

After a Suicide



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This is dedicated to the memory of Jennifer Susan Ross, who took her own life on 4th February 2001, at the age of 23, after struggling with mental health problems for 11 years.

Introduction

Every day, around two people in Scotland die by suicide. For every one of those people, there are friends, partners, children, relatives, carers and colleagues left behind. This booklet is for all of them.

SAMH first produced After a Suicide in 2004, and it has helped many people since then. Funded by Choose Life, Scotland's national strategy and action plan to prevent suicide, this new edition has been fully revised and updated. It will help you with the practical issues that need to be faced after a suicide, talk about some of the emotions you might be experiencing and suggest some places where you can get help.

“The fact that there was the After a Suicide booklet was a huge relief to me. It never left my side in the early days. I encouraged my friends and family to read it and it helped them too! Knowing that this booklet was at hand meant that although I didn't know anyone else in the same situation as me, there were others out there who had gone through and were going through this experience. It made me feel less alone.”

Jacqui

1. Practical Issues

- 03 The Police
- 04 The Procurator Fiscal
- 04 Post mortems
- 05 Releasing the body for burial/cremation
- 06 Communications with the Procurator Fiscal
- 06 Fatal Accident Inquiries
- 07 Registering the death
- 09 The funeral
- 10 Funeral payments from the Social Fund
- 12 Letting others know
- 13 Media interest
- 14 Money and possessions
- 15 Benefits and allowances
- 16 Other investigations and inquiries
- 16 The NHS
- 17 The Mental Welfare Commission

2. The Grieving Process

- 18 Immediate responses
- 19 The big question: why?
- 19 Stigma and shame
- 20 Children affected by suicide
- 23 Your emotions
- 23 Guilt
- 23 Anger
- 24 Confusion and helplessness
- 24 Isolation
- 24 Coping strategies
- 26 Moving forward

3. Useful contacts and resources

- 27 Mental health information
- 27 Support
- 29 Scottish Government initiatives
- 29 Legal advice
- 29 Welfare benefits
- 30 Other advice
- 31 Helpful books
- 32 Acknowledgements

Part 1. Practical issues

Following any death, there will inevitably be practical issues to deal with. This section sets out some of the organisations you might now come into contact with, explains what their roles are and covers some other issues that you might need to know about.

The Police

When a body is found under circumstances which may indicate suicide, the police will:

- retain any item that has an obvious connection with the death
- record the position and appearance of the body in writing and by taking photographs
- examine any notes or letters that the person has left which indicate a suicidal intention
- make enquiries to establish the person's state of mind before their death

The deceased person's body will be taken to the local mortuary.

Police enquiries can take many different forms and often involve interviewing family, friends and colleagues as potential witnesses. Police officers often have to inform people of the death of a relative and should carry out this duty professionally and sensitively. As a next-of-kin or someone close to the deceased person, you may be asked to formally identify the person. This may be done immediately if you have found the person, or you may have to go to the mortuary later and do this.

A police report to the Procurator Fiscal should also include information about any cultural or religious issues that may be relevant to the investigation into the death and sensitive liaison with bereaved relatives.

The Procurator Fiscal

The Procurator Fiscal (referred to here as the Fiscal) is a lawyer who works for Scotland's prosecution service. The Fiscal is responsible for investigating all sudden, suspicious, accidental and unexplained deaths and any death occurring in circumstances which give rise to serious public concern. The Fiscal must enquire into any death where the circumstances point to suicide. The Fiscal has legal responsibility for the deceased person until the death certificate is issued and the deceased person is released to the person arranging the funeral.

The Fiscal will investigate the cause and circumstances and will then decide whether any further investigation is needed. This may involve instructing a post mortem, to be carried out by a forensic pathologist. The Fiscal is responsible for directing the level and type of post mortem examination, subject to advice from investigating police officers, medical experts and other expert advisers.

The purpose of the Fiscal's investigation is to decide whether there is a need for criminal proceedings or if a Fatal Accident Inquiry should be held (see page 6 of this booklet for more information on Fatal Accident Inquiries). This decision may depend on the results of toxicological examinations.

Post mortems

There are different levels of post mortem depending on the circumstances of the death:

- a non invasive external post mortem examination by one pathologist
- an invasive post mortem examination by one pathologist
- an invasive post mortem examination by two pathologists or more

After the post mortem, you will be given the medical certificate showing the initial cause of death which you will require to take with you to register the death (see page 7 of this guide for information on how to register a death). If toxicology or other tests have been taken at the time

of the post mortem (for example, blood or urine) it may take some time for the results of these tests to become known.

Should the outcome of these tests amend the cause of death, you will be advised of any amendment to the cause of death by the Procurator Fiscal. You will also receive a letter from the National Records of Scotland in due course to advise you when the amended death certificate is available for you to collect from the local registrar.

