

The Long-Term Impact of a Suicide Loss

When someone significant in your life dies by suicide, it is important to be gentle with yourself long after the loss, even well beyond the first year.

After the First Year

Suicide loss is often complex and traumatic. It is usually unexpected and can be violent in nature. This type of loss can activate post-trauma survival reactions in addition to emotions associated with non-traumatic grief and mourning. These feelings and reactions take time to unpack.

It is not uncommon for the trauma associated with a suicide loss to occupy a survivor's thoughts and reactions to the exclusion of more "normal" grief and mourning reactions.

Integration of the Loss

Dr. John Jordan identifies seven tasks of psychological integration of the loss that are common (although not meant to be prescriptive) for suicide loss survivors.¹ Many of these take place months or years after a loss.

1. **Containment of the Trauma and Restoration of a Sense of Psychological Safety and Control:** You may feel like the world became a very unsafe and unpredictable place. This is an understandable reaction after a suicide loss. It is not uncommon to experience a fear of what might happen next.
2. **Self-Dosing – Creation of Psychological Sanctuary and Relief from the Pain:** It may take time before you give yourself permission to do something that takes your mind off the pain – even momentarily – of your loss. It is important to find respites. And it is not a betrayal to your special person.
3. **Repair of the Mourner's Assumptive World:** It takes time to consider what you assumed to be true about this world and what you may now hold true.
4. **Development of Social Management Skills:** You may sense that some people are uncomfortable with you. They may unintentionally say insensitive things. It is okay to not have the patience or emotional energy to engage with some people. You may find that even years later there will be certain times you need to limit your exposure to some people. (Continued on next page)

Resources

- Loss Support Groups in Ohio
(Check with the facilitator if there are longer term survivors in their group)
<https://www.ohiospf.org/postvention/support-group/>
- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention: Long-Term Survivors of Suicide Loss Summit
<https://afsp.org/long-term-survivors-of-suicide-loss-summit/>
- Alliance of Hope Emotions and Challenges: Trauma
<https://allianceofhope.org/emotions-and-challenges/trauma/>

Integration of the Loss (continued)

- 5. Repair of the Relationship with the Deceased:** Some survivors may feel anger toward the person that died by suicide. Some survivors may feel betrayed by the person that died. These feelings may not surface right away, and it may take time to acknowledge, process, and resolve these feelings. Be patient with yourself.
- 6. Development of a Durable Biography of the Deceased:** It may take time before a survivor can find peace or joy in special memories. A suicide loss can have a way of tainting memories making it difficult to view the person's life apart from the way they died. Go at your own pace. And make a mental note when a memory warms your heart. This is a step towards integrating the loss into your life.
- 7. Reinvestment in Living:** Some survivors have difficulty finding meaning in their life after the suicide loss of someone special. Try new things and remember that what brings you peace for one season may not be helpful further down the road. Give yourself the freedom to change your mind.

What to Know for the Long-Term

Long-term support is essential. What that support looks like will vary from person to person. It is important to find what works for you. Here are some things to consider:

- Think in terms of integration of the loss rather than closure or moving on. Your person will always be special to you.
- There may be times you feel ambushed by grief especially around special occasions such as holidays, weddings, and births. Give yourself permission to feel whatever you are feeling. Remember that your feelings are not right or wrong. Try not to judge them.
- It may be helpful to include time to honor or remember your special person. Something as simple as a toast and mention of their name before Thanksgiving dinner can be very meaningful.
- Connecting with other longer-term loss survivors may create a much-needed sense of normalcy.
- It is never too late to see a therapist. We grieve in our own unique way and time. Openly talking about your special person, their life, and their death, with a therapist can be very helpful.

Integrating this complex loss into your life is ongoing. If you are gentle with yourself and seek support from patient and caring friends and professionals, you will likely find the pain softens with time.

Reference

- 1 Jordan, J.R. Lessons learned: Forty years of clinical work with suicide loss survivors. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, 766. Accessed November 21, 2024. <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychology/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00766/full>

ABOUT

OHIO SUICIDE PREVENTION FOUNDATION

Ohio Suicide Prevention Foundation (OSPF) educates, advocates for, and builds connections and support for individuals, families, and communities to prevent suicide.



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