

**UNDERSTANDING  
SUICIDE  
BEREAVEMENT**

*Reflections of a Survivor*

*Linda L. Flatt*

# **SUICIDE BEREAVEMENT**

**Nearly 30,000 Americans die by suicide each year. It is estimated that for every suicide, there are from 6 – 8 survivors. Since 1970 more than four million people in the U.S. have become “survivors of suicide”.**

# SUICIDE BEREAVEMENT

## Survivor of Suicide

*Anyone whose life  
has been impacted  
by a suicide death*

# SUICIDE BEREAVEMENT

## Survivors of Suicide are....

*Family, friends, co-workers, classmates, therapists, physicians, nurses etc.. who are left behind to pick up the pieces after the shattering experience of a suicide death.*

# **SUICIDE BEREAVEMENT**

## **Survivors of Suicide....**

**....not only suffer the grief and trauma of losing a loved one to suicide, but also are themselves at higher risk for suicide and emotional problems.**

# **SUICIDE BEREAVEMENT**

## **Multi-Levelled (Complicated) Grief**

# SUICIDE BEREAVEMENT

## LEVEL ONE

### *SEPARATION (DEATH)*

# **SUICIDE BEREAVEMENT**

- ◆ **Loss of Relationship**
- ◆ **Changes in Lifestyle (Secondary Losses)**
- ◆ **Adjustment to Life Without the Deceased**
- ◆ **Emotional Healing/Grief Work**



**SUICIDE BEREAVEMENT**

**LEVEL TWO**

***SUICIDE***

# **SUICIDE BEREAVEMENT**

- ◆ **Volitional Death**
- ◆ **Rejection & Abandonment**
- ◆ **Sudden Death**
- ◆ **Often Violent Death**
- ◆ **Post-Traumatic Stress**

# **SUICIDE BEREAVEMENT**

- ◆ **Social Stigma (Real and/or Perceived)**
- ◆ **Embarrassment**
- ◆ **Isolation**
- ◆ **Loss of Social Support**

# **SUICIDE BEREAVEMENT**

- ◆ **Unanswered Questions (“WHY?”)**
- ◆ **Blame and Responsibility**
- ◆ **Intensified Denial and Delusion**
- ◆ **Magnified Emotions**
- ◆ **Suicidal Feelings**

# SUICIDE BEREAVEMENT

## LEVEL THREE

Often (but not always) present:

*SYSTEM STRESS*

*PRIOR TO SUICIDE*

# **SUICIDE BEREAVEMENT**

- ◆ **Mental Illness**
- ◆ **Substance Abuse**
- ◆ **Unhealthy Family Dynamics**
- ◆ **Impaired Coping Skills**
- ◆ **Loss of Energy and Hope**
- ◆ **Relief**

# SUICIDE BEREAVEMENT

## What can be done for survivors?

- ◆ Self-care
- ◆ Support of family and friends
- ◆ Faith/spiritual beliefs
- ◆ Medical care
- ◆ Professional counseling
- ◆ Support and self-help groups for bereavement
- ◆ Survivor conferences and educational material
- ◆ Healing through involvement

# Protective Factors for Suicide

- ◆ Effective clinical care for mental, physical, and substance use disorders
- ◆ Easy access to a variety of clinical interventions and support for help-seeking
- ◆ Restricted access to highly lethal means of suicide
- ◆ Strong connections to family and community support

From the *National Strategy for Suicide Prevention:  
Goals and Objectives for Action*



# Protective Factors for Suicide

- ◆ Support through ongoing medical and mental health care relationships
- ◆ Skills in problem solving, conflict resolution and nonviolent handling of disputes
- ◆ Cultural and religious beliefs that discourage suicide and support self-preservation

From the *National Strategy for Suicide Prevention:  
Goals and Objectives for Action*

# **SUPPORTING SUICIDE SURVIVORS**

**SIEC ALERT #38**

**November 1999**

**Suicide Information & Education Centre**

**<http://www.siec.ca>**

# Supporting Suicide Survivors

- ◆ More than 30,000 Americans complete suicide each year.
- ◆ Compounding this critical loss of life is the profound and often debilitating despair and grief experienced by surviving families and friends.
- ◆ Using a modest estimate of six survivors for each suicidal death, researcher John McIntosh estimates that one out of every 68 Americans is a survivor of suicide.

# Stigma

- ◆ Survivors may find their social network, perhaps even their clergy or caregivers, have judgmental or condemning attitudes or beliefs about suicide.
- ◆ Cultural and religious taboos combine with our tendency to avoid death and bereavement issues and can serve to isolate and stigmatize suicide survivors.
- ◆ A lack of social support can increase a survivor's risk of complicated grieving, depression, and suicide.