Post mortems do not usually leave any obvious marks when the person is placed in their coffin. They can usually still be dressed in their own clothes and seen after the post mortem. If there are any cultural, religious or other objections to a post mortem examination it is important to tell the Fiscal as soon as possible. There may be legal reasons why a post mortem is unavoidable, but where possible the wishes of the next of kin will be respected.

Releasing the body for burial/cremation

The Fiscal is responsible for instructing the release of the deceased person's body for burial or cremation. The extent of the investigations will determine how long the deceased person's body needs to be kept before being released. In deaths where there are no grounds to suspect that a homicide has been committed, the Fiscal must ensure that there are arrangements in place for the deceased's body to be released to the nearest relative as soon as possible.

The Fiscal recognises that a delay in confirming the cause of death can be very distressing for a bereaved family and is also aware that it is a tradition in many cultures to bury or cremate the deceased's body as quickly as possible.

Once the Fiscal has received all the information needed he/she will assess the circumstances of a death by suicide. In most cases there will be no further proceedings by the Fiscal following a death report being received from the police. However in a very small number of

suicide cases, the circumstances of the death may require the Fiscal to report the death to Crown Office (the headquarters of the Procurator Fiscal Service), for a decision to be made as to whether a Fatal Accident Inquiry should be held. All suicides which occur whilst a person was in legal custody will however require a Fatal Accident Inquiry to be held.

Communications with the Procurator Fiscal

Regardless of whether there is to be a Fatal Accident Inquiry, the Fiscal should normally contact the nearest relatives at the earliest opportunity and may offer a meeting to discuss matters. The Fiscal will ensure that families are updated on any developments in the investigation. The nearest relatives will be informed about the decision to hold, or not hold, a Fatal Accident Inquiry. If there is to be a Fatal Accident Inquiry, and you, as the nearest relatives, want to raise any issues, you may wish to contact a solicitor for advice. The nearest relatives are entitled to be represented at a Fatal Accident Inquiry, and can lead evidence and question witnesses.

Fatal Accident Inquiries

A Fatal Accident Inquiry (FAI) is a public inquiry into the circumstances of a death. It will be held in the Sheriff Court. Generally speaking, an FAI will only be held in cases that involve issues of public safety or public concern arising from the death. If the death happened as a result of an accident, whilst a person was working or when a person was in legal custody (e.g. in prison or police custody) a Fatal Accident Inquiry must be held.

The purpose of an FAI is to assess the circumstances surrounding the death and to identify any issues of public concern or safety. The Court will identify whether anything might be done to help avoid similar deaths in the future. At the end of an FAI, a Sheriff makes a determination. The determination will set out:

- where and when the death occurred
- the cause of death
- any precautions by which the death might have been avoided
- any defect in systems that caused or contributed to the death.

An FAI cannot make any findings of fault or blame against individuals.

Registering the death

The National Records of Scotland (NRS) keeps records of all births, deaths, marriages, divorces and adoptions. Any death which occurs in Scotland must be registered within eight days by the Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages. Deaths can be registered at any registrar's office. You should be able to find out the contact details of the local registrar from the police, undertaker, hospital, doctor, local telephone book, or find more information on registering the death on their website: <http://www.gro-scotland.gov.uk>.

You should phone the registrar before you go, as many registrars require people to make appointments to register deaths. Although a burial can take place before the death has been registered, a cremation can only take place afterwards.

The death can be registered by any of the following people:

- any relative of the deceased person
- any person who was present when the death occurred
- the deceased person's executor or legal representative
- the occupier of the property where the person died
- any other person who knows the information to be registered.

If you are registering the death, you should try to take with you:

- the medical certificate showing cause of death
- the deceased person's birth certificate and, if relevant, marriage certificate
- the deceased person's NHS medical card
- any documents relating to the receipt of a pension or allowance from government funds.

Don't worry if you don't have all of these documents, as the death can still be registered without them. After you have registered the death, the registrar will give you:

- a certificate of registration to give to the person in charge of the burial ground or crematorium
- a Social Security registration or notification of death certificate for use in obtaining or adjusting Social Security benefits
- an abbreviated extract of the death entry (excluding cause of death and parentage details)

You may wish to buy some extra copies of the extract as they will often be required by banks and other organisations when you notify them of the death. If you want a copy of the full death entry in the register, you will need to pay a small fee.

If a person who normally lived in Scotland died abroad, their death will have to be registered according to local regulations, and a certificate of death obtained. The local police, British Consul or tour guide can advise you on how to do this. You can also often register the death at the British Consulate as well, for a fee. You don't have to do this, but if you do you can buy a UK-style death certificate, and the record will be sent to the General Register Office Scotland within 12 months. You can then ask the Registrar for a copy by contacting the General Register Office at: New Register House, Edinburgh, EH1 3YT (tel: 0131 334 0380). You can also

use the contact form available at the General Register Office for Scotland website: <http://www.gro-scotland.gov.uk>

If the person who died was a serving member of the British armed forces, their commanding officer can also request a copy of the record.

