

# Survivors of Suicide

*A handbook for  
those left behind*

# Survivors of Suicide

This guide was designed by the Sedgwick County Suicide Prevention Coalition. Our intent is to provide you with some initial resources in this most difficult time. Please know that while this is likely the most difficult thing you will ever face, you are not alone. There are others who are here to help you now and in the future. We sincerely hope you find this handbook helpful and that you will access some of the suggested resources.

## About the Sedgwick County Suicide Prevention Coalition

The Sedgwick County Suicide Prevention Coalition is made up of individuals who have an interest in and desire to help reduce the number of suicide deaths in Sedgwick County. The coalition is active in the community and hosts several events during the year to help increase awareness of suicide with the ultimate goal of prevention. The Board of Sedgwick County Commissioners continues to support the work and efforts of the coalition.

We encourage you to review this handbook several times because you may find it hard to stay focused during the following days and weeks. Again, remember you are not alone.

The coalition would like to extend a note of gratitude and appreciation to Mr. Dave Clark and his wife Luanna. They have openly shared their personal story of loss and their experiences to help those who are now facing what they have faced. Their support and direction, along with the Compassionate Friends Support Group, have been invaluable.

# Letter of Introduction

We write to you as fellow survivors who have lost loved ones and friends to suicide. We're Kansans. People like you. Some of us are recent survivors, others lost loved ones a few years ago, and still others have been survivors for decades. Each of us has struggled in our own way with the pain and complexity of suicide loss.

"Death by suicide is not a gentle deathbed gathering; it rips apart lives and beliefs, and sets its survivors on a prolonged and devastating journey." This quote by Kay Redfield Jamison in her book "Night Falls Fast" sheds light on the painful path traveled by those of us who have lost a loved one by suicide. It is a path of compounded pain: the terrible loss of a vital life, the public shame and private second-guessing, amplified feelings of guilt and anger.

"Survivors of Suicide" is a term used for those coping with the suicide death of a family member, friend, co-worker or neighbor. Coping with this loss is not an orderly progression. Somehow we stumble and move forward, and when we risk a look back, we see the many small wonders that marked our path: A friend reaching out with no pretention of explanation or expectation that this pain can be fixed, our faith even as we struggle with difficult questions, and time - a bit of meaning and new purpose going forward.

When we stand together and express our emotions, we begin to heal. When we come together and talk, we are less lonely. We hear our own questions and concerns voiced aloud by others and feel a sense of comfort that someone understands. The power of our painful thoughts is diminished when spoken and shared.

You are not alone. There are resources and people to support you. There is no universal time frame for healing, but you will move forward from the place where you are now. As you travel the painful path of suicide loss, please allow us to join you on this difficult journey.

Kevin Bomhoff

Survivor  
Member, Sedgwick County Suicide Prevention Coalition

# Know That You Are Not Alone

Each year more than 41,000 people in the United States die by suicide. In Sedgwick County alone there are roughly 80 suicides per year. The devastated family and friends left behind are known as "survivors." In fact, research shows that during the course of our lifetime 85 percent of us will lose someone we care about to suicide. That means that there are millions of survivors who, like you, are trying to cope with this heartbreaking loss.

# Support is Important

Suicide support groups are an immeasurable help to survivors. They are a place to receive emotional support, and learn from other suicide survivors.

*Survivors often struggle to make sense of the range of emotions they experience such as:*

- **Shock** is a common immediate reaction. You may feel numb or disoriented, and may have trouble concentrating.
- **Anger** is a natural part of the grieving process, but survivors of suicide are far more susceptible to it – anger toward the deceased, another family member, a therapist, yourself or a higher power.
- **Relief** particularly if the suicide followed a long and difficult mental or physical illness.
- **Guilt** including thinking, "If only I had ..." Guilt comes from a mistaken belief that we could have or should have prevented the death, or from regret over irreconciled aspects of the relationship. In truth, we all do the best we can. You are not responsible for your loved one's suicide in any way, shape or form.
- **Sadness** once the "reactive" emotions have either passed or become manageable, the basic sadness that accompanies any loss moves to the forefront. This may be felt more acutely when confronted with reminders or special occasions. As we gradually learn to accept our loss and embrace happy memories of our lost loved one, we make room in our hearts for happiness to re-enter.
- **Denial** is the refusal to accept reality or fact, acting as if a painful event did not exist. This is considered a defense mechanism.
- **Depression** may include disturbed sleep, loss of appetite, intense sadness and lack of energy.
- **Acceptance** is a survivor's goal. To accept this tragic event as something that could not have been prevented and cannot be changed. Only with acceptance, can you move on with your life.

