

# *Coping*

*After A Suicide*



Families  for  
Depression Awareness

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

*“I can’t get Mark back  
but I can honor his memory  
by helping others.”*



## *For families and friends*

*It is hard to express the depth of sadness and sympathy I feel in writing to you, knowing that you have just lost a loved family member or friend to suicide. My brother Mark took his life 17 years ago. I helped my father get diagnosed with depression after Mark’s death. Mark’s death has been the most traumatic event in my life and my search for answers and my desire to help others who experience this unfortunate pain is the compelling reason that I started Families for Depression Awareness.*

*You and I are often referred to as ‘suicide survivors’. I have often wondered why this term should apply to us, instead of people who attempted suicide and luckily survived. But, the term fits us because we are the ones left behind to endure a terrible loss. So we are the survivors.*

*The following tips and information contain research facts about suicide, and were collected from our advisory board of clinicians, family members and suicide survivors. Suicide survivors have many questions, and I hope this information will provide some answers, and help you cope with your loved one’s death.*

*Sincerely,*

*Julie Totten*

Julie Totten

Founder, Families for Depression Awareness

## How common is suicide?

You may feel all alone in this situation, but you are not. Each year, more than 30,000 people in the U.S. take their own lives. They leave behind untold family members and friends, who often feel puzzled, ashamed, or even responsible. Who are these families? It is likely that there are people in your everyday life who have experienced the loss of a family member by suicide, but shame and worry can cause them to remain silent. Suicides are not specified as such in the obituaries, and are

often not reported at all. It is not uncommon for relatives to be completely unaware that someone in their family died by suicide.

### Did I cause this to happen?

No! You didn't cause your loved one to take their life. He or she was enduring such unbearable pain that it seemed the irrational act of suicide was the only way to relieve this suffering. Family and friends feel tremendous

guilt over suicide, and worry about what they could or even should have done to prevent the death. Over time, many survivors come to terms with this guilt, but many express that even years later, they wonder if there was something they could have done to help.

Recovery is an ongoing process. In talking about her young son nearly two years after his grandmother's suicide, Jess says,

***“We're finally to the point where he can get some support and he's opening up.”***

*Jess, survivor to her mother-in-law*

## Which emotions are normal?

Immediately after a suicide, you may have feelings of shock, denial, sadness, or even relief. Other common emotions are anger, resentment, irritation, and grief. These emotions can fluctuate rapidly, sometimes even hour-by-hour. Strong reactions and a variety of emotions are completely normal. One family member may feel anger, another guilt, and yet another intense sadness. Those feelings can differ and change over time. Survivors report feeling shocked or in disbelief for days or weeks, then suddenly experience anger or guilt.

### Why?

You probably think a lot about why your loved one took his or her life and how he or she could do it. It is important to know that 90% of people who take their lives are suffering from a mental illness, usually a mood disorder such as major depression or bipolar disorder. Mood disorders are medical conditions, just like diabetes or heart disease. Yet, even in our informed society, stigma and shame

***“Talk about it; be open about it. Talk to your siblings; talk to your kids. I was surprised how many people got in touch with me—old friends and acquaintances who had relatives who took their lives. In some cases, I hadn't even known that.”***

*Jeff, survivor to his brother, Andy*



surround them. Most people find it easy to tell others that a loved one died of a heart attack, but difficult to say the person died by suicide because of a diagnosed or probable depression. Survivors often worry about others' judgments, or dread their potential questions.

## Should I tell people?

It is up to you whether you want to tell people that your loved one died by suicide. Many people find it helpful to state the fact, because doing so helps them connect with others and work through their grief. Others choose to remain silent because it is too painful to talk. Some survivors find it easier to open up about the subject as time passes. Many speak more openly once they know

more about the subject, because they want to end our society's persistent stigma surrounding mood disorders. The truth is you have nothing to be ashamed of.

## Do many people have mood disorders?

Mood disorders are extremely common. Nearly 10% of the population suffers from depression. It is a well known fact that many who suffer from mood disorders are incredibly gifted. Some of the most creative, empathetic, and

artistic people have been diagnosed with these disorders. In fact, the world is full of brilliant actors, politicians, athletes, musicians, writers, and corporate leaders who have mood disorders. People with depressive disorders have trouble with mood regulation, but the disorder does not define them.