The funeral

Funerals can be expensive and the costs will depend on the requirements. Services can vary greatly, taking account of different cultures, religions and beliefs. It is best to check where the money for the funeral will come from before finalising the arrangements; otherwise you may find that you have to cover the cost. In some cases, the funeral expenses will be covered entirely by the person's estate. In other cases, depending on the circumstances, help may be available to cover the costs (see the next section for further details).

You do not have to use the services of a funeral director but most people find it easier to have someone else make the arrangements on their behalf. You can ask the funeral director to explain the costs, give you a written estimate and explain whether you have to pay the costs before or after the funeral. The total cost will cover services such as laying out the body, use of the chapel of rest and hearse, and purchasing the coffin. It will also include any expenditure that the funeral director makes on your behalf such as inserting notices in newspapers and obtaining official documents.

Funeral payments from the Social Fund

You may be able to get help towards the cost of a funeral from the Social Fund, depending on your relationship with the person who died and any other money, other than your personal savings, that may be available to help with the costs. You can apply for a Funeral Payment if you or your partner get any of the following benefits or tax credits:

- Income Support
- income-based Jobseeker's Allowance
- income-related Employment and Support Allowance
- Pension Credit
- Housing Benefit
- Council Tax Benefit (or the Council Tax payer where you live gets a Second Adult Rebate because you are on a low income)
- Working Tax Credit which includes a disability or severe disability element
- Child Tax Credit at a rate higher than the family element.

To be able to get a Funeral Payment you must also be either:

- the partner of the deceased when they died
- the parent of the deceased child, or have been responsible for the deceased child (and there is no absent parent) (unless they are getting one of the above qualifying benefits or were estranged from the child at the date of death)
- the parent of a still-born child
- a close relative or close friend of the deceased (and it is reasonable for you to accept responsibility for the funeral costs)

You can claim a Funeral Payment from the date of death and up to three months after the date of the funeral. If you are waiting for a decision on a qualifying benefit or entitlement you must still claim within this time period. To apply for a Funeral Payment contact your local Jobcentre Plus office and ask for a Funeral Payment from the Social Fund Form (SF200). There is an information guide on the Funeral Payment scheme available to download from the DirectGov website (www.direct.gov.uk) and the application form for Funeral Payments (SF200) can also be downloaded from this website.

You will need to show a copy of the final invoice from the funeral director, showing a breakdown of the total costs. A Funeral Payment includes necessary burial or cremation fees, certain other specified expenses and up to £700 for any other funeral expenses, such as the funeral director's fees, the coffin or flowers. For your claim to be successful, it must have been reasonable for you rather than anyone else to take responsibility for the cost of the funeral. If there are any other funds available to pay for the funeral, this may affect your claim.

(Please note that all information relating to Funeral Payments were correct at time of writing and changes to legislation and benefits may mean that this information is no longer current)

Letting others know

As well as family, friends and carers, there are likely to be other people who should be informed of the death. A solicitor might be able to help you notify banks, creditors or other organisations. The following list might help you in deciding who you need to notify:

- GP and/or hospital
- other health professionals like dentists , community psychiatric nurse or optician
- the person's employer (you may need to arrange to collect the person's belongings or notify staff of the funeral date)
- the person's pension company
- the person's insurance company
- the person's bank
- the person's mortgage provider or housing association
- the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency
- the Passport Office
- a car insurance company (if you are insured under the deceased person's name, your insurance will become invalid)
- gas, electricity and telephone companies
- the Post Office so they can redirect the person's mail
- email providers, like Gmail or Hotmail (most accounts will be automatically closed if they are not used for a certain period)
- online networks like Facebook or Twitter

You might find it helpful to register online at The Bereavement Register (www.the-bereavement-register.org.uk). This is a free service which can help to cut down the amount of unsolicited mail that is sent to a deceased person. Local authorities are now offering a service called 'Tell Us Once' that allows someone to inform the Government just once about a death and this information will then be shared with the appropriate services and departments on your behalf. When you register the death at your local registrar's office, you can ask if this service is available and if so, many of the above departments and services can be notified on your behalf. There is more information on 'Tell Us Once',

including checking whether this service is available in your area on the DirectGov website (www.direct.gov.uk)

If this service is not available in your local authority, the Department of Work and Pensions has a Bereavement Service available via telephone who can take the details of the death, provide advice on benefits and funeral payments and help with ending benefits for someone who has died. They can be contacted on 0845 606 0265, Monday to Friday 8am to 8pm.

