

Healing Suicide Loss with Jewish Wisdom



Alexander JFS
**Behavioral &
Mental Health Services**

Contact us at bmhs@alexanderjfs.org



You are Not Alone

Condolences, Comfort & Support After a Possible Death by Suicide

Psalm 23

A psalm of David. The Lord is my shepherd; I lack nothing. G-d makes me lie down in green pastures; G-d leads me to water in places of repose; G-d renews my life; G-d guides me in right paths as befits G-d's name. Though I walk through a valley of deepest darkness, I fear no harm, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff—they comfort me. You spread a table for me in full view of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my drink is abundant. Only goodness and steadfast love shall pursue me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for many long years.

*"Help me, G-d. Give me strength to carry on.
Heal my anger and shame. Ease the burden on
my heart. Teach me to believe that I am not to
blame. Lead me back to life and hope and joy."*

Rabbi Naomi Levy

Sections

Preface

Page 2

What You May Be Feeling

Page 4

What May Happen

Page 13

**How Death Affects
Different Relationships**

Page 17

Facing the Future

Page 24

Helping Someone Bereaved

Page 27

The Jewish Mourning Cycle

Page 31

Resources

Page 36

Preface

This bereavement guide has been designed to help you navigate perhaps the most painful time in your life. The content is based in part on the experiences of those who have suffered a similar tragedy and may have experienced some of what you may be going through. We offer these words and guidance as a source of emotional and spiritual grounding during a time of excruciating pain and confusion in your life.

In these pages, you may find help understanding what you might be feeling. You may find direction by understanding what practical details need your involvement. You may find guidance knowing how and where to seek support in the days, weeks, months and years ahead. You may find solace in grieving through particular Jewish rituals. And you may also choose to offer this text to your family, friends or colleagues so they can begin to understand some of what you are going through and offer comfort and support.

This guide can only attempt to describe some of what you are going through. It is no substitute for talking things over with those people close to you or to a professional. Alexander JFS seeks to console, support and offer guidance to anyone bereaved by a suicide as well as those who are comforting the bereaved.



A note about language

Throughout this guide, we use the expressions “died by suicide” and “took their own life.” We recognize that each person and family may have their own preferred language. These terms are widely used today and are intended to speak about this kind of loss with care and without judgment.

We avoid the phrase “commit suicide,” as it can carry associations of wrongdoing or blame, which do not reflect the compassion with which we approach this loss.

We also recognize that relationships are deeply personal and varied—whether the person who died was a loved one, family member, friend, or someone important in your life. To keep the language consistent and inclusive, we use the phrase “person who died” throughout. This is simply a shared way of speaking and is not meant to diminish the depth or meaning of any relationship.



Photo Credit:
Gabrielle Howard

What You May Be Feeling

“In the confusion after the death, when I felt so alone, so devastated and so dazed, I wanted to understand what I was feeling, what was happening in my mind and heart and body and how in the world to grieve.”

You may be reading this just after someone has died, or weeks, months or years afterwards. Being a survivor of suicide loss has been described as “grief with an unbearable volume” (Pompili, et al., 2013). Much of what you may be feeling now would be the same if the person close to you had died suddenly or after a long illness. Yet people who have been bereaved say a suicide seems to intensify the typical responses to loss. (Tal Young, et al., 2012). For example, you may feel a sharper guilt over your own actions, a more bitter blame towards someone else who you feel could have prevented the suicide, anger at the person who died, or a deeper despair that someone close to you has died in this way.



How People Grieve

Grief is as unique as you are, and as individual as a single leaf. Each person will be affected in his or her own way because everyone is different – even in the same family. Each has had their own relationship with the person who has died, their own experience of other losses and differing levels of support available.

People also have their own ways of expressing feelings. Some find it helpful to share feelings and thoughts. Research suggests that mourners tend to exhibit different grieving styles (Doka & Martin, 2010). Some find it very hard to cry or to put into words how they are feeling: it doesn't mean that they are not as distressed as someone who cannot stop crying.

In your grieving, you may find that other people tell you how you are or what you should be feeling, even suggesting how to grieve. Although well meaning, only you can find your own grieving path by listening to yourself and remembering there is no right way to be feeling or grieving.

When someone dies suddenly and unexpectedly, you may experience an overwhelming tangle of feelings and thoughts that seem to occur simultaneously. Please know that everyone grieves and feels emotions in their own way. You may feel a range of emotions at the same time or you may be overwhelmed by a single emotion such as sadness. The range of emotions each mourner feels is also individual.

Psalm 34:19

G-d is near to the broken-hearted, and
G-d saves those of crushed spirit.

Research shows that people grieving a suicide loss often face a wide and complicated array of emotional reactions, often worsened by guilt, stigma, and unanswered questions. Common reactions may include abandonment, agitation, anger, anxiety, betrayal, confusion, defensiveness, despair, desperation, disbelief, fear, guilt, hopelessness, longing, numbness, feeling overwhelmed, powerlessness, questioning, rejection, relief, sadness, shame, shock, feeling stigmatized, and even suicidal thoughts (Jordan & McIntosh, 2011).

Looking More Closely at Emotion

Anger

People who have been bereaved often feel angry. You may be angry with the person for dying in this way or for leaving you. You may be angry for all the pain left behind or because you have to deal with so many practical details and you feel ill-prepared. You may be angry with yourself for missing signs or warnings. Or you may be angry with someone else who you feel let the person down, or with those who you believe should have taken better care of the person. If you have faith, you may be angry with your G-d. You may find yourself questioning your faith and feel angry and disillusioned that something this tragic could have happened under G-d's watch.

Defensiveness

The uncertainty over how people will react can lead you to behave defensively to protect yourself in case someone says something upsetting or asks intrusive questions. Particularly with a death by suicide, you may find it hard to let this guard down and talk openly about how you are feeling. Some people say it can be easier to talk with people who have also been bereaved by suicide.

Despair

People bereaved by suicide may question whether they can face living without the person who has died. For some, this may be a fleeting thought; for others, it can become a deep despair that leads to thoughts of suicide. Mourners can also feel they must somehow live the life of the person who died by suicide, leading to extended grief and emotional turmoil.



Photo Credit:
Ari Klein

Disbelief

Some people find it hard to accept the reality of the death. Internalizing the permanence that the person will no longer be part of their lives can take years. It is natural to struggle with what has happened, especially if the person has died by suicide. This feeling can fade as the reality of their death sinks in, but you may still find yourself doubting what has happened for a very long time. You may experience the death as unreal or surreal, as if you are living in a time warp. Mourners often describe moving along at a different pace than others are moving.

Fear

Grief can feel frightening: a shaky uncertainty because everything has changed. Sometimes people are afraid about what life will be like without the person who has died, or the impact the death will have on others. It can be difficult or impossible to imagine a different future. Mourners can also feel fear about the way the person may have died, struggling to accept the death was by suicide.

Guilt

Some people may feel painful guilt. You could be feeling guilt for something you did or did not do, or said or did not say. It may help to remember that only the person who died knows why they could no longer bear to live. Feeling overwhelming guilt may be one of the main reasons that bereavement through suicide is so painful. Guilt is not a feeling that can be diminished by someone reminding you of all the good things you did for the person who died. The guilt felt by the bereaved can sometimes feel like failure. Blaming yourself for a death by suicide is unjustified. Remember no one blames himself or herself when someone dies from cancer or heart disease. It is important to remember that mental illness can be fatal.