## How can my family and I cope?

People grieve in their own way and each family member will deal with your loved one's death differently. Here are ways of coping that other families surviving a suicide have found helpful:

- **Reach out.** Because of the stigma of suicide, you may feel afraid to talk to others about your loss. However, you may find it helpful to talk about the suicide, your feelings, and ask friends and family to help you.
- **Share your feelings as a family.** Most survivors find it helpful to talk openly with family about their emotions. It is important to be supportive of one another even when reactions are different. Let your family and children know that you care and are there for them. Be an 'active listener' by listening empathetically and without judgment. Allow your family to talk, while you remain silent, nodding and maintaining eye contact to show that you're listening. Summarize parts of what has been said to show you understand, and allow the person to express emotion.
- **Plan ahead.** Anniversaries, birthdays, and holidays can be particularly difficult.

**“Whatever you are feeling is completely valid.”**

*Kelly, survivor to her brother*

### *Famous People with Depression or Bipolar Disorder*

*Tipper Gore  
(Wife of U.S. Vice President, Activist)*

*Anne Hathaway  
(Actress)*

*Ernest Hemingway  
(Writer)*

*Patrick Kennedy  
(Politician)*

*Abraham Lincoln  
(U.S. President)*

*Bonnie Raitt  
(Musician)*

*Brooke Shields  
(Actress)*

*Mike Wallace  
(TV Journalist)*

**“Try to allow yourself to do something you used to enjoy.”**

*Barbara, survivor to son, Michael*



*Barbara with her son as a young boy*

Survivors share that they sometimes experience a setback at these times, so be aware of the possibility of strong emotions. For example, you may not feel up to working. You may want to follow a family tradition, schedule a visit with another family member, or to your loved one’s memorial site.

• **Find support.** Some people find support

groups for suicide survivors helpful. Mental health professionals, including grief counselors, social workers, psychologists, and psychiatrists can help you process your feelings. It is vital that you seek the help you need. Suicide is extremely difficult to deal with, don’t feel you have to be strong and pull yourself together.

• **Help children and teens.** Children and teens also need help after a suicide. Most clinicians believe it is best to tell children the truth about the suicide. If they don’t learn about it from a parent, they often learn the truth later, even by accident. If this occurs, children can face the double shock of not only finding out about the suicide, but that they feel as if they were misled by the family. It is important that children understand that the death was not their fault. They need to be allowed and encouraged to express their feelings, and be heard.

• **Keep a regular schedule.** Although you may feel helpless, it is important to keep

your daily routine as much as possible. Get enough sleep, exercise, and eat nutritious foods. Stay on your medications. You need to stay healthy to work through the stress of a loved one’s suicide.

• **Plan family time.** You may find it helpful to set aside time to talk and be with your family. You can also plan activities such as dinners, walks, volunteering, and spiritual events to come together and experience some positive time after this hardship. For some, the family unit will be the only place that feels safe to express feelings.

### **What is grief compared to depression?**

Grief is a normal reaction to death of any kind. It is difficult to state exactly how long someone should grieve after a suicide, because everyone is different. But, as is the case with other severe stress, sometimes the loss of someone to suicide can trigger a serious depression.

### **When help is needed.**

The feelings of grief are very similar to the symptoms of depression, so knowing what is normal grieving compared to depression can be confusing. It is important to become familiar with the symptoms of depression so that you can help yourself or other members of your family.

• **If you feel suicidal, this is not normal grief. Get immediate medical help.**

*Since suicide produces such intense emotions that can be difficult to process alone, it is helpful and healthy to work through your grief in individual counseling sessions and/or suicide support groups.*



- **If you are having trouble functioning at all, seek medical help.**
- **If your severe grief continues for more than six months, seek medical evaluation.**

### **Signs of mania (for bipolar disorder or manic depression)**

Feeling periods of the ‘low’ depression symptoms above, contrasted by the ‘high’ mania symptoms as follows:

**Increased energy** (e.g., staying up all night working or cleaning) and decreased need for sleep.

- **Excessive irritability**, euphoria, or aggressive behavior.
- **Increased talkativeness** or pressured speech.
- **Disconnected and racing thoughts.**
- **Impulsive behavior** and poor judgment such as spending sprees, erratic driving, or sexual indiscretions.
- **Inflated self-esteem**
- **Increased goal-directed activities**
- **Distractibility**

### **Warning Signs of Suicide**

If you have been thinking about death or suicide, you need to get medical help for a probable underlying mood disorder. Call your doctor today. You may notice these warning signs of suicide in yourself or a loved one:

- **Talking about suicide.**
- **Talking about hopelessness** and worthlessness.
- **Being preoccupied with death.**
- **Suddenly being happier and calmer.**
- **Making unusual visits** or phone calls to people not often visited or called.