Media interest

Sometimes the media might take an interest in a death by suicide. Your funeral director or the police might be able to help deal with any media attention. The police might provide you with a Family Liaison Officer who you can speak to about this. It is best to check the identity of anyone who phones or comes to your door before telling them anything.

If you are asked to release a picture of the person to the press, consider this carefully before you do so: the picture could subsequently appear in other publications and on the internet, which you may find distressing.

Journalists are encouraged to report on any suicide in a sensitive and appropriate manner. For more information, you might find it useful to read the National Union of Journalists' media guidelines on reporting suicide: <http://www.nujscotland.org.uk>. The Samaritans also have media guidelines which give guidelines on how suicide should be reported sensitively across all media; these are available at www.samaritans.org/media_centre.

Money and possessions

If the deceased person has left savings, property and/or debts, then someone will need to deal with these. It is best to try and gather together all of the relevant paperwork such as:

- any will
- bank or building society books or documents
- insurance documents
- benefit order books
- mortgage statements or rent book
- savings certificates
- credit card or loan statements
- utility bills (gas, electricity, telephone).

It is also best to seek advice as soon as possible from a solicitor or advice centre. Legal costs vary depending on how much work is involved in winding up the estate. Legal Aid may be available for the costs of winding up an estate. You may also be able to get Legal Aid to cover the costs of going to court to be appointed as the executor of the will. You should not dispose of any property until you have sought legal advice. If the person has not left a will, then there are rules about how the estate should be divided among surviving relatives. Funeral expenses take priority over any other debts on the person's estate.

Benefits and allowances

If you are a widow or widower as a result of the death, then you may be entitled to receive:

- Bereavement payment – a one-off, tax-free lump sum payment of £2000 paid to the husband, wife or civil partner of someone who has died
- Widowed parent's allowance – a weekly payment made to a parent whose husband, wife or civil partner has died who has a dependent child or young person (aged 16 and under 20) and for whom they receive Child Benefit
- Bereavement allowance – a taxable weekly benefit paid to a widow, widower or civil partner for 52 weeks from the date of death

There are rules and conditions about eligibility for these, more information is available at the DirectGov website (www.direct.gov.uk) and the pack to apply for these benefits can be downloaded from the section on 'What to do after a death'. You can get advice on eligibility from your local Jobcentre Plus Office, Citizens Advice Bureau or welfare rights adviser (see 'useful contacts and resources' section) to find out if you are entitled to any payment.

If the deceased person was receiving any benefits, or if you were receiving welfare benefits for them (such as Child Benefit), you will need to notify Jobcentre Plus of the death. You should also notify the Tax Office. If you use The Bereavement Register (www.the-bereavement-register.org.uk) service or call the Department of Work and Pensions Bereavement service on 0845 606 0265 then this shouldn't be necessary. There is more information on this service on Page 12 of this booklet).

Other investigations and inquiries

There are several different organisations besides the police and Fiscal which might be involved in investigating the circumstances surrounding a suicide. The type of inquiries that may be carried out will depend very much on a person's circumstances at the time of, and leading up to, their death. As a result, **some of this section may not be relevant in your own case.**

You may not always be told that an inquiry is taking place, or given copies of reports that are produced.

The NHS

NHS Boards usually carry out some form of review in any case where someone who has been receiving treatment, either as an in-patient or as an out-patient, has died and suicide is the most likely cause. These reviews are usually referred to as critical incident reviews or suicide reviews. The main aim of these reviews is to look at the care and treatment the person was receiving prior to his or her death and to see if any lessons can be learned in order to help reduce the risk of future suicides. These reviews are not fault finding investigations.

At the moment, there is considerable variation in the way that NHS Boards deal with reviews. Healthcare Improvement Scotland (www.healthcareimprovementscotland.org) has developed a Scotland Suicide Reporting System promote good practice advice for NHS Boards undertaking suicide/critical incident reviews and help ensure that lessons learnt can be shared throughout the NHS in Scotland to improve services for those at risk. You can contact the Suicide Reporting Team for more information and advice at hcis.SuicideReviewTeam@nhs.net or on 0131 623 4281.

The clinical staff involved in the care of someone who has died by suicide will usually speak with the relatives and close carers of the person concerned. It is usually very helpful to the suicide review to have information from relatives who were in close contact with the person who has died.

Healthcare Improvement Scotland may refer individual cases to the Mental Welfare Commission if it believes further investigation should be considered.

The Mental Welfare Commission

The Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland (MWC) is an independent organisation set up by Parliament. It works to safeguard the rights and welfare of people with mental disorder. ('Mental disorder' covers mental illness, personality disorder, learning disability and dementia.) More information is available from their website: www.mwscot.org.uk

The MWC will not routinely look into the care and treatment of people who die by suicide. They can investigate if there appears to be any abuse, neglect or "deficiency of care". Sometimes, the MWC investigates a death by suicide if they think the care might have been poor. The MWC will not investigate if there is to be an FAI.