Numbness

Some find it hard to feel anything due to the magnitude of shock. People who experience this numbness can feel guilty for not expressing grief through crying or talking, especially when others around them may find it easier. For some, it can take a long time for pain to break through and mourners can feel they are floating, disconnected, or detached from any emotional response. This can make it hard to answer simple questions such as “how are you feeling?” because the answer is sometimes “nothing.” Often mourners find they prefer being alone because of the emotional states of being overwhelmed and numb.

Longing

A particular sadness after someone has died can take the form of a desperate yearning for that person. It can be a physical sensation: wanting to see, touch, hold or smell them. It can feel like a heart-breaking longing for them to return, even for just a moment. These feelings are common not only early in the grieving process but over the course of many years. Particular times of the year like birthdays, holidays, or anniversaries can be particularly challenging. Other happy times like births, weddings, b’nai mitzvot and graduations can leave mourners feeling alone and lonely, longing for their loved one to share in the joy.



Photo Credit:
Evan Levine

Looking at Other Physical and Mental Responses

The body and mind can show the impact of grief through many physical symptoms as if one is ill. These are some typical physical reactions that can cause worry for the mourner:

- Low energy: needing more rest, tiring more quickly, feeling generally fatigued
- Hyperactivity: an intense state of arousal or panicky feelings, bursts of physical energy, difficulty sitting still, needing to move around
- Crisis response: elevated heart rate, high blood pressure, muscle tension, dizziness, weakness, headaches, not feeling well, tightness in the throat and chest, shortness of breath, dry mouth, feeling overwhelmed
- Susceptibility to illness: due to suppression of the body's immune system
- Aggravation of pre-existing chronic medical conditions or precipitation of new ones: ulcers, colitis, hiatal hernia, arthritis, asthma, migraines, back pain
- Sighing or yawning: shallow breathing, inhaling frequently, trying to catch your breath
- Feeling off balance, uncoordinated
- Nausea
- Erratic eating and sleeping patterns, insomnia, or hypersomnia, weight loss or gain
- Susceptibility to use of drugs, alcohol, nicotine, caffeine and food
- Heaviness: feeling as if you're made of lead
- Feeling "out of sync" with your body
- Distorted perceptions of time and distance

As mourners move beyond the initial weeks and months, continuing to care for oneself remains very important, especially when one is suffering the physical symptoms of grieving. Though self-care cannot erase grief, it may offer periods of relief. Paying attention to nutrition, rest, relaxation, meditation, exercise and human contact as they are very important to healing.



Photo Credit:
Halley Turner

Other Suggestions for Coping with Physical Symptoms of Grieving

- Ask someone to stay with you to help you focus and prioritize what needs to get done.
- Feel permission to ask for help with specific tasks like reviewing medical bills or doing errands. Family and friends often feel helpless and confused; specific tasks and requests can help them understand how to meet your needs.
- Inform your physician about what's happening in your life, so your blood pressure, weight changes and other health indicators can be monitored.
- Know you will make it through these episodes, even if it doesn't feel like it at the time.
- Recognize that your thinking processes, coordination and reaction time aren't your norm right now.
- Breathe. Frequently throughout the day, stop what you're doing, take a deep breath, hold it, then exhale very slowly and repeat this pattern for a number of minutes.
- Add fruit, vegetables and grains to your diet. Eat smaller, more frequent meals rather than three big ones. Eat foods you like that are easy to fix and digest, and include food that is special and comforting to you as well.
- Drink plenty of water.
- Find an exercise you can do (stretching, walking, swimming, dancing, swinging or swaying to music) and set aside time to do it regularly.
- Reach out to family and friends and seek touch. Cuddle children and pets; hold hands with your friends; get a massage.
- Attend to personal grooming (hair, skin, nails, wardrobe) that will support your sense of well-being.
- If you're having trouble sleeping, speak to your doctor for support.

Be mindful if physical symptoms persist and deepen that may indicate depression or generalized anxiety. It is not abnormal that the shock and despair of grieving a death by suicide may lead to these outcomes. Allow yourself to always seek medical support and consultation without hesitation if you have concerns about your physical or mental responses to grieving. Grief and bereavement support groups and individual counseling can also offer comfort during this time.

Tasks of Mourning

10

There are many models of grieving. The Stages of Grief theory, first introduced by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, has been adapted to the “tasks of grieving” model by William Worden. We offer his model as a possible framework to consider when understanding your grief process. Worden suggests there are four tasks of mourning. The idea behind this model is that grief is painful work that requires active participation from the mourner and those who want to help them. Worden emphasizes that these tasks do not have to be completed in any particular order and can be revisited as many times as needed. He writes that grief is not linear, and that it’s hard to have a timeline or an estimate of how long each task will take. These are the four tasks suggested by Worden:

Task 1 Accepting the reality of the loss

Task 2 Working through the pain of grief

Task 3 Adjusting to life without the deceased

Task 4 Finding an enduring connection with the deceased while embarking on a new life

Accepting the Reality of the Loss

The first task can be both simple and complex. There are basic ways one can accept the reality of a loss: going through the rituals of a funeral or memorial, beginning to speak about (and think about) the person in past tense, etc. On a more complex level, there is accepting the reality of the significance of the loss. For example, one may speak of someone in the past tense and accept their death but may downplay the significance of their relationship with that person, denying the impact the loss will have. On a basic level they may have accepted the reality of the loss, but on a deeper level they will not have accomplished this task until they have fully accepted the depth of the relationship and correlating impact.

Another common struggle with this task is around acceptance of the mechanism of the death. A death by suicide may present challenges to accomplishing this task if family or friends are unable to accept the reality of the mechanism of the death.

Working through the Pain of Grief

Task two is to work through the pain of grief. Rather than attempting to identify all the emotions of grief that one may experience and need to work through, Worden’s model acknowledges that each person and each loss will mean working through a range of different emotions. From sadness, fear, loneliness, despair, hopelessness, and anger to guilt, blame, shame, relief, and countless others, there are many emotions you as a griever will contend with. What is important in this task is acknowledging, talking about, and understanding these complex emotions in order to work through them. The danger, of course, is denying one’s feelings and avoiding them. This tendency can be exacerbated by society’s discomfort with the feelings that accompany grief, so the griever may feel like they shouldn’t feel, or acknowledge, these difficult emotions.

