

**I've lost a loved one to suicide.
What do I do now?**

Get support and find resources to help.



*Maine Center for Disease
Control and Prevention*

*An Office of the
Department of Health and Human Services*

Paul R. LePage, Governor

Mary C. Mayhew, Commissioner

Dear Friend,

We understand. *It may be hard to believe, but you are not alone. We know the incredibly painful and challenging time you are going through. Many of us have been there too.*

The loss of someone close to you by suicide is like no other. *It is usually sudden, unexpected and shocking. The grief you must work through is complicated and may feel overwhelming at times.*

As a suicide survivor, *you will experience a rollercoaster of emotions including confusion, hurt, anger, guilt and others unique to those who have experienced a loss like yours. You may never feel fully healed or free of grief. Over time, your pain will lessen and you will begin to continue your daily life.*

Remember—grief affects everyone differently. *People deal with loss differently and on their own timeline. There is no timeline for grief or when to accept that someone is really gone. Some survivors want to continue their routine, while others need a lot of time alone. **Be kind to yourself.***

*Survivors often describe the first year as being the most difficult as they go through a “**year of firsts.**” Nothing can fully prepare you for the first holiday, birthday, and special occasion. During this year, allow yourself to grieve and accept support from others. It is not the time to make any big life changes or decisions.*

It is important to accept that no one is responsible for another’s choice to end their life.

This booklet *was created with the help of survivors of suicide who shared what they found helpful and information they wish they had known. We hope this booklet helps you through the first few weeks and months of your journey.*

There is hope.

Fellow Survivors

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We express our gratitude to a caring group of professionals and survivors for their thoughtful assistance and contributions during the creation of this booklet.

For an online version of this booklet:
www.maine.gov/suicide

I'VE LOST A LOVED ONE TO SUICIDE...WHAT DO I DO NOW?

First, take a deep breath. You are not alone. It may seem impossible, but you can move through this. Be open to asking for and/or accepting support from others. It's ok if you just need someone to lean on.



Ask for help.

Getting anything done may feel impossible. Reach out to friends, family and others for help with tasks like fixing meals, providing daycare, rides, making phone calls, mowing the lawn, feeding or walking the pets.



What to say.

You will be asked many questions by family, friends, even strangers. Think about what you are feeling and what you want to share.

Remember:

It is up to you as to when, how much and with whom you share details.

Saying the word suicide and using your loved one's name allows friends and families who also lost someone to suicide to provide support from their own personal experiences.



An obituary – If you choose to have one.

It is up to you and your family to have or not have an obituary. Writing an obituary for someone who died unexpectedly is so hard; for a suicide death it can be harder. Some families choose not to share the cause of death. This is a very personal decision. Discuss your options with close friends, clergy, or the funeral director. Be aware that many newspapers charge for an obituary. For help on what to write visit: <http://theconnectprogram.org/survivors/surviving-suicide-loss/survivor-resources/obituaries>

✓ **Memorial and Funeral Service Decisions**

A memorial or funeral service are ways to help understand and accept what happened. Family, friends and community members come together for support as they begin accepting the loss.

Remember

A memorial or funeral is not mandatory. You can decide to not have a service or choose to do something private.

If you choose to have a service, focus on the life of your loved one. You can work with a clergy person about what will be said. If you decide not to have a memorial, know that others may decide to host their own. For more information: <http://www.sprc.org/sites/sprc.org/files/library/aftersuicide.pdf>

✓ **Financial decisions to make.** One of the cold realities during this time is thinking about the expenses involved. **It is possible to honor your loved one and be mindful of a budget.** You may want to call your town office for information about General Assistance that may be available to cover some of the costs. General Assistance is based on a person's income.

The loss of a spouse, child, or partner may change your role in how household finances are managed. Consider getting help from a family member or friend, or meet with a financial or legal advisor. For more information read "Surviving a suicide loss: A Financial Guide": <https://www.afsp.org/coping-with-suicide-loss/resources/a-financial-guide>

✓ **Contact your workplace.** Some people feel a sense of safety in a daily routine, while others find it impossible to focus on work. Talk with your boss about what you need. Sharing that you have an urgent family emergency is sufficient.

GRIEF AFTER A SUICIDE...AM I “NORMAL” ?

Everyone reacts differently to stressful events, including losing a loved one to suicide.

It is normal to

- Feel angry, guilty, sad, anxious, scared, overwhelmed, exhausted, confused, afraid, helpless, and many more emotions.
- Have a change in sleep patterns and appetite, have headaches, etc.
- Want to be alone for a while.
- Feel like you can't shut off your brain. Wonder what happened, thinking “what if?” and replaying the events in your mind.

What to watch for

- Changes in behaviors like alcohol use and isolation.
- Stress in relationships: spouse, partner, friends, family members.
- Concern that you are not feeling any better over time.
- Trouble doing daily functions.
- Feeling unable to take care of yourself or your family.

Things that helped other survivors

- Going to grief counseling or joining a grief support group.
- Trying to do small tasks daily like making a bed, taking a walk, working in the garden.
- Cutting down on junk food and alcohol. Trying to eat fruits and veggies, and drinking plenty of water.
- Listening to positive music.

“Death by suicide is different. If you lose somebody to cancer or lose somebody to suicide, you still lost somebody...to understand that you're allowed to grieve that way as well, it's almost as if you give yourself permission to go to the acceptance level...just because it's a suicide death, doesn't mean it's not a death.”

If you, or someone you know, is in crisis, call the
Maine Crisis Hotline, anytime 24/7 at 1-888-568-1112
National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, anytime 24/7
1-800-273-8255 (TALK)

Young people especially in a family that experiences a loss may take on guilt and blame. They wonder if they should have acted differently. It may seem they do not want to talk or be around adults. It is important for parents, counselors and others to support the youth.