Part 2. The Grieving Process

What follows is an attempt to outline some common reactions to losing someone to suicide. You might recognise some of them, or you might find that your reactions are totally different. Everyone grieves differently: there is no correct response.

You may feel low and unable to cope. You might find it very difficult to sleep, eat or feel motivated to do anything. You may even have suicidal thoughts yourself. If you do, it is important that you speak to someone about it. Talk to someone you trust or phone Breathing Space on 0800 83 85 87 or Samaritans on 08457 90 90 90. **If you are having serious thoughts about suicide, and you have a plan and the means to carry it out: call 999 right now.**

Immediate responses

Nothing can truly prepare you for the news that someone you love or care for has taken their own life. Whether someone else broke the news to you, or you had the uniquely traumatic experience of discovering the body, shock and disbelief are often the immediate responses to suicide. The emotions that you experience can be powerful, frightening and overwhelming.

You may feel that the person's death has come out of the blue with no warning. Even in cases where someone has previously told you that they were feeling depressed, or had made suicide attempts before, their death may still come as a shock.

In other cases, people may feel that they had 'seen it coming' but been powerless to prevent it. You might have had a loved one go missing and known in your heart that they would not be coming back. The manner of death may be particularly hard for you to accept. Whatever the circumstances, finding out about a suicide is a deeply painful experience..

The big question – why?

One of the first things that you might ask yourself, or others might ask you, is "Why did they do it?". Even if the person left a note, it might not give you all the answers. Notes are generally written at a time when the person was extremely distressed and they may not properly express how the person was feeling at the time. It can be very hard to accept, but you will probably never know for sure.

Stigma and shame

You may find yourself wondering what to tell people – should you say that the cause of death was suicide? Some people find it helpful to be open about this, for example at the funeral, but it can be a difficult decision. Sadly, there is still an element of stigma which surrounds suicide and mental health problems. This can lead to misunderstanding and unhelpful attitudes in others, which can make things even more difficult for people affected by the death. Many people simply do not know much about suicide, although it is a major public health issue. For example, many people are unaware that suicide is a leading cause of death in Scotland. There are initiatives ongoing in Scotland to try to tackle this issue, such as the 'see me' anti-stigma campaign which SAMH manages. To learn more about the 'see me' campaign go to www.seemescotland.org.

Ultimately, only you can decide what to tell people. You may wish to tell only the people closest to you, and others who 'need to know'. Or you may decide to tell anyone who asks. Bear in mind that sometimes people will speculate about what happened and it is not always possible to keep things hidden.

Although you will probably find that most people will be supportive, you may be disappointed by the way that others react. Some people may be afraid or feel helpless; they might not know what to say to you or be worried that they will upset you, or they might avoid talking about it at all. Try to accept that this might happen and focus on coping with your own feelings without dwelling on what others think or say.

“Before Darryn died, the phone never stopped ringing, but afterwards it was the opposite. People who I thought were friends cut contact and said things that made me feel as if I was being judged as a parent. They didn’t realise that their comments were really, really hurtful. I felt rejected and isolated which made me retreat for a period of time. But online support groups and organisations made me realise that I wasn’t alone and that the feelings I was having were normal.” **Caroline**

Children affected by suicide

Depending on the circumstances, and the age and maturity of children affected by suicide, it is often best simply to be truthful about what happened and how it is affecting you, without going into too much detail. Avoid using phrases like ‘gone to sleep’ or ‘gone to a better place’, as this can be confusing for them. Children should be encouraged to talk about their feelings and not to bottle things up. Reading stories and drawing can help children express emotions and understand some difficult issues. Children who experience loss and grief can act differently from adults and may communicate their feelings in lots of ways.

The UK childhood bereavement charity Winston’s Wish have created some guidelines on supporting a child when someone they care about has died by suicide. They recommend five steps when talking to a child about a death by suicide. These steps can take place over the course of minutes, hours, weeks or even years depending on the age of your child and their understanding of the situation.

There is no one set way to have this conversation and it will take time and care. It can be helpful to give the child a chance to say how they are feeling and allow you to respond to their need for information at different times. The five steps are as follows:

Stage 1 – explaining that the person has died

This is the stage where you gently and simply say that someone has died
“I have something really sad to tell you. Mum died today”

Stage 2 – giving simple details about how they have died

This is an opportunity to explain in general how the person died. It allows you to tell part of the story honestly but without having to give details which you feel might be too much at this time. Remember to check with the child what they have understood and if they have questions or want more information.