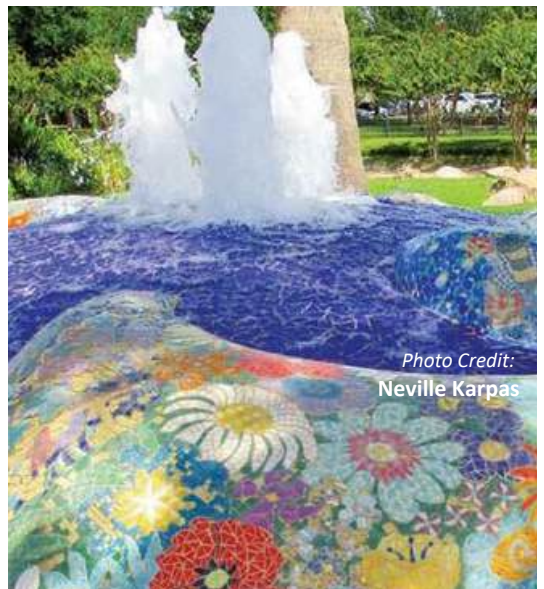


Photo Credit:
Neville Karpas

Adjusting to an Environment without the Deceased

Task three is adjusting to the environment in which the deceased is missing. Worden acknowledges that this task can also mean very different things to people depending on the relationship to the person who has died, as well as the roles that are impacted by the loss. This readjustment happens over an extended period, and can require internal, external, and spiritual adjustments. It may take a significant period of time just to realize the different roles the loved one performed, or internal and spiritual adjustments that are required. This can be especially difficult for those who may need to learn a wide array of new skills and tasks ranging from bill paying, parenting, and taking care of the home, to environmental changes such as living alone, doing things alone and redefining the self without another person. This can also mean adjusting to a new spiritual environment, which may have been changed by the experience of the death. This task requires developing the necessary skills to move confidently forward in the changed environments – internal, external, and spiritual.

Finding Enduring Connection

Finally, task four is to find an enduring connection with the deceased while embarking on a new life. This task asks you to find an appropriate, ongoing connection in your emotional life with the person who has died, while allowing you to continue living. Like the other tasks, this can mean varying things to different grievers. But it often means allowing for sad thoughts and memories, while beginning to meaningfully engage in things that bring pleasure, new experiences, or new relationships. For Worden, not accomplishing this task is to not live. It is the sense that life stopped when the person died: that one is not able to resume life in a meaningful way with a different sense of connection to the person who has died. This last task can take a long time and be one of the most difficult to accomplish.

“Tasks of Mourning” adapted from the writings of William Worden



Photo Credit:
Halley Turner

When Will I Be Myself Again

“When will I be myself again?”
Some Tuesday, perhaps,
In the late afternoon,
Sitting quietly with a cup of tea
And a cookie;
Or Wednesday, same time or later,
You will stir from a nap and see her;
You will pick up the phone to call her;
You will hear her voice--unexpected advice--
And maybe argue.
And you will not be frightened,
And you will not be sad,
And you will not be alone,
Not alone at all,
And your tears will warm you.
But not today,
And not tomorrow,
And not tomorrow's tomorrow,
But some day,
Some Tuesday, late in the afternoon,
Sitting quietly with a cup of tea
And a cookie
And you will be yourself again.

— Rabbi Lewis John Eron





What to Expect in the Days Ahead

The information that follows is offered to give you a general idea of what things to expect in the coming days and weeks following a death by suicide.

Jewish Views of Death by Suicide

In the aftermath of a death by suicide, families sometimes worry about how their loved one will be treated in Jewish tradition. It is important to say clearly that Jewish tradition teaches that you and your loved one are to be treated with dignity and the deceased can be buried in a Jewish cemetery.

Jewish law recognizes an individual who acts on impulse or who is under severe mental strain or physical pain when they take their life by suicide as being an *anuss*, meaning a “person acting under compulsion.” In such moments, a person may not be acting with full freedom or clarity. Because of this, the emphasis is not on judgment, but on compassion. The Jewish community honors the person’s life, cares for them in death, and surrounds the family with support in mourning.

Do the police have to get involved?

Remember that neither you nor your loved one has committed a crime. Because suicide involves taking one's life, the authorities are required to investigate to determine the cause of death. Suicide is not against the law but given that there are cases where a homicide has been made to look like a suicide, the authorities will want to make certain that the suicide has not been staged to cover up foul play. (Texas Code of Criminal Procedure, 2023).

At the scene of the suicide, the police may limit your access to the body—and to your home, if that's where the suicide took place—until their initial investigation is complete. They may also take some of your loved one's personal belongings, including any notes or messages that they may have left. If the police take personal possessions, be sure to ask for an inventory so you can keep track of what should be returned to you. You have the right to get all these possessions back once the investigation is complete.

As part of the investigation, the police will want to question you. You should cooperate with them, but you have the right to ask them to conduct their investigation quickly and sensitively. You also have the right to have a friend, family member or clergy with you at the time of the interview.

What if the death occurs away from home?

The investigation and post-mortem procedures all take place in the area where the person died, not where the person comes from or lives. This may be difficult as it will mean you have to travel for the interview and then make arrangements to return the body home. You can expect support from the coroner's office, your hometown funeral home, and your clergy. Remember you can ask a family member, friend or clergy to travel with you during this incredibly stressful time.

Can I/do I have to view the body?

Will there be an autopsy?

If you are the immediate next of kin but not the person who discovered and identified the body at the scene of the suicide, you will be asked to identify the body either in person or through photographs. You may choose not to identify the body yourself and ask someone else to do so.

Even if the body has already been identified you have the right to view it, and to request that the coroner or medical examiner give you time alone with your loved one.

Whether you view your loved one's body is up to you. Research conducted with people who chose to view the body indicates that most survivors feel they made the right decision in doing so (Chapple & Ziebland, 2010). While they may forever carry that last image in their mind, they also feel that the experience helped them come to terms with the reality of the death. But this will be a difficult and stressful decision on your part – take your time – and try, as best as you can, to decide what will be best for you in the long run.



Photo Credit:
Harry Samelson

Before you view the body, it is a good idea to have a friend or relative view the body (or photographs of the body) first to determine if the sight might be too traumatic for you.

Family members can have different views on seeing the body. Experts recommend holding a facilitated family counseling session to help to clarify individual needs among family to determine choices (Jordan & McIntosh, 2011). Alexander JFS clinicians are trained and available to counsel you and your family members as you navigate these painful decisions.

The medical examiner or coroner may discourage you from viewing the body if the suicide method has caused significant damage on the grounds that the sight will unduly upset you. This is a legitimate concern, but the decision about whether to view the body and how much of the body to view is yours to make.

In the event of a suicide, the medical examiner or coroner is required to perform an autopsy on the body, which is a surgical procedure used to determine the cause of death. The next of kin has the right to request a copy of the autopsy report. You can tell the medical examiner that the deceased is Jewish and request that the coroner performs as limited an autopsy as possible.

In Orthodox Judaism, autopsies are not allowed (Goodman et al., 2011). If a coroner knows this tradition and the evidence of suicide vs. homicide is clear, the request to avoid an autopsy may be honored. Judaism also encourages a burial as soon after a death as can be arranged. Autopsies can sometimes delay a timely burial.

What do I tell people about what happened?

Feeling alone and isolated

Some of those bereaved by suicide find it hard to face others, particularly in the early days. Having to try to explain what happened and answer everyone's questions is extremely difficult and painful. Some also feel, mostly because of the stigma of suicide and the shame they feel, that they cannot face others and will not be able to express their true feelings. This too is just fine and experienced by many. Perhaps you can talk first to those you most trust and feel comfortable with, and as that begins to soften your fear, you can slowly turn to others and discover your discomfort is less than in the beginning

What do I tell my children?

If you are the parent or guardian of minor children, it is up to you to determine whether to tell your children the truth about what happened. Please bear in mind that people talk, and while you may not (yet) wish to share the nature of your loved one's death with your children, it's very possible that they will overhear adults discussing or speculating about the nature of the death.