# **Some Common Survivors Responses**

# Some Common Survivor Responses

- ◆ A struggle to make sense of the suicide
- ◆ **ANGER**
- ◆ Guilt over failed responsibilities, real or imagined
- ◆ Isolation caused by a sense of self-imposed shame
- ◆ Aloneness when others keep their distance

# Some Common Survivor Responses

- ◆ Blame towards those perceived to have contributed to the suicide
- ◆ Awkwardness when others don't know how to respond
- ◆ Having to face the traumatic and sometimes unexpected nature of the death

# Some Common Survivor Responses

- ◆ Difficulty accepting that the death was by suicide
- ◆ Fear that powerful grief reactions may not be normal
- ◆ Remorse over lost opportunity



# **What Helps and Heals Us As Survivors?**

# What Helps and Heals Us as Survivors?

- ◆ Acknowledge that the death is a suicide
- ◆ Learn more about suicide and grief
- ◆ Acknowledge our feelings and our loss
- ◆ Find formal and informal rituals to honor loved one's life

# What Helps and Heals Us as Survivors?

- ◆ Call upon our personal strengths and ways of coping from other difficult times
- ◆ Read, write, express our grief in a way and at a time that is comfortable for us
- ◆ Find other suicide survivors, share our stories and build mutual support

# What Helps and Heals Us as Survivors?

- ◆ Understanding and thoughtful offers of support from others

“I’m here if you need someone to talk to.”

# **What Hinders Our Healing as Survivors?**

# What Hinders Our Healing as Survivors?

- ◆ Hide or deny that the cause of death is suicide
- ◆ Blame ourselves or others
- ◆ Internal and external pressure to “finish” or “stop” grieving
- ◆ Self destructive behaviors, e.g. drug or substance dependency

# What Hinders Our Healing as Survivors?

Thoughtless or cliché comments from others:

- ◆ “It was so sudden!”
- ◆ “You can’t live in the past.”
- ◆ “Didn’t you know this was going to happen?”

# **How Can Caregivers Assist Survivors?**



# How Can Caregivers Assist Survivors?

- ◆ Listen without judging
- ◆ Accept the intensity of an individual's grief
- ◆ Communicate with compassion – not cliché
- ◆ Offer and provide information – literature, community resources, support group information

# How Can Caregivers Assist Survivors?

- ◆ Reassure the survivor that their feelings are normal
- ◆ Be vigilant about suicidality: ASK!
- ◆ Be sensitive to difficult times: holidays, anniversary dates

# How Can Caregivers Assist Survivors?

- ◆ Being there is important
- ◆ Let the bereaved know they are not alone
- ◆ Offer oneself, and expect that your invitations may be refused
- ◆ Have patience, and continue to offer oneself over time

# UNDERSTANDING SUICIDE BEREAVEMENT

*“Effective postvention for suicidally bereaved families may be one of the most important forms of multigenerational prevention available to mental health.”*

**John R. Jordan, PhD**

*Is Suicide Bereavement Different?*

*A Reassessment of the Literature*

**Suicide and Life Threatening Behavior**

**Volume 31, No 1 Spring 2001 (pages 91-102)**

**SUICIDE BEREAVEMENT**

**POSTVENTION**

**IS**

**PREVENTION!**

Linda Flatt and  
Terri Greenfield  
with Senator Harry Reid

Nevada Life Keeper Quilt  
on the Capital steps



Healing Through Involvement  
Washington, DC 1998



Suicide Prevention Action Network USA, Inc.

**2003**

**Suicide Prevention Legislation**

**Adopted in 2003 Session**

**of Nevada State Legislature!**

**SPAN-Nevada**

# **Suicide Prevention Resources**

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP)

[www.afsp.org](http://www.afsp.org)

AFSP-Nevada Chapter (AFSP-NV)

[www.afspnv.org](http://www.afspnv.org)

American Association of Suicidology (AAS)

[www.suicidology.org](http://www.suicidology.org)

Suicide Prevention Action Network (SPAN USA)

[www.spanusa.org](http://www.spanusa.org)

Nevada State Suicide Prevention web site

[www.suicidehelpnv.org](http://www.suicidehelpnv.org)

Surviving Suicide (survivor support) web site

[survivingsuicide.com](http://survivingsuicide.com)



**1-800-273-TALK**

**National Suicide Prevention Lifeline**

**[www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org)**

**Suicide Prevention Hotline of Nevada**

**1-877-885-HOPE (4673)**

**Crisis Call Center**

**Reno, Nevada**