- **Making arrangements**, and getting affairs in order.
- **Giving things away.**

### **Does depression run in my family?**

Since depression and bipolar disorder tends to run in families, it is important that you look out for symptoms in your family members. Be assured that just because someone has a mood disorder, it does not mean that the person will commit suicide. Mood disorders are treated by medical professionals with medication and talk therapy.

If you notice any of the above symptoms of depression, bipolar disorder, or the warning signs of suicide in a family member, you can help them get medical attention, possible diagnosis, and treatment. Sometimes after a suicide, family members come to realize that they too have experienced depressive episodes during their lives. Treatment is important. Many of those treated can recover from a mood disorder.

### *Signs of Depression*

*For at least two weeks, you are:*

- *Feeling miserable, sad, empty, or irritable*
- *Losing interest in once enjoyable activities or withdrawing from people*

*Other Signs:*

- *Feeling anxious*
- *Having trouble concentrating or remembering*
- *Feeling tired*
- *Feeling guilty*
- *Sleeping too much or too little*
- *Eating too much or too little*
- *Have medically unexplained aches and pains*
- *Thinking of death or suicide*

## You Can Help

Survivors of suicide often report that by getting involved in educating others about depression and suicide helps them to feel better. Being proactive helps them to feel useful. Families for Depression Awareness needs and welcomes your involvement. You can make a difference by:

1. **Making a gift at [www.familyaware.org](http://www.familyaware.org)** in the memory of your loved one, to help our organization educate and support people.
2. **Getting involved** in our online community and creating a network of families that want to help us to educate the public to help prevent suicides.
3. **Getting the word out** that most people who have taken their own lives suffered a mood disorder. Mood disorders are often treatable.
4. **Distributing** our Coping with Stress brochures in your community.
5. **Becoming a regional volunteer leader**
6. **Holding a Sweet! Bake sale.** (Consult [www.familyaware.org](http://www.familyaware.org) to register your bake sale with proceeds to Families for Depression Awareness.)
7. **Telling your story** to the media.

### Contact us:

Families for Depression Awareness,  
395 Totten Pond Rd., Waltham, MA 02451

Call 781-890-0220

E-mail [info@familyaware.org](mailto:info@familyaware.org)

Visit [www.familyaware.org](http://www.familyaware.org)

## Making a gift

A memorial gift in your loved one's name to Families for Depression Awareness will enable us to help families prevent suicides by recognizing, treating, and coping with mood disorders. You can choose to honor the memory of your loved one or honor someone in your life. If you would like to send a memorial gift for another family, we will send a special note card acknowledging your gift to the family you designate. Of course, your donations made without a memorial name are also welcome.

Your Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_ Email \_\_\_\_\_

I'd like to make a Memorial or Honorary Donation in someone's name: \_\_\_\_\_

Memorial donation       Honorary donation

Amount \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Please list this person on the web site:  yes  no

Send notification of this gift to:

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Check     Money order     VISA     Mastercard

Credit Card Account \_\_\_\_\_ Exp. Date \_\_\_\_\_

Name (as it appears on card) \_\_\_\_\_

Signature (required) \_\_\_\_\_

I'd like details on including Families for Depression Awareness in my will.

I've enclosed my company's matching gift form.

*Thank you!*

## In Memory of:



JOE

**Paul Benjamin Byrd**

**Naomi Ruth Cohen  
Charitable Foundation**

**Joe Gaskins, Jr.**

**Ralph Giannini**

**Andy Harrison**

**Brian Sheridan**

**Joe Stima**

**Kurt Struss**

**Mark Alan Totten**

**Marianne Wennrich**

**Brian Atkins Whitcomb**



BRIAN



MARIANNE

**Michael Keosayian**

**Kristin Lilly**

**Doug McLaughlin**

**Robert S. Pike**

**Anne Sexton**



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# Families for Depression Awareness

## About Us

Families for Depression Awareness is a national nonprofit organization helping families recognize and cope with depressive disorders to get people well and prevent suicides. The organization provides education, outreach, and advocacy to support families. Families for Depression Awareness is made up of families who have lost a family member to suicide or have watched a loved one suffer with depression, with little knowledge about how to help.

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Waltham, MA 02451**

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