When explaining the suicide to a child or adolescent, provide truthful information, encourage questions, and offer loving reassurance.

- Reassure children that they are not responsible, and that nothing they said or did caused anyone else to take their own life.

What Do I Say? Who Do I Tell?

You may even be hesitant to share with others that your loved one took their own life. While we cannot determine what is right for you, please note that in the long run, most survivors are glad that they decided to be honest about the facts of the death. One of the most important reasons to be honest about the way your loved one died is that it will give your friends and family the opportunity to support you in an appropriate way over the long course of your life.

- Be prepared to talk about the suicide multiple times during the first days and weeks, and later throughout the child's life.
- Consider a children's bereavement support group to offer your child the comfort of grieving with others near their age.

How do I handle the media if the suicide has caught the public's attention?

You are under no obligation to talk to the media about your loved one's death. If you choose to do so, it can be helpful to designate someone as the family spokesperson and for that person to have prepared remarks. With the death of a very public individual, you can also choose to give exclusive rights to the story to just one reporter. This way, if other reporters contact you or show up at your door, you can refer them to the reporter you've already entrusted with your story.

What do I need to know about planning the funeral?

If you have any concerns that the funeral home where you would like to hold your loved one's funeral might not be comfortable handling a death by suicide, ask up front (or have a family member or friend ask for you).

For those in mourning, taking time to plan who, if anyone, will join the immediate family in the "waiting room" prior to the service and who will join the family at the cemetery can add greater solemnity and reduce stress. Research shows that death by suicide involves a combination of health and psychosocial (life) factors, and most all clergy will be both sympathetic and supportive of you and your family. Choose someone in the clergy who offers you comfort and understanding. If you'd like to memorialize your loved one with charitable donations, provide an "in lieu of flowers" statement in the obituary or at the funeral home that informs people where they can send monetary donations in your loved one's name.

In my loved one's obituary, do I have to say the death was a suicide?

Do what feels comfortable for you. However, by including the cause of death you will avoid repeated questions and rumors about how your loved one died later on, and you will again give people the opportunity to support you in a way that is meaningful and remove layers of shame and stigma from burdening your grieving path. You might share that your loved one died after a long struggle with mental illness.

If the funeral is to include a Jewish clergy member, talk to them in advance to explore their understanding of suicide and consider discussing your views about suicide and the content of the messages or eulogies you wish for clergy to offer to mourners at the service. Work with the funeral home and clergy of your choice to structure the service in a way that offers mourners comfort during an intensely stressful time. Feel receptive to offers of support by family and friends as you plan a funeral service or ceremony.



How Death Affects Different Relationships

Those who live after the death of a person by suicide are referred to as “survivors of suicide.” The term suicide survivor is potentially a confusing one, since it might logically refer to people who have attempted suicide and survived the attempt. But the term suicide survivor has come to mean someone who is bereaved after the death by suicide of someone they know.



Photo Credit:
Gabrielle Howard

No survivor can ever know the full story of a death by suicide because the person who has all the answers is gone. Haunting questions and incomplete narratives contribute to the trauma of grieving a death by suicide. Because of this, those who knew the person who died, whether a partner, family member, friend or colleague can be emotionally tormented by endless questions that will never have answers. The burden of these unanswered questions adds to the particular grieving faced by each survivor.

“How did I let this happen?” “What did I miss?” “What didn’t I know or see?” “What if I hadn’t left the house?” “Why didn’t I find another doctor or seek a different form of treatment?”

“How will I ever recover from my own culpability?” “Why didn’t I take certain comments more seriously?”

And as shocking and distorted as these words may seem, those who die by suicide genuinely feel those left behind will be better off without them. Some who have survived an attempted suicide explain reaching a point when desperation removed their ability to see anything beyond an end to their mental anguish. In that narrow reality, those who attempt or die by suicide also feel that those they love and care about will be spared further worry and suffering when they are gone.

Spouse/Partner

When a spouse/partner dies by suicide, you may feel the life you lived together has been completely rejected. You may ask unanswerable questions such as: “wasn’t I enough reason to stay alive?” You may feel that the death has wiped out the memories of good times together for a very long time.

If the death was unexpected, you are likely to feel that the ground has fallen from under your feet. If you have been supporting your spouse/partner through mental illness or previous attempts for a long time, you may experience confused feelings of frustration, exhaustion, ambivalence and relief.

People whose spouse/partner has died by suicide sometimes say the manner of their death can make others treat them in a very different way, as if they were “tainted” or to blame for what has happened. This can sometimes be the case with a partner’s relatives who are, of course, also grieving.

The death of an ex-spouse/partner can also hurt unexpectedly. You may not feel entitled to grieve and your reasons for grieving might not be easily understood by others such as your “ex-spouse’s/partner’s” family or friends; yet grieving will likely be inevitable as you shared part of your lives together. To not grieve the person you were in a relationship with and knew well, would feel unnatural.

Parents

For any parent, the death of a child – whatever their age, whatever the cause – is a kind of physical, emotional and spiritual devastation that defies language. When a child dies before a parent, the natural order of life seems violated. For a parent whose child has died, the inability to see or hold or be with their child, to see their child continue to grow up, to share the milestones and challenges of their life, is a loss so crushing that survivors express that life feels broken and forever changed.

After a death by suicide, you may tear yourself apart with questions and then put yourself on trial, finding only guilt. You may also feel that others are judging you – and your child – in a way they would not if your child had died in any other way. Even if your child was grown up and no longer at home for years before their death, you may endlessly wonder and relive what you could have done that might have changed the outcome.

Partnered parents may grieve in different ways. While one may find it impossible to talk about what has happened, seem unmoved and keep themselves busy, the other may need to talk, to cry and to express feelings and pain.

This may lead to a sense of being estranged from each other at a time when you most need each other's support. This may lead one parent to think that the other does not care. Single or separated parents may feel very alone and unsupported.

Parents whose adult child has died by suicide sometimes feel they have to support their child's partner and any other children, thus putting their own grief "on hold."

It can be especially difficult to support other children while you are grieving. While you know they need your support, you may feel you have nothing left to give. You may end up hiding your feelings and not talking about the enormity of what has happened.

Parents bereaved by suicide may worry that their other children will also consider suicide, which can result in becoming hypervigilant and over-protective.

If you are a parent whose only child has died, you may wonder how you will ever define or describe yourself in the future. You may feel like "a mother without a child." This may make answering the question "do you have any children?" very painful.

Children and the Young

When a young person dies by suicide, intense support is needed for their network of friends. Friends have likely shared many things together, and they can feel intense shock, confusion, worry and self-blame that there was more they could have done or might have said. Family and other adults may not understand just how important or how severe the grieving can be for friends of the person who died.

Often young people may struggle to share their thoughts and feelings with members of their family, so support organizations, school counselors and helplines can be critical avenues for sharing feelings.

Photo Credit:
Arthur Alexander



Children

For children of any age, the death of a parent/sibling by suicide brings particular complexity and challenge. Children are likely to feel literally and emotionally abandoned. Many children find it excruciating to avoid believing that somehow they weren't enough of a reason for their parent to keep living. Other children may feel they were somehow the reason their parent took their own life.