Stage 3 – saying that the person chose to take their own life

At this stage you will need to explain that the person has killed themselves. The explanation will be different in each situation because each suicide is individual but explaining that the person has chosen to end their life is important. After your explanation, you might also want to check again if the child has understood what you have said and if they have any questions.

Stage 4 – providing a more detailed description of how the person died

This is the stage where you need to explain the method of suicide. This is probably the part people are most worried about but if the child is told gently, simply and factually it can help them to better understand what has happened. It is important the child feels informed by what you have told them but not too frightened. They should also be able to ask you for any more information if they need it.

Stage 5 – explaining possible reasons why the person has killed themselves

Most family members will ask the question ‘Why’ and will wonder why they didn’t see things were so wrong or whether they could have done more to prevent the person from dying by suicide. If you know some of the reasons why the person has taken their own life it might be helpful to share these with your child. It will be important that the child knows that nothing they have done or said (or have not done and said) made this happen.

If it is appropriate you might want to reassure the child at this time that the person who has died loved them and cared about them very much. Conversations like these will be emotional and difficult for everyone but afterwards you may feel relieved that you have been able to be honest with your child and know that they can trust you if they have difficult questions to ask later.

More information on this process and advice on your own situation are available from the Winston's Wish helpline (see the Useful Contacts section later in this booklet).

Children are likely to need reassurance that they are not to blame in any way for the death, that people still love and care for them, and that it doesn't mean that other people in their life will die unexpectedly. If it is too difficult for you to support or reassure children while you are grieving, try to get other people to help you. Let the school or any groups the child is part of know what has happened, so that they can be supportive.

"I played the game of Jenga with my young daughter to help her understand what happened when her father died. We built a tower of wooden blocks, and slowly, as we recognised a difficulty for her daddy, we pulled a block out and placed it on top of the tower. After these difficulties began to pile up, the tower became unsteady and eventually tumbled. This showed her that there was never just one event that caused her daddy to take his own life, but that there were a number of unresolved issues and pressures which finally became unbearable for him." **Teresa**

Your emotions

Experiencing bereavement by suicide will mean dealing with sometimes conflicting emotions, such as:

Guilt

You may feel that you should have seen it coming and that you should have done something to prevent the person's suicide, or perhaps that something you did or said was partly to blame. This is a very common reaction, but no matter what happened, **it is not your fault**. People may go to great lengths to hide their thoughts of suicide from their loved ones. Even if you suspected that the person was deeply depressed, it is often extremely difficult to convince people to get help, or to get help on their behalf.

The reality is that you did what you thought was best at the time and that is all that can be expected of you. You cannot take complete responsibility for anyone else's life. Nor can you know exactly how someone is thinking or feeling.

Perhaps you feel guilty because you may feel partly relieved that the person has gone and that you don't have to worry about them anymore. This is another common reaction, particularly when you have spent a long time caring for, and worrying about, someone who has been very unwell.

Anger

The fact that someone has 'chosen' to end their life may make you feel very angry. You may ask yourself, 'How could they do this to me/us?'. You might want someone to direct your feelings towards or to blame. This may be the person you have lost, or it may be others who were involved with them. Coping with anger can be very difficult and you may need the help of others to work through this (see 'Coping strategies' later in this section).

Confusion and helplessness

You may feel very confused and unable to concentrate. It can be very hard to make decisions when you are struggling to get through days which may be filled with exhausting and overwhelming emotions. Some people talk of a sense of helplessness – that things are completely out of their control, and that they don't know how to help others who are also grieving.

Isolation

You might feel that no-one understands what you are going through and that you are on your own. People react differently to loss, even within close families. Some people may cope by talking about their feelings, while others may prefer not to talk about things and feel that what they need is to 'put it behind them and get on with life'. This may lead to disagreements. It is worth recognising that although some people may not want to talk about their loss initially, this may change as time goes on.

Everyone grieves in different ways and at different times. Triggers that can set off tears and immense feelings of sadness for one person will not necessarily do the same for another. This does not mean they don't care: it just means that they are grieving differently.

Coping strategies

Not all of these suggestions will work for you, but these are some things that people who have lost someone to suicide have found helpful.

It is essential that you do not feel that you have to cope alone. You might turn to family or friends, or you may find other sources of comfort, such as spiritual beliefs. In some cases, you may find it easier to speak to people out with your family or friends. The last section of this booklet gives details of organisations that provide bereavement counselling or local support groups: your GP can also refer you to a counsellor.

Support groups offer you the opportunity to meet other people who have been bereaved and to talk through your feelings in a supportive environment. There are some groups in Scotland specifically for people who have been bereaved as a result of suicide: see the 'Useful contacts and resources' section at the end of this booklet.

