



# The Suicide Family: Helping Traumatized Families

By Joy Johnson

One of the first things you're likely to encounter is untruths and gossip about the family. Defend them. Stand up when someone shares an opinion that is unkind.

**D**awn's son, Craig, had killed himself. Three weeks after his funeral she walked into the church with her eight-year-old daughter. They were there to work on costumes for the Christmas pageant. The minute the other mothers saw her, they busied themselves over tables of fabric, glue, and fake wise men beards, being careful not to see her. She turned to the friend who had driven them there and sighed. "Our funeral director said we'd probably have to take the first step after the funeral. So here goes my first step." And she walked toward the nearest woman, opened her arms and was soon surrounded with hugs.

The family who sits with you to plan a funeral for a loved one who has completed suicide is victimized, grief-stricken, and traumatized. Even if, with one or two members of that family, there is a sizeable sense of relief, the whole thing is still devastating.

Fortunately, suicide does not carry the cruel stigma that once draped its shoulders. Those who complete suicide are no longer buried outside the cemetery. More and more families are talking about suicide and not hiding it under names such as "an accident," or blaming someone else for killing their family member.

## Mysterious Myths

Thomas Joiner has written an excellent book, *Why People Die by Suicide*. Some of the myths that have grown up over the years from who-knows-where are faced squarely and debunked.

*\*Suicide is an easy way out.*

Not true. I don't know about you, but I sure wouldn't have the nerve to put a gun in my mouth and pull the trigger, and I'm pretty sure I'd hold a bottle of pills in my hand for a LONG time. It's not easy.

*\*Suicide is an act of anger or revenge.*

Not true again. Most people who attempt and fail tell us they felt everyone would be better off without them.

*\*Suicide attempts are just a cry for help.*

Wrong again. Most attempted suicides succeed and those who recover from their attempt say they definitely intended to kill themselves. We may convince ourselves and them that it was indeed a cry for help, but most say, "Not so."

As you comfort and console your families, a great little book to hand them is Nan Zastrow's *Ask Me . . . 30 Things I Want You to Know*. While the focus of Nan's work is helping friends be true friends after a suicide, it's excellent for your staff and the grieving family. One of the first things you're likely to encounter is untruths and gossip about the family. Defend them. Stand up

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when someone shares an opinion that is unkind. You can always say something like, "We don't really know what happened. I'm sure when the time is right, we will." One of the advantages of being a funeral director is knowing grieving people are not crazy. You recognize the mysteries of grief.

## Guilt and Regret

Audrey's husband had fought hard. The long bouts of dismal depression wore him down, and it wore Audrey down, perhaps even more. Finally, after being up for more than thirty hours trying to once more talk him out of killing himself, she gave up.

"I'm tired to the core," she told him. "You have to be the one to decide to get more help and stay alive. I can't do it anymore."

She left their bedroom, closed the door, and went to the kitchen to make them some sandwiches. As she opened the refrigerator door, she heard the gunshot.

There is always guilt and regret when there is a suicide. Let your families know you realize and honor their attempts to help. That, more than anything, you know that if there was any way they could have prevented this death, they would have done so. If they talk about feeling guilty, you can be the one to assure them this is normal, and that there is a difference between guilt and regret. Guilt is when you purposely do something to harm another person emotionally, mentally, or physically. Regret is when you wish there was something you had done or had not done. Your families may well be feeling more regret than actual guilt. Knowing the difference can be helpful.

## Be Their Advocate and Educator

We don't have much time with them, so giving them the knowledge you have about grief, providing resources, and handing them the contact information for grief groups, suicide survivors groups, and parent or spouse groups, is helpful, even if it gets stuffed in a purse for awhile.

There are good, small books on suicide. Nan's is one of them. Another is Sondra Sexton's *When Someone You Love Completes Suicide*. And Earl Grollman has one for teens.

## Keep in Touch

You are probably going to be one of their first friendly, understanding contacts after the death. You probably already have a schedule to send a card, make a call, and even drop by to check on how they're doing. They're counting on you, and, proudly, you are indeed one of the people who will come through for them.