

# Healing after a co-worker dies by suicide

Losing a co-worker to suicide can be overwhelmingly painful and there are often unanswerable questions and complicated emotions. Unlike a death that occurs naturally from old age or illness, a death by suicide is usually sudden, unexpected and sometimes violent. The shock and trauma for survivors is further complicated by the social stigma of suicide, possible police investigations, media coverage, lack of privacy and judgment of others in the community

The emotional pain can be complicated, intense and prolonged. People's reactions can range from guilt to sorrow to anger. People may feel a sense of guilt and responsibility and blame themselves for not seeing the warning signs. They may feel a profound sense of betrayal, rejection and abandonment. Grief can quickly turn to concern for the surviving family members and significant others and how they can be helped.

Following is information to help you understand why people die by suicide, the ways people react and how you can help yourself and others through the grieving process

## Why people die by suicide

Every suicide is a unique story. There is no predictable 'profile' of a person who will die by suicide and there is no way to fully understand why a person would choose to take their own life. However, there are some explanations that may help you better understand a person's actions.

Significant depression and anxiety is characteristic of many medical and behavioral conditions. When depression and anxiety become pervasive enough, some people feel hopeless and helpless and may believe that suicide is the only alternative. People may feel that the world would be a better place without them.

Other conditions like a serious illness, chronic pain, substance use, agitation, marital, financial or a work-related crisis can trigger depressive reactions and irrational thinking that can develop into suicidal thoughts. Sometimes the loss of the rational thought, coupled with depression, can lead a person to think that there is no other way to make the pain go away.

## Common responses

- Each person will respond in their own way and it is important to understand and respect those differences. Some people may react and need to talk, and others may not.
- Shock and disbelief and feeling a need to make sense of the death and understand why the person made the decision to die. Even when survivors learn about factors related to the suicide, there are often unanswered questions that can persist for years
- Replaying the events that took place before the person's death and constantly second-guessing different outcomes. Thinking they should have recognized the threat and that they could have done something to prevent the suicide. These feelings are normal and common but are most often not truly justified. Guilt often arises when the deceased had made either direct or veiled threats to others about their desire to complete suicide. People often do not take these threats seriously or do not see them for what they are. This does not mean that people are negligent or uncaring. Most people aren't trained to recognize symptoms of severe depression or thinking about suicide.
- Experiencing symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder such as flashbacks and anxiety, particularly if they witnessed the suicide or discovered the body.

- It is very common for people to feel angry at the person and emotionally rejected. Anger is often mixed with grief and can feel very confusing. Sometimes the person may feel that they are the object of blame or speculations or left to handle the emotional and practical challenges of a death by suicide. Suicide usually produces more anger than any other type of death.
- Intense sadness is a normal part of the grieving process for many people. This sadness, especially when mixed with guilt and anger, can seem overwhelming. It is a natural part of the process, and it should fade over time.
- A common reaction is to blame those close to the victim, because they 'should've seen the warning signs' or 'could've prevented the act'. Although an understandable reaction to grief, it is incorrect and unwarranted and could compound the grief of those who are left behind.

### Help a grieving co-worker

- Allow the person to express his or her feelings openly without feeling the need to provide answers. Grieving people need to work through their feelings and often do so by sharing their feelings with others. Alternatively, allow the person to say nothing and just be present with them.
- Be non-judgmental about the other person's feelings. Each person has their own feelings about death and suicide and it is generally not helpful to impose your own feelings on a grieving person.
- Be sensitive about what you say. Avoid clichés such as "I know how you feel" or "time will heal all wounds."
- Be mindful of the difficult dates. The day or date of the suicide can be especially difficult for the next six months for survivors.
- If a grieving person is expressing suicidal feelings, strongly encourage them to get immediate help.

### Help yourself

- Ask for support from your friends and family. Someone you know has died, and it is natural to feel that loss.
- Talk about your feelings with people who can be non-judgmental and supportive.
- Seek out your co-workers who are having similar feelings, as they might best understand how you feel.
- Take advantage of support services that are made available to you. Group interventions that are designed to help surviving co-workers pull together can be very helpful in understanding each other's feelings.
- Seek additional support if you feel you are having a difficult time coping after the initial shock wears off. If you are currently in treatment for depression or other psychological conditions, it is a good idea to contact your doctor or therapist if you are having trouble handling what has happened. Other supportive services include your family doctor, clergy and local grief groups that can be located through your community hospital, hospice or mental health agencies.