What to watch for

- Drugs and alcohol use or withdrawing from usual peer groups.
- Blaming yourself.
- Drop in grades.
- Reckless behavior, fearlessness, high impulsivity.

For more information www.maine.gov/suicide/about/warning-signs.htm

What you can do

- Be **patient**. Understand their level of maturity affects their response. Make time to talk.
- Be **honest and factual**. Ask what they know about the death. Be gently persistent if they act like they do not want to talk, but do not force the conversation.
- **Listen** when they want to tell their story.
- **Reassure** the youth that he/she is **NOT responsible** for the suicide.
- **Ask** a trusted adult if you are not comfortable talking about suicide.
- **Consider** grief counseling for youth who may be at risk.

As a caregiver, you may struggle to understand the depth of the person's distress. You may not know what to say or do and worry about saying the wrong thing. These are normal thoughts and concerns.

What you can do

- **Ask** how you can help. Offer to feed the pets, mow the lawn, pick kids up after school, cook a meal or make phone calls.
- **Do not judge**, place blame or offer explanations
- **Know** that everyone grieves differently and at different times.
- **Help** establish a routine of day-to-day activities as appropriate.
- **Ensure the safety** of the survivor. Encourage grief support.

WHAT OTHER SURVIVORS EXPERIENCED

“It's the question of ‘how are you going to deal with it’. I remember trying to think back...how I dealt with it, how my mother dealt with the loss. Everybody is a little bit different. There's no sugar coating it.”

- Staying up all night. Or thinking that if you go to bed, when you get up, it will be just a terrible nightmare and your loved one is ok.
- Wanting to keep personal spaces, such as bedrooms or offices, exactly as your loved one left them.
- Wanting to keep busy and needing a goal or focused task.
- Wanting to learn about and talk about death with others. Feeling like no one will listen or understand and feeling isolated as a suicide survivor.

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- Reacting to certain things, like grocery shopping, listening to music, seeing pictures or people you didn't expect would affect you.

“I remember driving to a doctor's appointment and I'm getting there, hearing a song on the radio, burst out crying, didn't know what to do, couldn't move from where I was sitting.”

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- Feeling ready to experience life again, but feeling guilty about it.

“You get your life back, it's not the same life because it never will be. It's the new normal. You will find a way to be happy again by finding a new normal. Smiling, laughing, and feeling happy...it's ok for you to do that. It won't discredit the memory of your loved one.”

WHO CAN I CALL? WHERE ARE THE RESOURCES?

You don't need to do this alone. There are many people who understand and are able to provide you with resources to help.

- If you, or someone you know, is in crisis, call the **Maine Crisis Hotline, anytime 24/7 1-888-568-1112** or the **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, anytime 24/7 1-800-273-8255 (TALK)**

- **Grief Support Centers** by Maine county can be found at <http://www.maine.gov/suicide/survivors/index.htm>

Remember—If you choose to attend grief support counseling or a support group, it may take time to find the right fit for you or a loved one. Leave to try another. Do what feels right for you.

- **National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI Maine)** trained staff will provide information on referrals, resource materials, and supports. Call 1-800-464-5767 or visit www.namimaine.org
- In Maine, **dial 211** to connect to resources on basic needs, like transportation, cleaning services, grief counseling and other emotional services, legal assistance, financial assistance, child care, and more. All calls are confidential.

Remember—school counselors, employee assistance program, community health centers, faith community, your friends and family are available for support.

“Contacting somebody who is able to say, ‘I experienced a loss too.’ has been helpful for me. Even if that loss wasn’t by suicide

MORE RESOURCES FOR YOU

Some survivors find reading about suicide is helpful, especially in the early days of grief, when it is hard to be with others. Other survivors find it helpful to read about or talk with other suicide loss survivors. Below are links that may help. A more detailed list of resources is at: www.maine.gov/suicide

Surviving a Suicide Loss: A Resource and Healing Guide—The American Foundation on Suicide Prevention 1-888-333-2377 (AFSP) and www.asfp.org.

- How to cope after a suicide.
- Personal stories from others who have lost someone to suicide.
- Resources for survivors of suicide loss.
- Articles on bereavement.
- An extensive reading list. Click on “Coping with suicide loss.”

The Dougy Center is a national nonprofit center dedicated to providing education and opportunities to support the grieving needs of youth and their families. Resources can be ordered online. 1-866-775-5683 and www.dougy.org

- American Association of Suicidology: 1-202-237-2280 and www.suicidology.com
- Suicide Awareness Voices of Education: 1-952-946-7998 and www.save.org
- Survivors of Suicide: www.survivorsofsuicide.com
- Suicide Prevention Resource Center: 1-877-438-7772 (GET SPRC) www.sprc.org/library_resources
- Compassionate Friends: 1-877-969-0010 and www.compassionatefriends.org

I Don't Know Why—Iris Bolton

*I don't know why...
I'll never know why...
I don't like it...
I don't have to like it...*

*What I do have to do is make a choice about my living.
What I do want to do is to accept it and go on living.
The choice is mine.*

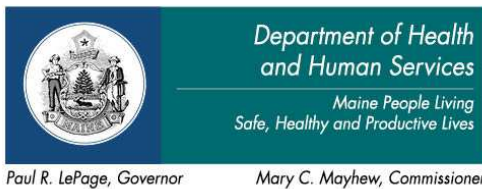
*I can go on living, valuing every moment in a way I never did before,
Or I can be destroyed by it and in turn, destroy others.*

*I thought I was immortal, that my children and my family were also,
That tragedy happened only to others...*

But I know now that life is tenuous and valuable.

*And I choose to go on living, making the most of the time I have,
Valuing my family and friends in a way I never experienced before.*

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