With young children who have lost a parent or sibling to suicide, a natural response is to want to protect them from knowing what has happened and to provide an alternative explanation for the death. It is better for children to hear the truth from people who love them than from someone in the playground or on social media. At such a vulnerable time, children need to feel there are people they can trust. Holding a secret can not only be impossible but also carry damaging emotional consequences for a child's future.

Telling a child the truth about a death by suicide can bring great stress and pain to the adult who is sharing the news. But talking about what has happened sets a precedent of truth for a vulnerable child. By answering questions (within the limits of their age and level of understanding) an adult respects a child's right to have honest and true information. The adult can also determine what a child actually understands.

Ideally, a parent is the best person to tell the child what has happened. If this is not possible, ask another relative or friend that the child trusts to explain what has happened. Most important is continually reassuring a child or children that they are not to blame.

If the child has already been given a different explanation for the death, it is possible and important to go back and tell the truth. For example you could say something like, "You know I told you that your dad had an accident and that is why he died. Well, I've been thinking about this and I would like to tell you more about how he died. I didn't know what to say when it happened, it was such a shock. Now I'd like you to know what actually happened that day."

You may be wondering whether children should view the person's body or whether they should attend the funeral. These decisions will depend on your knowledge of the child's level of understanding. Children and young people value being given the information to make their own choice.

Young people may experience extreme anger not only with the person who died, but also with other members of the family and even with themselves. Grief can put a great strain on relationships and young people may become estranged from members of their family or friends. Children and young people can also be naturally scared that someone else in their family may die by suicide.

Children and young people learn to grieve by watching the adults around them.

If adults grieve openly, expressing feelings will be acceptable. If adults close off, children and young people will not know it is okay to show emotion. Reassurance and open communication is essential and emotionally healing. When a grieving child or young person can share how they are feeling and talk about what has happened, healing can begin.

It is also natural to be afraid that affected children will grow up believing that suicide is a choice. Clearly telling a child or young person that you do not believe that suicide is ever an option will be a critical message that you continue to reinforce over time.

You can say things like: "I know I have not been myself since your dad died but I am not going anywhere. I get sad and angry, because I am still so shocked, but I want you to know that I am here for you and I will never take my own life."

Photo Credit:
Arthur Alexander



Children and young people also need help with answering questions from others because their friends may be very direct and intrusive. Help them find words they are comfortable saying, for example: “My sister died last weekend. I am very sad. It was suicide. Please don’t ask me anything else. If I can talk about it, I’ll let you know.”

Children may find a graveside service to be a scary experience. Help them find a way to say whether they want to go to the funeral service only. If they go, prepare children for what they will hear or see at a funeral. If you can, give a child permission not to attend a funeral service or burial if they don’t want to participate.

Children may give the appearance of coping well when an event unrelated to the death triggers a big reaction. Grappling with the permanence of death, children can exhibit regressive behaviors like bedwetting, thumb sucking, separation anxiety, wanting to sleep with parents, feelings of insecurity, wanting to be held, food demands or baby talk.

Some friends may post intrusive questions on social media. You can help a young survivor find a comfortable way to say, “Please do not talk about my loss online because it causes me a lot of pain.”

In contrast, some young people actually find it much easier to talk openly and may want to say things to their friends or teachers like “please don’t stop talking to me about my mother just because of what happened. I know it is hard but I want to talk to you about her and what happened.”





Photo Credit:
Harry Samelson

Siblings

Sibling relationships are the longest of our lives. If your brother or sister dies by suicide, you immediately lose a person who you have grown up with, laughed with, argued with, and with whom you share the deepest memories. You may feel you have lost your shadow or your closet person in your world. You may feel so devastated you cannot connect to the magnitude of the lifetime loss. You may feel you should have protected your sibling, or you may feel really hurt that they did not turn to you for support. If you have had a troubled relationship, you may feel you are left with unresolved issues.

When you lose a sibling, you are facing your own grief and confusion, but you can also feel responsible for helping to support your parents with their grief. You may now feel you have additional responsibility for looking after your parents as they age. Friends may ask about your parents without realizing you are also grieving. Sometimes, you may feel you have lost all your family at once because your parents withdraw into their own grief. You can reach out to your extended family and friends for support.

Friends

Most people who die by suicide have friends they were very close to and often feel closer to than they do with some of their family. After the death, close friends may feel that their grief and needs are overlooked. As a best friend, it can be hard to find yourself in a secondary role after the death, having little or no involvement in planning the funeral or other arrangements. You may also have particularly intense feelings to deal with if you are the person who knew how low your friend was feeling. Maybe your friend who died also knew things about you that no one else did, and now they are gone.

Friends can sometimes feel that they are not “entitled” to any support after someone dies or that their feelings or needs are overlooked after a death. It is important to remember that what matters is how this loss affects you, not whether you were related as family to the person who died. If you are grieving, you deserve to be supported in your grief.

Older People

Older people may grieve for the person who died and for the grief being felt by other family members. Or they may feel they should not express their grief, feeling it is in some way “less important” or that they need to “stay strong” for others in the family. Older people may also struggle more with the stigma of a death by suicide.

People with Cognitive and/or Learning Differences

People often underestimate the capacity of a person with cognitive or learning difficulties to feel grief and understand death. Your knowledge of the person with learning difficulties is likely to help you know best how to support them in dealing with new experiences. It can feel particularly difficult if the person who died was one of the people who could best understand them and their needs.

Sometimes, because people may not be able to express their grief in the usual ways, those around them may assume they are not grieving when they are actually feeling distress and pain.

Any death can be a difficult concept to convey, and the idea of a death by suicide may be even harder to understand. Simple, clear, repeated explanations of what has happened could help; our language around death can be very confusing. People with learning difficulties may struggle to understand concepts such as “lost” or “passed away” and may prefer a more literal explanation such as “died.”

The Impact on Many

Any individual death, especially a death by suicide, can affect people far beyond immediate family and friends.

Many people are sad and distressed after a death by suicide, and you don’t have to be a family member or friend of the person who has died to be deeply affected. For instance, you may be one of these people:

- Work colleague, ex-colleague or fellow volunteer
- School, college or university student or staff
- Social media contact
- Health professional (nurse, doctor, counselor) who may have supported the person through crises
- Emergency services (e.g. paramedic) who may have been first on the scene and tried to save them
- Police who may have had to break the news to a devastated family or may have found the person who died

Often when you are affected by a death, the impact brings other deaths and losses you have previously experienced more sharply into your mind. You may feel a deepened grief remembering those losses and you may wonder if there was something you could have done to prevent this person from dying.



Photo Credit:
Melissa Shapiro



Facing the Future

Moving On or Moving Forward?

Moving on means starting afresh, which, short of being an amnesiac, is a nearly impossible task. Moving forward, however, means venturing forth on uncharted territory, navigating the world without our parents, our spouses, our parents, or G-d forbid, our children for the first time. That's hard, sometimes excruciatingly so. From whom we will seek wisdom or guidance or comfort or nourishment for body and soul, as we move forward? Moving on asks us to shed our past, but moving forward allows us the possibility of bringing some of what we loved along with us into the future.

– Rabbi Shira Stern



The most important factor in healing from loss is having the support of other people. Even if you are not comfortable talking about your feelings, sharing your loss makes the burden of grief easier to bear.