"When the police came to tell me my son was dead I thought I would die. How can you describe the feeling of loss? The anger, years of trying to get the right help and support then all of a sudden it was too late. I was lucky I had great family and friends who supported and encouraged me through the first months, which was just as well as there wasn't much support from anywhere else. I do hope things have changed over the years. Doing something, getting together with other people, finding ways of helping others are all great healers. We don't need to do earth shattering things to make a difference, and that's how I got over my grief." Isabel

Many employers offer Employee Assistance Programmes, which can arrange telephone or face-to-face access to counselling: if you are working, it may be worth asking your manager or HR department whether this is available.

Some people might find it helpful to read self-help books or poetry, perhaps written by others who have had a similar experience (see 'Helpful books' section at the end of this booklet). Others may find an outlet for their emotions by writing about how they feel or keeping a diary.

Bereavement can affect your health, physically and mentally. It is important to take care of yourself – try to eat a balanced diet, get sleep and rest. You might be tempted to use alcohol or other substances to numb your feelings, but this is not a solution, and may well make things worse.

When you are ready, it can help to commit some time to try and focus on things which help to take your mind off your bereavement, such as hobbies or sporting and leisure activities like swimming, cycling or running. Perhaps you could try something new, like meditation or yoga, which might help you to relax.

Some people find it helpful to set up a web page that can be dedicated to the person who has died. It enables friends/family to have input and can often help with the healing process. One such company is www.gonetoosoon.org but there are many others.

Moving Forward

Inevitably, there will be difficult times such as the anniversary of the death, birthdays or family events. It might help to plan ahead for these times. It might help to talk through your feelings with someone, or do something in remembrance on significant days like visiting a place that has a special memory or planting a shrub or flower. Sometimes, the anticipation of the event can be worse than the actual day itself.

You will undoubtedly hear clichés like ‘time is a great healer’. Although you may not initially accept this, most people find that as they work through their emotions, it becomes easier to adjust to living with their loss. For every person who has died as a result of suicide, there are many others who have somehow survived losing them. Learning to accept that the person has gone doesn’t mean you are forgetting that they played an important role in your life, and that they always will.

“It’s really good to be able to get together with other people and talk about the people you’ve lost and what they meant to you, and to celebrate their lives. It is by having such contacts now that I feel able to get that information out to others who may be in that same place of despair and isolation.” **Caroline**

Part 3. Useful contacts and resources

Mental health information

If you have any queries or comments about this booklet or would like information or advice about mental health issues, please contact:

SAMH:

By phone: 0800 917 3466
or 0141 530 1000

By email: info@samh.org.uk

By post: Brunswick House, 51 Wilson Street, Glasgow, G1 1UZ

Website: www.samh.org.uk

For information or advice about depression, contact:

Action on Depression:

By phone: 0808 802 2020 or
0131 467 3050

By email:
info@actionondepression.org.uk

By post: 11 Alva Street,
Edinburgh EH2 4PH

Website:
www.actionondepression.org.uk

Support

Breathing Space is a free and confidential phone line service for anyone who is experiencing low mood, anxiety or depression, or who is in need of someone to talk to or unusually worried. Contact Breathing Space:

By phone: 0800 83 85 87
(Mon-Thurs 6pm-2am,
Fri 6pm-Mon 6am)

Website:
www.breathingspacescotland.org.uk

Samaritans provide confidential emotional support 24 hours a day, 365 days a year for people who are feeling distressed or need to talk to someone. You can contact them:

By phone: 08457 90 90 90

By email: jo@samaritans.org

By post: Chris, PO Box 90 90,
Stirling FK8 2SA

Website: www.samaritans.org.uk

Childline is a free 24 hour helpline. Children and young people can call and talk to a Childline counsellor about any problem, including coping with bereavement. You can contact them:

By phone: 0800 11 11

Website: www.childline.org

Child Bereavement Charity works with families and children when a child dies or experiences bereavement

By phone: 01494 568900

By email:

support@childbereavement.org.uk

By post: The Saunderton Estate, Wycombe Road, Saunderton, Buckinghamshire, HP14 4BF

Website: www.childbereavement.org.uk

Winston's Wish works with children who have been bereaved. Contact them:

By phone: 08452 03 04 05

By email: info@winstonswish.org.uk

By post: Westmoreland House, 80-86 Bath Road, Cheltenham, Gloucestershire GL53 7JT

Website: www.winstonswish.org.uk

Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide

offers emotional and practical support to people bereaved by suicide. You can contact them:

By phone: 0844 561 6855 (9am-9pm)

By post: The Flamsteed Centre, Albert Street, Ilkeston, Derbyshire DE7 6GU

Website: www.uk-sobs.org.uk

PAPYRUS is a national UK charity dedicated to the prevention of youth suicide. Their helpline **HOPELineUK** offers practical advice, information and non-judgemental support from trained professionals to children, teenagers and anyone up to the age of 35 who is worried about themselves or who is concerned about a young person they know who may be at risk of suicide. Contact them:

