

Introduction

For *Survivors*— the Other Victims of Suicide

One of my students once described her cousin's suicide and its continuing effects on his family by saying, "He didn't just take his own life; he took part of theirs too."

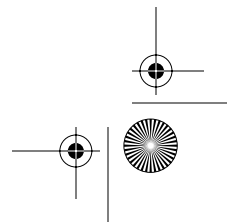
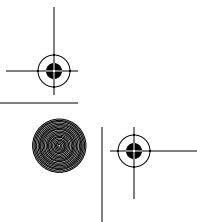
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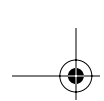


If you have experienced the suicide of a loved one, this book is for you.

Approximately a million people around the world kill themselves each year. In the United States over thirty-two thousand suicides take place annually—perhaps far more, since many suicides are disguised to look like accidents.

While suicides often take place in isolation, they are never unnoticed by others. There may be one primary victim, but as with a bomb thrown into a crowd of people, the collateral damage done to others nearby is massive. An individual suicide causes numerous other casualties—friends and family, the “other victims.” Every suicide leaves behind at least six survivors, sometimes ten or more.



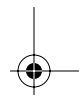


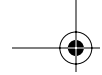
In most literature on the topic, “suicide survivor” refers to a loved one left behind by a suicide—husband, wife, parent, child, roommate, coworker, another family member, friend—not a person who has survived a suicide attempt. It is no coincidence that the term *survivor* is commonly applied to those who have experienced a horrible catastrophe of earth-shattering proportions. We speak of Holocaust survivors or of survivors of genocide, terrorism or war. So it is with those of us who survive a suicide. According to the American Psychiatric Association, “the level of stress resulting from the suicide of a loved one is ranked as catastrophic—equivalent to that of a concentration camp experience.”¹

Survivor suggests desperation, one who clings to life, but only barely. The TV show *Survivor* created an artificial environment in which a group of people was stranded in a remote location to fend for themselves. But their actual survival was never really in doubt; after all, there were camera crews, directors and production assistants on hand to chronicle their everyday experiences. Not so with the survivors of a true catastrophe, like a shipwreck or plane crash. These survivors do not have any guarantee of survival. Their lives hang in the balance. They may have survived an initial life-threatening crisis, but they face an ongoing, day-to-day challenge of survival with no assurance of safety, rescue or recovery.

Such is the case for survivors of suicide. We have experienced a trauma on par psychologically with the experience of soldiers in combat. In the aftermath, we simply don’t know if we can endure the pain and anguish. Because death has struck so close to home, life itself seems uncertain. We don’t know if we can go on from day to day. We wonder if we will be consumed by the same despair that claimed our loved one. At the very least, we know that our life will never be the same. If we go on living, we will do so as people who see the world very differently.

Shortly after my father’s suicide, I purchased a dozen books on the topic. Most sat on my shelf unread for months: I discovered that I was unable to bring myself to read them. Many times I would pick one up





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and attempt to read a few pages, only to abandon it when tears clouded my vision.

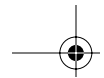
If this is your experience as well, that's fine. You certainly do not need to read this book straight through from cover to cover. In fact, you may not be able to. Read only what you can handle. Feel free to skip around and go directly to chapters that you think may be helpful to you. The chapters in the first part of the book deal more directly with the immediate grief experience, whereas the second part attempts to answer the haunting questions that suicides present. The third section offers further reflection on living one's life following a suicide.

Some things I read early in my own grieving made no sense to me at the time. They seemed too trite, like simplistic pat answers. My emotions were probably too raw then, my grief too fresh. Now that some time has passed, things make a little more sense. So if some of my observations are of no help to you right now, I apologize in advance and pray that I have not added to your grief. I do not pretend to offer the authoritative word on this topic, but I hope this book can be a companion through your experience.

I grew up in Minnesota, a state known for frigid winters and heavy snowfall. The wind-chill factor falls so far below zero that merely taking a breath brings sharp pain to your lungs and makes your nostrils freeze up. I remember childhood blizzards when I looked out the window and couldn't even see the end of the driveway. The dark skies, icy streets and arctic winds made it nearly impossible to travel anywhere or even to see where to go. These storms are dangerous. Without proper protection, people caught outside can die.

But eventually the storms subside, leaving an altered landscape. Familiar landmarks have disappeared under a cover of crystal white. It can be hazardous to venture outdoors after a new snow. Many slip and fall on the ice, breaking hips or wrists. Every year some people have heart attacks while shoveling their driveways. Even walking through the snow can be risky. If the top layer of the snow is crusted over with ice, the surface appears deceptively solid. But with one





misplaced step, your leg can break through the crust and sink up to your thigh.

Soon enough, however, shovels and snowblowers emerge, and gradually the sidewalks reappear, marked by the bootprints of those who clear new paths. It's always easier to walk through snowdrifts if you place your feet in the footsteps of those who trudged through earlier.

Survivors of suicide can feel as if they are caught in a winter storm of epic proportions. The road ahead looks bleak and daunting. It may not seem to lead anywhere, or you may seem to be going in circles. You may feel as if you are frozen in place. You may think that you'll die. But wherever you are on the journey, know that the path you tread is one that others have trod. I hope this book provides you with some protection in the storm, that it will guard your heart and soul during a time of terrible agony. May it provide you with some tracks to follow to make your way through.

