forums](#) for people who have suffered a loss due to suicide.
  - One of the forums at [grieving.com](#) is specifically for people who have been [bereaved by suicide](#).

### About Bereavement Counselling and Talking therapies

Turning to bereavement counselling after losing someone to suicide is not an admission of weakness, but instead it is an admission of the strength to seek help when it is needed. One-to-one counselling can have the following benefits:

- Freedom of expression – After bereavement, some people have feelings that are difficult to express among their relatives and friends. A one-on-one setting with a professional counsellor or therapist can be the best place to express these feelings, particularly the anger, guilt and shame that is often very intense for people in these situations.

- Understanding the grieving process – After a loss, some people can be shocked at the strength of their feelings, confused by their complexity, or worried by their feeling of numbness or lack of emotion. A good bereavement counsellor or therapist can help someone understand these feelings and guide them through the grieving process.
- Understanding suicide – For some people, ‘why questions’ can come to dominate their thoughts after losing someone to suicide, and this can intensify their feelings of guilt and shame. A bereavement counsellor or therapist will not be able to definitively answer these questions, but can provide a grieving person with a better understanding of why many people die due to suicide
- A safe space – For many people bereaved by suicide, their home environment, their work environment, contact with their friends and even peer support groups can induce anxiety and be difficult to cope with. One-on-one sessions with a counsellor or therapist provide a safe, quiet space in which to explore their feelings.

### Find Bereavement Counselling

Free services have limited availability, poor coverage, long wait times, and a limited selection of counsellors and types of counselling. Many people eventually find that the cost of paid-for counselling services seems like a small investment relative to the improvements to their wellbeing and progress that they make.

- The [Public Health Executive](#) provides resources and links for bereavement counselling.
- [Search for grief counsellors](#) in your area. Many counsellors offer a sliding scale of fees dependent on your income.
- Pieta offers face-to-face support at their [local branches](#)

### Apps

Some people will naturally be sceptical that a smartphone app can help them through the extremes of emotion following the loss of someone to suicide. However, it’s worth bearing in mind that the vast majority of resources related to suicide bereavement, including apps, have been developed by people who have been through a similar experience and have decided to try and help as many people as possible.

- [My Grief Angels offer an app](#) which has a proximity-based feature allowing the user to connect with others nearby.
- [The grieving.com app](#) offers streamlined access to the website’s forums.
- [The Child Bereavement UK app](#) is designed to be used by young people (11+), and contains information, videos and stories. It aims to help young people feel less alone after a bereavement.
- [15 Top Apps for Resilience, Mental Health Promotion & Suicide Prevention](#) by Dr Sally Spencer Thomas.
- [My3App](#): My3app is a safety plan tool that helps people who are at high risk for suicide. It helps them develop a written list of coping strategies and sources of support.

- [MoodKit](#): Based in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, MoodKit helps people improve their mood by engaging them in over 200 mood enhancement activities like thought-checking and journaling.

### Other peoples' stories

Reading, watching or hearing about other people's experience of bereavement by suicide (or other kinds of bereavement) can offer some of the same benefits as the direct contact of peer support groups and forums.

- Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide have brought together some [survivor's stories](#) on the website, which are grouped by those which describe the loss of a parent, partner, sibling or child.
- [Seven people share](#) how the suicide of someone close to them affected their lives.
- [Some survivors' stories from Australia](#)
- Six people from the US [share their stories](#) of bereavement by suicide(video)
- A series of videos describe the experience of adults [telling children about a suicide loss](#).
- Some of the members of Widowed and Young [tell their stories](#).
- [Nine children share their stories](#) of bereavement.

## About suicide

### Background and context

#### What is suicide?

Suicide is defined as the act or instance of taking one's own life voluntarily and intentionally.

#### Basic statistics on suicide in Ireland

According to Mental Health Ireland:

- Attempted suicides are much more common than actual suicides. There are about 12000 attempted suicides each year in Ireland.
- Women are more likely to attempt suicide or engage in other types of self-harming behaviour. However, men are more likely to succeed and die by suicide. Suicide rates are three times higher in men than in women.
- Men under the age of 35 are particularly at risk of dying by suicide. Suicide is the second most common cause of death in this age group, after accidental death.
- Cases of suicide have been reported in people of all ages, including children, but suicide or attempted suicide are more common in certain age groups.
- In men, suicide is more common in people who are 15-44 years of age, and particularly in men who are 15-24 years old. Men who are 45 years of age or over have a lower risk of committing suicide.
- In women, suicide is more common between the ages of 45 and 74. Younger women between the ages of 15 and 24 are thought to have a low risk of suicide.

The Samaritans publishes annual [reports](#) that detail who is most at risk of suicide and analyse trends related to death by suicide.

