

SURVIVORS OF SUICIDE

Without your knowledge or permission, you have been inducted into a terrible and unique club. It is an exclusive club anyone of us would pay untold amounts to have never taken membership in.

You are a survivor of suicide. Your relationship to the person who suicided is of little consequence. Whether your loss involved a husband or wife, son or daughter, father or mother, brother or sister, aunt, uncle or friend or whether you loved or hated the person is inconsequential. If there was an emotional relationship or bonding, you have to deal with issues surrounding the suicide.

Your dues in this club have been paid for with the suicide. In dealing with this death, you have some specific rights and responsibilities.

First, you have a right to understanding, a right to realize your feelings of doubt, guilt, disbelief, fear, anger and anxiety are normal and typical. So is the absence of any one of those feelings.

You have a right to heal at your own pace, free from feelings of inadequacy.

You have a right to feel whatever it is you feel without guilt or shame. Feel your feelings, and express them. Don't deny them to yourself or to anyone. Your heart has been torn asunder. To deny the feelings you have is to slow the process of healing.

Finally, you have a right to know you are not alone. There are many others in this club. Some of them choose to spend some time together each week in support of each other. There are survivors in support groups who have either been where you are, or will be where you are soon. Often there are people who are exactly where you are in terms of coping with their feelings and their life. This can be a great help and

consolation. Talking is healing in and of itself.

Your responsibilities are great. Some or all of your past responsibilities may now be "on hold," until you have started the process of healing your wounds. This in itself can be monumentally difficult to accept.

You will have to be kind to yourself at a time when you may not like yourself very much. Guilt is common. It is also one of the four useless emotions (guilt, hatred, anxiety and jealousy).

You should seek out supportive and understanding people to talk to about the suicide and your feelings. Support groups are one place to find people who understand and are supportive. Shun "know it alls" and people who create a rigid timetable for your healing from this most painful of hurts.

You will need to deal with your own feelings of suicide. You may not have them at all, and that is good. However, if you feel suicide is an option to escape the horrible pain or to join your loved one, realize there will be people left behind to deal with the same feelings you are now enduring. Break the suicide cycle. Seek help.

I was told, in the wake of my wife's suicide, "It will get better." Such simple words.. In spite of my disbelief it did get better – very slowly, to be sure, but it has gotten better – much better.

You have a responsibility to love yourself. You have sustained a major emotional wound. Your life may be in total disarray. You should understand you will not heal overnight; but you will heal. It takes time. Americans have trouble comprehending "time," in our "hurry up" society. Remember also that injuries heal more rapidly when the injured person takes care of their physical and emotional health.

Remind yourself often there is not a fixed timetable you must adhere to in order to heal. You will heal at your own pace, whatever it may be. We are all unique individuals. No two of us will heal the same way. There will be scars. One cannot endure a suicide and not expect emotional scarring any more than we can endure a major physical trauma free of scars.

I distinctly remember saying, "I'll never be the same again," at about the three month post-suicide point. You may never be the same again either. In all probability, you wouldn't want to be the same. With the experience of suicide, as in other life tragedies, we learn.

I wish my wife had not committed suicide; that puts it mildly. It does not alter the fact that she did, nor does it alter the fact that there have been profound changes in the way I feel, think and act. Some of those changes are negative, and I am working on

those now, and there are some extremely positive changes.

There has been an extraordinary change in the amount of empathy I feel; especially toward survivors of suicide. I am more patient and understanding. I look at things once taken for granted from an altered perspective. I am thankful for my family and friends, much more so than before, realizing how quickly and completely those things can be lost. Yes, there are positive changes. Maybe that is my wife's true legacy.

When I was a "new survivor," I happened upon the following quote attributed to Shakespeare; "Everyone can master grief but he who has it." I found the quote to be helpful then, as I still do. Possibly you will also find it helpful on your journey back to emotional peace.

A peace we all so richly deserve. It will get better, it really will.

By Mark Mitchell from *Thanatos*, Fall 1992.