Grieve in Your Own Way

Do what is right for you. If you are not ready to do something, (such as go to visit the grave) wait until you are ready. Don't let anyone tell you how to feel. It is your grief and no one can tell you when it is time to "move on" or "get over it." Don't worry about going crazy because you are not, even if you feel that way at times. Feelings of losing your mind are a result of emotions barraging you when you are most vulnerable. On the other side of these dark and unsettling experiences can be a path forward despite the often unbearable pain.

Face Your Feelings

In order to heal, you have to acknowledge your feelings, or begin to talk them out with a professional. Avoiding or trying to suppress your grief, even if it is for the best of intentions (e.g. looking after the rest of the family) will only prolong the grieving and may lead to further problems down the road, such as depression, anxiety, substance use or other health problems.

Don't Rush Yourself

Losing someone to suicide is devastating and your healing can only happen at its own pace. You cannot force your way through it. Nor are there any "quick fixes" You cannot compare your grief to anyone else. We are all different and unique and we all grieve in our own way and time. Be compassionate to yourself.

Remember Your Loved One's Life Was More Than Their Last Day

Try to remember and celebrate the important, joyous aspects of their lives and your relationship together. Mark their achievements and share memories with others who loved them.

Expect Setbacks

As you work through your grief, you will begin to feel more and more “good days” but some times you will experience setbacks that leave you feeling you are back where you started. This too is a normal part of grieving. Grieving is no longer thought of as a process of linear stages so your healing will not happen in a straight path. Even in the early days and months, mourners may feel guilty when good memories or thoughts of the person emerge. This is also part of the grieving process and can provide a bittersweet glimpse of hope.

Grief Triggers

The first year of mourning can be filled with triggers as each holiday or special date is reached without your loved one for the first time. Reaching the first month or first year of the death anniversary can also be an especially painful trigger.

In fact, anniversaries, birthdays, and other special occasions may always be painful reminders of your loved one’s death, regardless of the length of time has passed.

You may also notice something more subtle: a shift in your mood or in your body before the arrival of a significant date. This is described as a “body memory”—feeling unsettled, emotional, or off without immediately knowing why, only to realize that an important date is approaching.

For some people, the anticipation of these occasions is the hardest part. For others, it is the day itself.

Grief can be triggered in unexpected ways unrelated to specific events or times of year. It could be a song, a movie, a passing comment, a commercial on TV, a book, or something you notice in everyday life. These can all trigger feelings of grief that catch you off guard. Such a grief reaction can feel like a “punch in the gut.”

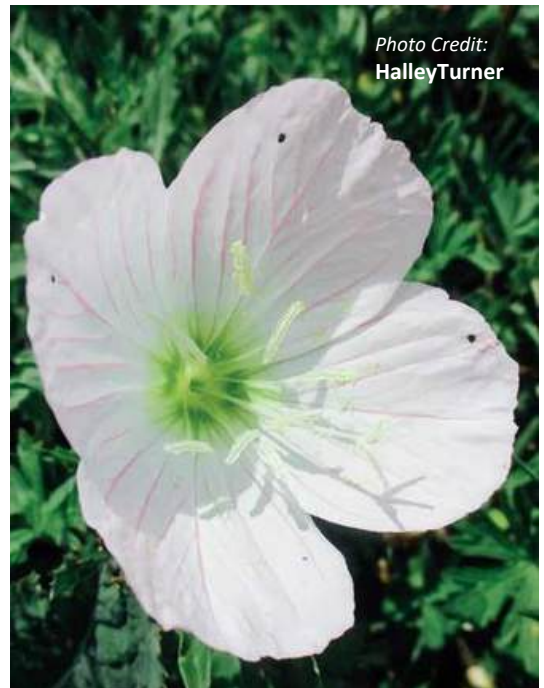
Allow yourself to be prepared and aware of your feelings and accept that this, too, is a normal part of grief. It does not mean you are moving backward or that something is wrong.

Over time, you may find that these moments remain painful but also become more familiar. You may start to recognize, prepare for, and emerge from them with a deeper sense of healing.

Professional Support

You may have moments of “knowing” you need or want to seek professional help from those trained to work with “survivors” of a death by suicide. This may be a very difficult step but the benefits to you and your grieving can far outweigh your anxiety and doubts.

Your loved one may have been under the care of a mental health professional at the time of death and your feelings toward that provider may be complex. You may have complex questions, or you may seek insight. You may want to express overwhelming feelings toward a provider such as anger or confusion or disappointment or regret. Most mental health providers will encourage these conversations and expect your instinct to reach out for a meeting or series of appointments. Often such interactions can bring relief as well as deeper understanding to grieving loved ones.



Helping the Bereaved

The support of friends and relatives can make a huge difference in the bereaved person's capacity to manage their grief.

Family or Friend

Love, kindness and non-judgmental support are the most important ways to be there for your family or a friend who has been bereaved by suicide. The bereaved person can find it almost impossible to explain how they are feeling or to ask for help. They may tell you that they are fine when actually they are not.

People who have been bereaved by suicide say that regular contact from friends and loved ones is of great comfort. Most importantly, making yourself available to simply listen or talk if needed is the most generous support. You may want to provide offers of practical help: such as shopping or you may want to drop by with a cooked meal. Even a simple text to let the person know they are in your thoughts can feel so welcome to the bereaved.

The key things – as with any loss – are to let your relative or friend talk and for you to listen without making judgments. Sometimes, people bereaved by suicide say that they discover that many people find it very awkward to talk about what has happened. This can leave the bereaved person feeling even more isolated.

People bereaved by suicide have many questions running through their heads and the most difficult are: “why did this happen?” and “could I have done something to stop it?” Your friend or relative may want you to tell them that they were not to blame and sometimes they may need you to let them express their feelings of guilt and responsibility. Sometimes they may want to cry without being told to stop, or they may simply want you to spend time with them. People usually appreciate hearing others’ memories of something the person did or what they meant to you. It may be hard, but try not to focus only on the death, but also on when the person was alive and enjoying life

It is likely that, for some considerable time, the bereaved person will find it difficult to concentrate or function as they have in the past; they may lose confidence in their ability to perform even simple tasks. Alternatively, they may want to work themselves to exhaustion to avoid thinking about what has happened.

You may find it too hard to hear some of the things that your friend or relative feels they need to say. You could gently suggest they may want also to talk to a professional or join a support group.

You could also make a note of particular dates (e.g. the birthday and the date of death of the person who died, Father’s Day or Mother’s Day) and remember to mark and acknowledge these in the years to come.

If there are children or young people in the family, they will appreciate it if you acknowledge that they are grieving too. Children sometimes report being told to “look after their parent” when they need support themselves.

Colleague or friend

Someone who has been bereaved through suicide may feel aware of the stigma associated with a suicide and find it difficult to return to work and the spotlight of people’s attention. It may help to ask them beforehand what they would like people to know about the person who died and how they died and to give colleagues hints about what would help. For example, you could tell all staff something like this (language applied to a male colleague):

“Our colleague is coming back on Monday. Most of you will know that his daughter (name) died a month ago. He wants everyone to know that (name) took her own life. As you can imagine, he and the entire family are reeling with shock and grief. He has asked me to tell you that he doesn’t mind people expressing their condolences but would prefer not to be asked about the details of what has happened.”