It is clear that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual people are at [higher than average risk](#) of suicide, although the figure ranges anywhere from two to seven times more likely to die by suicide. The lack of clarity is due to the fact that sexual orientation is not included in death records.

### Safe language around suicide

Some of the traditional language around suicide has negative connotations and, as a result, unintentionally perpetuates stigma. Some examples include “committed suicide” (implying criminality), “successful suicide” or “completed suicide” (implying being unsuccessful or incomplete before) or “failed suicide attempt” (implying a failure).

More neutral, compassionate words should be used when talking about suicide, and care should be taken by media organizations that report on deaths by suicide. The following are a few recommendations to find more information:

- [Suicide and language: Why we shouldn't use the 'C' word](#) is an article by three Australian suicide prevention researchers which sets out guidelines for talking about suicide.
- [This report](#) by the National Centre for Injury Prevention and Control in the US includes other terms which are now considered unacceptable (p.23), including those which imply manipulative behaviour on the part of people who may be suicidal.
- In the UK, The Samaritans' [Media Guidelines for Reporting Suicide](#) is the most up-to-date version of that organization's advice to the UK press and other media that report on suicide. The majority of large news organizations in the UK have committed to following these guidelines.

### Myths and facts about suicide

Myths, or common misconceptions, about suicide are very common and very persistent. They can be dangerous because they can lead to people not being taken seriously, being seen as weak, being seen as selfish, or their death being seen as unpreventable. The following resources list common misconceptions about suicide and set out what people can do to correct these beliefs in themselves and others:

- The Samaritans have created a list the [most common suicide myths](#) and countered them with factual information.
- In his book [Myths about Suicide](#), Thomas Joiner deconstructs in detail the myths surrounding suicide, and points out that many of the most damaging misconceptions originated in the field of psychiatry, not just in the moralistic or religious concerns of wider society.
- Various organisations in Ireland provide training courses in suicide awareness, with the aim of spreading factual knowledge and increasing the effectiveness of prevention work. These include:

- esuicideTALK: a one to two hour exploration in suicide awareness. The programme is organised around the question “should we talk about suicide?” and offers a space to safely explore some of the more challenging issues relating to suicide. Individuals 18 years and over, can access esuicideTALK for free.
- [ASIST](#) (Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training): a two-day interactive workshop in suicide first-aid. It is suitable for all kinds of caregivers and trains participants to reduce the immediate risk of suicide and increase the support for a person at risk. It helps them seek a shared understanding of reasons for suicide and reasons for living.
- A similar one from [SafeTALK](#) called 'suicide alertness for everyone' provides a half day training that prepares participants to identify persons with thoughts of suicide and connect them to suicide first aid resources. These specific skills are called suicide alertness and are taught with the expectation that the person learning them will use them to help reduce suicide risk in their communities.
- If you wish to [volunteer as a listener](#) for The Samaritans you will undergo extensive training in suicide awareness
- The Association for Psychological Therapies (APT) runs [suicide prevention training](#) for mental health professionals.

### Stigma

The misconceptions and false beliefs that surround death by suicide can lead to those that have taken their own lives, and the people closest to them, being devalued or thought less of by other people in their lives. This devaluation, or stigma, can be difficult to overcome and add further complications to the grief of people who have been bereaved by suicide.

- [Two women talk about the dealing with the stigma attached to suicide \(video\)](#)
- In [this study](#) (the authors found that people who have been bereaved by suicide suffer the effects of different subtypes of stigma, including:
  - Public stigma – A result of the societal attitudes towards suicide that have persisted despite the decriminalisation of suicide (1961) and the waning influence of the Christian church which has traditionally seen suicide as a sin.
  - Personal Stigma – A result of a tendency to see suicide as a failure of problem solving on the part of the person who has died and the people closest to them. This can lead to survivors, especially the parents of young people who have taken their own lives, being blamed for the death, and potentially to social exclusion and a higher risk of suicide for bereaved people.
  - Perceived stigma – An acute awareness of potential public or personal stigma that can negatively affect the lives and grieving processes of people who have been affected by suicide.

- Read a [Bill of Rights for Those Bereaved by Suicide](#) developed in Belgium that sets out the rights of those affected by suicide to grieve for the person they have lost in the same way as those bereaved in other ways, free from the stigmas associated with suicide.

