

## HELPING SURVIVORS AFTER SUICIDE

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*"The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing ~ not healing~ not curing~ that is a friend who cares." Henri Nouwen*

The following suggestions are intended to guide you to comfortably extend yourself to suicide bereaved without concern that you might do or say the wrong thing. The worst that can happen, already has! You can't fix it, but you can comfort. The bereaved family benefits greatly from the consoling balm of love and shared sorrow from caring friends.

**What can I say?** The most caring and honest words are "I am so sorry". You may wish to continue with "He/she will be missed" or even, "I don't know what to say". If you had a fondness for the dead person or spent a fun or significant time with them, share that with the family. Every positive mention, every antic, amusing story or reinforcing action involving the person who died is precious to the surviving family.

**What can I do?** \*Be there. \*Anticipate and respond to need. \*Assure water and tissues are at hand for the bereaved. \*A hug is appropriate and usually welcomed. However, there are those who do not wish to be touched so you may choose to ask if you can give a hug. \*It is likely that you will shed tears in the presence of the newly bereaved and that's o.k., albeit, not excessively. Tears express deep empathy and knowing the death touches the hearts of others lends a bit of comfort and solace to the bereaved. \*It's helpful when someone maintains the kitchen, making refreshments available to callers, without displacing extended family members needing to help. Depending upon the situation and you may help by \*tending young surviving children, \*answering calls and recording callers, \*preparing meals, \*keeping records of gifts of flowers and food, \*yard or house work, \*making arrangements ie., funeral, travel, room accommodations, \*help selecting funeral attire (laundry, cleaners etc) and, at a later time, \*write thank you notes, \*help file insurance, social security claims or seek legal counsel. The family may designate a spokesperson to address the cause and circumstance of the death with callers. Providing facts restores a measure of control to the immediate survivors and lessens opportunity for rumors and gossip. \*In accordance to the boundaries of your relationship, discourage efforts of secrecy regarding the cause of death. Secrecy severely distorts and complicates healthy grieving and can create family dissention and breaches. Increasingly, survivor families are openly designating contributions to suicide aftercare or suicide prevention organizations. \*Find whether there is a support group for suicide bereaved close, provide meeting information to the survivor and offer to attend with them if this is permissible to the group leader. \*There are books and websites that provide support articles for suicide bereaved. A book or downloaded articles offers another avenue for validating their grief and assuring them they are not alone on this grief journey. \*If you know a long term suicide survivor willing to extend empathy and reinforcement, ask the newly bereaved family if a call from the seasoned survivor would be helpful. \*In the weeks following the death, when all the 'tragedy-focused' activity has subsided, the survivor needs calls, notes of support, dinner out...or brought in, visits and distracting activities. Invitations may not be accepted, but the fact that they are extended is reinforcing.