Equally, your colleague may not want to disclose this information. Either way, it is important to respect their wishes. People bereaved by suicide often appreciate colleagues acknowledging what has happened, even very simply: “I was so sorry to hear about your daughter,” rather than having it ignored completely.

Bereavement never follows a neat pattern and bereavement by suicide can be chaotic. It is possible your colleague or employee may need time off early on or around the anniversary of the death. Reminding your colleague or friend of support within the community and the workplace can be welcomed.

Students

The death by suicide of any member of a school or college community whether student, relative of the student or member of staff, needs to be taken seriously and responded to appropriately. You may find that young people react in different ways: some may find it hard to talk, some may find it hard to stop crying. Young people appreciate staff acknowledging what has happened, even very simply such as: “I was so sorry to hear about your brother,” rather than having it ignored completely.

The fear and stigma around suicide can be particularly strong within a school or college, especially if a young person has died. Staff may fear some imitative reactions and because of that, avoid talking about what has happened. This may be the response that is most likely to put both the bereaved young person and others at risk.

If the person who died was a student’s parent or sibling, the student will need a lot of support and understanding as they try and keep going with their studies while their head is full of questions and whirling emotions. They may be feeling deeply hurt and rejected as well as desperately sad and they will bring these feelings with them to school or college.

Your school will, hopefully, have a bereavement strategy that includes supporting any students who have previously been bereaved for whom this event brings additional feelings and memories. Schools vary in what they can offer, but you may have available a range of options for support, from one-to-one conversations to group activities.

Of course, as a member of staff, you may also be affected by the death, and it may remind you of previous losses. Make sure you have sufficient support, too.



A Prayer When a Loved One Dies by Suicide

Why, G-d? Why did he have to take his life? Why couldn't I help him? Why couldn't he hold on? Why didn't You save him? Why?

How G-d? How will I recover from this nightmare? How can I exorcise the guilt: "I could have done more," "I should have done more," "If only I had..." How do I forgive myself? How do I forgive him?

Help me, G-d. Give me strength to carry on. Heal my anger and shame. Ease the burden on my heart. Teach me to believe that I am not to blame. Lead me back to life and hope and joy.

I know the pain became too much for him. Death was his only hope for release from his suffering. Life offered him no such promise, no relief.

Let him rest now, G-d. Free from all that haunted him. At peace, at last. Watch over him, G-d. Be his comfort. Grant him the serenity that he so longed for in life. Let his death be his healing.

Amen.

— *Rabbi Naomi Levy*



Photo Credit:
Debra Simms



The Jewish Mourning Cycle

The Kaddish Support in Your Grieving

Adapted from sermon

Rabbi Oren Hayon, Congregation Emanu El, Houston

In traditional Jewish observance, the Kaddish is recited by those in mourning not only at the time of the funeral, but also three times each day throughout the first eleven months following a death when one loses a parent. When one loses a spouse, a sibling or a child, Kaddish is said for the first thirty days.

“Although the Kaddish is normally thought of as an obligation that weighs only on the mourner himself, the most ancient core of this elegant prayer is one that stands as a dialogue, a conversation in prayer, when those who are temporarily intact stand ready to respond to those who are broken.

Grief in a Jewish community is fundamentally a call and response. When we stand up for Kaddish we show that we are ready to be called upon to respond. The grief of the person who has just learned of the tragic death of a loved one issues a call that awaits our response as a community.

In Judaism, we are forbidden to respond to suffering with silence; it is our work to comfort and soothe, to help and heal, to make the words of the Kaddish come true a little bit more: that G-d's peace on high can be brought down to ease the pain of the mourners here below.”

In that spirit, this bereavement guide is for you, to offer hope and comfort as well as informational support during the difficult days, weeks and months ahead.

The Jewish tradition offers mourning rituals and stages of grief during the first year after a death as well as for each year following. This Jewish path of grieving supports the mourner from the moment of learning of a death, through the funeral, the first week, the first thirty days and the balance of twelve months. For those who find solace in this faith-based path, the Jewish way is rich in both spiritual and psychological wisdom.

Chevra Kadisha

Our tradition includes communal participation in the preparation of the body for burial. Just as the community comes together to welcome a new Jewish child into this world, the community comes together to help us leave this world and enter the world to come.

The family may request that the body of their loved one should be prepared for burial by members of the “chevra kadisha.” The funeral home will make these arrangements.

The focus of the volunteers of this burial society is to maintain a quiet, respectful environment during the ritual cleansing of the body and subsequent dressing for burial according to Jewish traditions.

At the heart of the society's purpose is the ritual of **tahara**, or purification. The body is seen as having been the receptacle for the soul, the eternal part of our life, and thus is accorded the honor of ritual cleaning.

The body is first carefully washed by members of the group, men attending to men, and women to women, all the while maintaining the modesty of the body. After the body is cleaned, a continuous flow of water is poured over the body while prayers are recited.

After this ritual washing, the body is dried completely and then dressed in **tachrichim**, simple white muslin or linen garments which are identical for each person, representing the idea that while we all have differences throughout our lives in wealth or possessions, during this transition, all stand equal before our Creator. Sand from the land of Israel is added inside the casket, and the group closes the casket.

This tradition often gives the family comfort to know that the final time the body of their loved one is handled, it is with dignity, in a spiritual environment and by a member of the Jewish community. This is considered a “chesed shel emet,” a good deed which will never be repaid. Members of this group do not speak of mundane things during their time preparing the body and and keep their contact with your loved one confidential.

The high premium the Torah places on the honor of the dead is shown through all the rituals of the burial society, and even those who pass away with no known relatives will be accorded this service by the chevra kadisha, so that everyone can be assured that they will be surrounded by their community at this time.

A “shomer,” someone who stays near the body and casket until burial while reciting psalms is available through the Chevra Kadisha as well. Your Rabbi can share with you any additional information about the local Chevra Kadisha and these thoughtful traditions.

Aninut

The first stage of mourning is *aninut* or “intense mourning.” Aninut lasts until the burial is over or if a mourner is unable to attend the funeral from the moment he or she is no longer involved with the funeral itself.

An onen (a person in aninut) is considered to be in a state of total shock and disorientation. With a death that may be by suicide, the period of shock and disorientation can last long after the funeral because grieving such a death is considered a complex and traumatic type of grieving.

Keriah

Some Jewish mourners follow the tradition of Keriah or making a tear in an outer garment before or at the funeral. The tear is on the left side (over the heart and clearly visible) for a parent and on the right side for siblings, children and spouses. Non-Orthodox Jews will often make the keriah in a small black ribbon that can pinned to a lapel or dress. Spiritually, the tear indicates the rupture in the lives of the mourners. The tear in clothing represents the literal tearing apart of life as it was before the death.

Avelut

Aninut is immediately followed by *Avelut* (mourning) that consists of three distinct periods. Judaism wisely recognizes that life cannot possibly return to normal after the funeral and thus offers a gentle path to guide the mourner through the tragedy and loss.