## Suicide risk and prevention

### Risk and protective factors

- Risk factors are characteristics of a person and their environment that increase the likelihood that they will die by suicide.
- According to the [Suicide Prevention Resource Centre](#) (SPRC) the most common risk factors are:
  - Prior suicide attempt(s)
  - Misuse and abuse of alcohol or other drugs
  - Mental disorders, particularly depression and other mood disorders
  - Access to lethal means
  - Knowing someone who died by suicide, particularly a family member
  - Social isolation
  - Chronic disease and disability
  - Lack of access to mental health services
- Protective factors are personal or environmental characteristics that help protect people from suicide
- The SPRC lists the most common protective factors as:
  - Access to effective mental health care
  - Connectedness to individuals, family, community, and social institutions
  - Life skills (including problem solving skills and coping skills, ability to adapt to change)
  - Self-esteem and a sense of purpose or meaning in life
  - Cultural, religious, or personal beliefs that discourage suicide
- The Samaritans have published [a report](#) that explores the reasons why middle-aged men are now the most at-risk group for suicide.

### Warning signs

The objectives of suicide prevention measures must include the reduction of risk factors and the strengthening of protective factors. However, it must be recognised that these are medium to long-term goals, and that effective prevention must also involve recognising and acting on the warning signs that somebody is in immediate danger.

- Suicide Ireland has produced [a list of the most common warning signs for suicide](#).

- The Royal College of General practitioners has produced [a list of tips](#) for GPs when dealing with young people who may be at risk of suicide. These tips cover risk and protective factors as well as warning signs
- [IS PATH WARM](#) - The American Association of Suicidology (2018): Educational tool to present the concept of warning signs.

#### Prevention resources

- [Suicide Prevention in the Community: a practical guide](#) by National Office for Suicide Prevention
- [Suicide, attempted suicide and prevention in Ireland and elsewhere](#) - Irish College of General Practitioners.
- [Living with a suicidal person: What families can do](#) - Irish Association of Suicidology
- [Resource Packs on suicide prevention and mental](#) - Irish Association of Suicidology
- [A suicide prevention guide](#) for people worried about someone that they know.
- [Building Suicide-Safer Schools and Colleges: A Guide for Teachers and Staff](#) by Prevention of Young Suicide (PAPYRUS)
- [Suicide-Safer Universities](#) by PAPYRUS
- [Reducing the Risk of Suicide: a toolkit for employers](#) by Business in the Community (BITC)

## Additional resources

### Books

Andriessen, Karl, Karolina Krysinka & Onja Grad *Postvention in action: The international handbook of suicide bereavement support* Boston, MA.: Hogrefe Books (2017)

Graves, Dodie *Setting up and facilitating bereavement support groups: A practical guide* London, UK: Jessica Kingsley Publishers. (2012)

Jordan, J., & J.McIntosh *Grief after suicide: Understanding the consequences and caring for the survivors* New York: Routledge (2011)

Marson, Gary *Just Carry on Breathing: A Year Surviving Suicide and Widowhood.* Staffordshire, UK: Dark River (2016)

Stubbs, Di, Julie Stokes and Heidi Baker (Designer) *Beyond the Rough Rock: Supporting a Child who has been bereaved through suicide* Cheltenham: Winston's Wish (2008)

### Academic Studies

Bailey, Eleanor, Karolina Krysinska, Bridianne O'Dea, and Jo Robinson. Internet Forums for Suicide Bereavement in: *Crisis* 2017 38:6, 393-402

Moore, Melinda, Maple, Myfanwy, Mitchell, Ann M., Cerel, Julie (2013) Challenges and Opportunities for Suicide Bereavement Research

*Crisis: The Journal of Crisis Intervention and Suicide Prevention*, Vol.34 (5), pp.297-304

Pitman, Alexandra L., David P.J.Osborn, Khadija Rantell and Michael B.King (2016) The stigma perceived by people bereaved by suicide and other sudden deaths: A cross-sectional UK study of 3432 bereaved adults in: *Journal of Psychosomatic Research* Volume 87, Pages 22-29

Ross, Victoria, Kairi Kölves, Lisa Kunde, Diego De Leo (2018) Parents' Experiences of Suicide Bereavement: A Qualitative Study at 6 and 12 Months after Loss in: *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 01 March 2018, Vol.15 (4), p.618

Tal Young, Ilanit, Alana Iglewicz, Danielle Glorioso, Nicole Lanouette, Kathryn Seay, Manjusha Ilaparkurti and Sidney Zisook Suicide bereavement and complicated grief in: *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience*. 14(2): 177–186.

## *About Cycle Against Suicide*

Cycle Against Suicide is a national awareness charity that strives to break down the barriers around mental health illness and works to increase awareness of the supports and treatments that are available to empower those affected.

While progress has been made in terms of prioritising mental health, the continued impact of the stigma surrounding this issue remains large. To create a discrimination-free society, Cycle Against Suicide sets out to develop public awareness of its core message:

*IT'S OK NOT TO FEEL OK; AND IT IS ABSOLUTELY OK TO ASK FOR HELP*

If you, or someone you know is in need of help, details of organisations that can assist are available at: <http://www.cycleagainstsuitide.com/ask-for-help/>