# Support Groups in Sedgwick County

*Survivors of Suicide Loss Day* is sponsored by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and is held every year on the Saturday before Thanksgiving. This day of remembrance provides an opportunity for those who have lost someone to suicide to gather together with other survivors for support, healing, information and empowerment. Please visit [www.afsp.org/survivorday](http://www.afsp.org/survivorday) for more information.

## Good Grief of Kansas Inc.

Suicide Survivors Support Group  
2622 W. Central, Suite B #112  
Wichita, KS 67203  
316-612-0700 for information on meeting times and location.

*Good Grief of Kansas provides this unique support group that focuses on the needs of survivors of suicide as they are people who actually understand what another suicide survivor is experiencing.*

## Compassionate Friends

Sunflower Chapter#: 1134  
Call Todd at 316-304-9656 for more information on meeting times.  
[tmccutcheon1@att.net](mailto:tmccutcheon1@att.net)

*For all parents, siblings and grandparents who have experienced the death of a child, brother, sister or grandchild.*

## Kidzcope

9415 E Harry, Ste. 501  
Wichita, KS 67202.  
316-263-3335  
[www.kidzcope.org](http://www.kidzcope.org)

*Kidzcope is a non-profit, independent organization providing support and a comforting environment for grieving children and their families.*

# Following the Suicide\*

Following the discovery of your loved one, there can be a cascade of events and responses that are set into motion. The first people to respond will usually be uniformed law enforcement officers. Depending on the situation, they may call EMS, the medical examiner, or other investigators and detectives.

The following are recommendations to assist you in getting through this difficult time:

- Until the facts are known, the investigation may be treated as if there was a homicide. This means that law enforcement officers may secure the scene, remove personal belongings from your home or property, or prevent your access to the area. They may ask to interview family members or others while facts are fresh. Remember that investigators are acting on the behalf of the victim and their loved ones.
- A detective (from the homicide division) is assigned to help with each investigation. They may be reached at 316-268-4181. Get the detective's name and business card in case you need to contact them. If you have questions about why certain steps are taken, talk to this investigating officer.
- If you should be asked to identify the body, it will be emotionally difficult for you. It is recommended that you ask someone to be with you to give you support during this time.

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# Following the Suicide

- You may need to choose a funeral home.
- When a person dies, his or her body is placed in custody of the medical examiner/coroner who is responsible for determining the actual cause of death. The body is usually taken to the Sedgwick County Regional Forensic Science Center at 1109 N. Minneapolis in Wichita where an autopsy will be completed. This takes about 24-48 hours, after which the body may be released. During this time the family will not be allowed to see the body. If blood tests, toxicology examinations, etc. are done, final results may not be available for some time. An investigator from the coroner's office will assist in the investigation of the death. Their number is 316-660-4800.
- You may have to reclaim personal belongings. Usually possessions travel with the body, so you will want to make sure they are accounted for. In Sedgwick County, belongings may be released when the detective believes they are no longer needed as evidence.
- When a loved one dies in your home in a violent way, the results are an awful reminder of what happened and can create an unhealthy living environment. It is important to clean the area as soon as possible, for both psychological and health reasons. For the same reasons, it is important you do not complete the cleaning yourself. Ask your assigned detective to recommend a reputable bio-recovery service company that provides this service. If they do not know of one, you can call the American Bio-Recovery Association's 24 hour hotline toll free at 888-979-2272 to connect you with a network of certified companies. Check with your homeowner's insurance company as your policy may cover these costs.
- You will need to get copies of the death certificate. Usually these are provided through the funeral home. Know that the medical examiner may delay signing the death certificate until all tests are complete and the actual cause of death is identified.
- It is a good idea to obtain a copy of the police report after the investigation is completed. These requests may be directed to the Wichita Police Department Records Section at 316-268-4186, or your local law enforcement.
- Notify all of your insurance companies, benefits plans, governmental agencies, health care providers and pharmacies either to file claims or to have their records changed appropriately. Remember to keep all receipts and keep track of all expenses as they occur.
- If your loved one had a will you will need to locate it.