Shiva-Seven Days

The first stage of avelut is shiva, a weeklong period of grief during which the mourner or mourners are surrounded by loved ones, friends and spiritual leaders. For observant Jews, shiva involves additional rituals all intended to recognize that life is being lived on a different calendar and with different rules following a death. The mourner is essentially “instructed” to set aside routine day-to-day life and surrender to the reality that life will no longer be the same. Grieving loss can be uncomfortable and unfamiliar but Judaism asks us to take time to be still and to begin mourning.

Some of those in mourning will find comfort during the Shiva if they are surrounded by family and friends who love and care for them. Others may experience Shiva as a period of “suspended animation,” feeling overwhelmed and uncomfortable with visitors who may not know how best to offer meaningful support. Mourners may find it hard to speak to everyone who attends the Shiva or may forget who came. Offering a sign-in book will allow family and friends to remember those who attended when they reflect back on the Shiva at a later time in their grieving.

The end of Shiva may be a vulnerable time for mourners as it can be the first time the bereaved is alone. Out of town family and friends may have returned home. Mourners still need the support of family, friends and clergy and reaching out for continuing support can help during this transition.

Photo Credit:
Evan Levine

There are various customs as to what to say to the mourner upon leaving a shiva. One of the most common is to say:

“The Omnipresent will comfort you and yours among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.” Others may add such wishes as, “You should have no more tzaar or distress.”

Sheloshim-Thirty Days

The thirty-day period following burial is known as sheloshim. The mind and body intuitively know that returning to the normal routine of life is impossible. Sheloshim is observed by immediate family to help move through the initial shock of death. Mourners can return to their jobs but resuming life as it was before the loss can be a slower and more painful process. Those who are actively mourning sometimes describe feeling they are walking on a different path than those who are living life without being in the midst of grieving.

Shneim Asar Chodesh-Twelve Months

Those mourning a parent or sibling who observe a twelve-month period, counted from the day of death. Observant Jews continue to recite the Kaddish prayer daily in Synagogue for eleven months during this time period.

Matzevah-Unveiling of the Tombstone

Although there is no obligation to hold an unveiling ceremony, the ritual has great meaning to many and is often held at the graveside by the end of eleven or twelve months of mourning. At the end of the ceremony, a cloth covering the headstone is removed and the Kaddish recited. The El Malei Rachamim prayer, in which G-d is asked to remember and grant repose to the soul of the departed is also recited.

Yahrzeit-Each Year

Grieving, however, can defy a timeline. Judaism provides a formal ritual known as Yahrzeit, which means “time of year,” in Yiddish. The word is used to refer to the anniversary of the day of the death of a relative or friend. If one attends a synagogue Sabbath service, the name of the deceased is said by a rabbi and loved ones recite the Kaddish prayer. On that day each year, a Yahrzeit candle is lit to honor the memory of the person who died. This ritual acknowledges that while grief does not end, a path of enduring connection can allow a return to living for those left behind.

Memorial Through Prayer

Jewish custom calls for the Mourner's Kaddish to be said at all prayers services and memorials. This prayer of dialogue offers support for those grieving as well as predictable times for all mourners to remember their loved one who died.

Yizkor

Yizkor, which means "remembrance," provides an enduring ritual of prayers recited four times a year during services held on Yom Kippur, Shemini Atzeret, the last day of Passover and the second day of Shavuot. Yizkor allows the entire community to pray together every year, remembering those loved ones who died.

Bright Stars: Annual Ceremony of Light and Remembrance

The Bright Stars ceremony honors loved ones on or around the holiday of Chanukah—the Jewish season of light. It celebrates the lives they lived before illness or tragedy dimmed their brightness. By focusing on the fullness of their lives rather than the circumstances of their passing, survivors can remember and hold close the times when their loved ones experienced health, joy, and well-being.

CONNECT THROUGH OUR WEBSITE:

<https://www.alexanderjfs.org/search?query=bright+stars>

EMAIL: bmhs@alexanderjfs.org

CALL: (713) 986-7825



Alexander JFS
Bright Stars
A Ceremony of Light and Remembrance

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

Text or call **988** Lifeline
www.988lifeline.org
 Free, confidential, and available 24/7

Crisis Text Line

741741
www.crisistextline.org

National Domestic Violence Hotline

1.800.799.SAFE (7233)
www.thehotline.org

Trevor Project: Crisis and Suicide Prevention for LGBTQ Youth

866.488.7386
 Text 'START' to **678-678**
www.thetrevorproject.org

You Are Not Alone

Alexander Jewish Family Service is here to help.
 To schedule a consultation with our mental health professionals, please reach out to us:

CONNECT THROUGH OUR WEBSITE:

<https://www.alexanderjfs.org/services/bmhs/all-counseling#request-service>

EMAIL: bmhs@alexanderjfs.org

CALL: (713) 986-7825

If you live outside of Texas and would like professional help, we are happy to connect you with mental health professionals in your area.



“If you loved someone who loved life, live for them. Whatever you do, remember grief is strong, but life and love are stronger. Grief might have knocked at our doors, but don’t forget that we welcomed love and life with open arms long before she arrived. Please always remember, love came first.”

Rabbi Jen Kaluzny, 2025

Links

www.griefhealingblog.com

www.myjewishlearning.com/article/suicide-in-jewish-tradition-and-literature/

www.whatsyourgrief.com

References

Chapple, A., & Ziebland, S. (2010). *Viewing the body after bereavement due to a traumatic death: Qualitative study in the UK.*

Doka, K. J., & Martin, T. L. (2010). *Grieving beyond gender: Understanding the ways men and women mourn* (2nd ed.).

Goodman, N. R., Goodman, J. L., & Hofman, W. I. (2011). Autopsy: Traditional Jewish laws and customs (“Halacha”). *The American Journal of Forensic Medicine and Pathology.*

Jordan, J. R., & McIntosh, J. L. (Eds.). (2011). *Grief after suicide: Understanding the consequences and caring for the survivors.*

Pompili, M. et al. (2013). Bereavement after the suicide of a significant other: A review. *Indian Journal of Psychiatry*

Tal Young, I., Iglewicz, A., Glorioso, D., Lanouette, N., Seay, K., Ilapakurti, M., & Zisook, S. (2012). Suicide bereavement and complicated grief. *Dialogues in clinical neuroscience.*

Texas Code of Criminal Procedure art. 49.04 (2023).

Weiss, E. (2019). *Mishkan Aveilut: Where grief resides.* Central Conference of American Rabbis.

*The Kaddish, Senior Rabbi Oren Hayon, Congregation Emanu El, Houston

Some excerpts from Public Health England (www.gov.uk/phe) and the National Suicide Prevention Alliance (www.nspa.org.uk)

Photography

Credited photos in this guide were taken by artists from Joan and Stanford Alexander **Celebration Company**, an Alexander JFS social entrepreneurial program for adults with disabilities.



Alexander JFS
**Behavioral &
Mental Health Services**

Alexander Jewish Family Service

4131 S. Braeswood

Houston, Texas 77025

Phone: (713) 667-9336

Fax: (713) 667-3619

E-mail: bmhs@alexanderjfs.org

www.alexanderjfs.org

This guide was informed not only by professionals but also by the voices of many survivors who have navigated this painful journey toward healing.

We offer these words to meet the expressed needs of those in our community who seek guidance in their grieving.

Edited by Alexander Jewish Family Service
Behavioral and Mental Health Services Team

Revised in August 2026