By phone: 0800 068 4141

(Mon-Fri 10am-5pm, 7pm-10pm; Sat-Sun 2pm-5pm)

Website: www.papyrus-uk.org

The **Compassionate Friends** is an organisation of bereaved parents and their families offering support to others who have experienced the death of a child. You can contact them:

By phone: 0845 123 2304

(10am-4pm, 7.00pm-10.00pm)

By email: helpline@tcf.org.uk

By post: 53 North Street, Bristol BS3 1EN

Website: www.tcf.org.uk

Cruse Bereavement Care Scotland offers free bereavement care and support through one-to-one counselling or local support groups. To find out about the availability of services in your area, contact the National Office:

By phone: 0845 600 2227

By email: info@crusescotland.org.uk

By post: Cruse Bereavement Care Scotland, Riverview House, Friarton Road, Perth PH2 8DF

Website: www.crusescotland.org.uk

PETAL (People Experiencing Trauma and Loss) provides practical and emotional support to those affected by murder or suicide. Contact them:

By phone: 01698 324502

Website: www.petalsupport.com

Email: info@petalsupport.com

Widowed by Suicide aims to reduce the isolation felt by those who have lost their life partner through suicide.

Email:

Jacqui@widowedbysuicide.org.uk

Website:

www.widowedbysuicide.org.uk

Scottish Government initiatives

Choose Life is a 10-year strategy and action plan aimed at reducing suicide in Scotland by 20% by 2013. It is funded by the Scottish Government and hosted by NHS Health Scotland. Most local authorities in Scotland have a suicide prevention action plan and a local co-ordinator to implement it. Find out more at: www.chooselife.net/

The **'see me'** campaign was launched in October 2002 to challenge stigma and discrimination around mental ill-health in Scotland. Find out more at: www.seemescotland.org/

The **Scottish Recovery Network** raises awareness of recovery from mental health problems. Find out more at: www.scottishrecovery.net

Legal advice

If you need a solicitor, you can contact the **Law Society of Scotland:**

By phone: 0131 226 7411

By email: lawscot@lawscot.org.uk

By post: 26 Drumsheugh Gardens, Edinburgh EH3 7YR

Website: www.lawscot.org.uk

Welfare benefits

For advice on welfare benefits, contact: **Citizens Advice Bureau** (CAB). You will find your local branch in your phonebook or contact them:

By phone: 0844 848 9600

Website: www.cas.org.uk

Money Advice Scotland can provide details of your local welfare rights projects:

By phone: 0141 572 0237

Website:

www.moneyadvicescotland.org.uk

Other advice

You can contact the **Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland** (MWC):

By phone: 0131 313 8777

User and carer advice line:

0800 389 6809

By email: enquiries@mwscot.org.uk

By post: Thistle House, 91 Haymarket Terrace, Edinburgh EH12 5HE

Website: www.mwscot.org.uk

You can contact the **Care Inspectorate** at their national headquarters:

By phone: 0845 600 9527

By email:

enquiries@careinspectorate.com

By post: Compass House, 11 Riverside, Dundee DD1 4NY

Website: www.careinspectorate.com

Helpful books

- No Time to Say Goodbye: Surviving the Suicide of a Loved One, Carla Fine, Main Street Books, 1999, ISBN: 0385485514
- All in the End is Harvest: An Anthology of Poetry for Those Who Grieve, Agnes Whitaker, Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd, ISBN: 0232516243
- A Special Scar: The Experiences of People Bereaved by Suicide, Alison Wertheimer, Routledge, 2001, ISBN: 0415220270
- Healing After the Suicide of a Relative, Ann Smolin, Simon & Schuster Inc, 1993, ISBN: 0671796607
- Bathed in Blue, Rona Ross, Chipmunka, 2008, ISBN: 9781847477460
- Beyond the Rough Rock: Supporting a Child who has been Bereaved through Suicide. Available from Winston's Wish www.winstonswish.org.uk

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Further copies of this booklet can be obtained by contacting the SAMH Information Service on 0800 917 3466 or can be downloaded from the SAMH website at www.samh.org.uk

The information contained in this booklet is believed, but not warranted, to be accurate as at the date of publication. If you have any queries as to how any of this information may apply in your own particular circumstances, seek advice from a solicitor or other appropriate adviser.

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If you are feeling overwhelmed by problems or are feeling suicidal, don't hide it. Talk to someone you trust or phone Breathing Space on 0800 83 85 87 or Samaritans on 08457 90 90 90. **If you are having serious thoughts about suicide, and you have a plan and the means to carry it out: call 999 right now.**