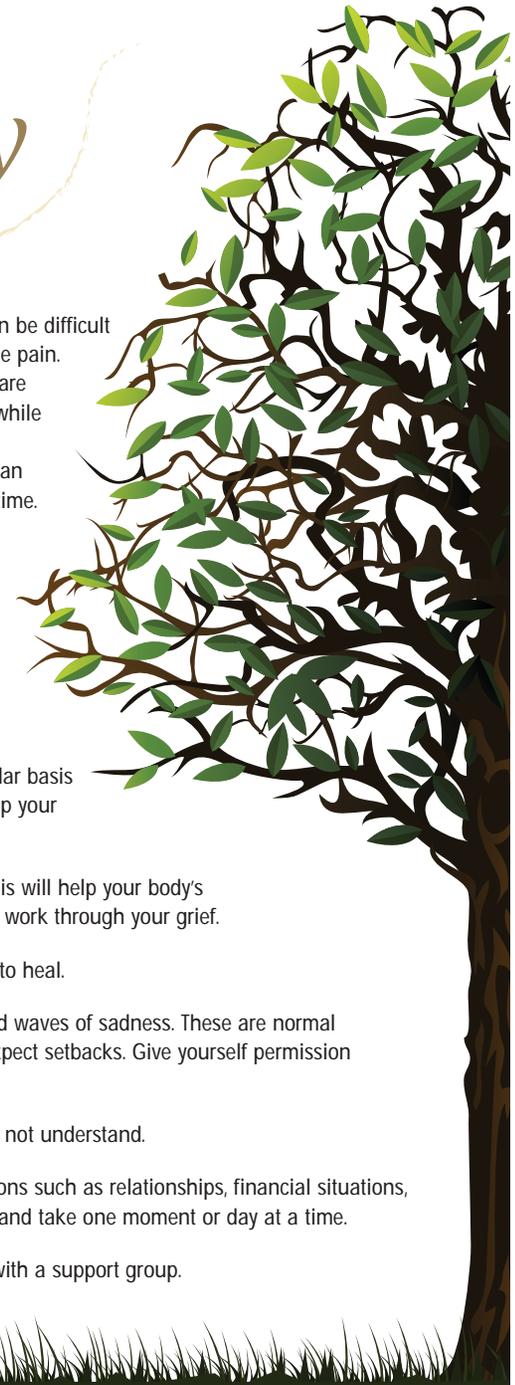
• Jenkins, William S (2001). *What To Do When The Police Leave*, WBJ Press, Richmond, Va.

# What Do I Do Now

With everything you have been through it can be difficult at times to remember that you can survive the pain. Through this process it is important to take care of yourself, both emotionally and physically, while remaining connected to others. We hope the following suggestions from fellow survivors can serve as a guide for you during this difficult time.

## Taking Care of Yourself

- Try to take care of your own well-being; consider visiting your doctor for a check-up. Discuss with them any difficulties you may be experiencing with sleep, appetite or other physical symptoms you may have.
- Try to continue to eat healthy food on a regular basis even if you don't feel like eating. This will help your immune system stay strong.
- Try to find a way to get regular exercise as this will help your body's defenses against illness and will help as you work through your grief.
- Don't be afraid to cry, and give yourself time to heal.
- It is not uncommon to experience unexpected waves of sadness. These are normal and a natural part of the grieving process. Expect setbacks. Give yourself permission to get professional help.
- Be patient with yourself and others who may not understand.
- This is not the time to make major life decisions such as relationships, financial situations, selling a house, etc. Be patient with yourself and take one moment or day at a time.
- Many survivors find it beneficial to connect with a support group.



# What Do I Tell My Children

One of the most common questions for survivors is how to explain suicide to children. Children are particularly vulnerable to feeling abandoned and guilty, so listening to their questions and offering honest, straightforward, age-appropriate answers is paramount. The following are suggestions from fellow survivors on how to explain suicide to children.

- Tell them the truth in simple, age-appropriate language.
- When you have a choice, tell them as soon as you have the news, in a place where both you and they will feel comfortable.
- Reassure them that the death was not their fault.
- Resist the urge to keep the suicide a secret out of fear that the children will copy the behavior.
- Reassure them that you, together with other appropriate adults will take care of them.
- Let them know they can approach you at any time if they want to talk.
- Children may express their feelings by crying, withdrawing, laughing, or expressing anger at you or others.
- Resume and maintain the child's regular routine as much as possible.
- The greatest gift you can give children is your assurance of love and support. Allow them to express their feelings, answer their questions, and provide them with affection.

# To Fellow Survivors of Suicide:

"The hardest thing you will have to do is not to bury your loved one---it's learning how to live without them." This saying from a fellow survivor is one of the most accurate sayings you will ever hear.

We lost one of our 20-year-old twin sons to suicide in 2007. What a shock and where do we go from here? Everything is turned upside down. Within the first six weeks we realized we needed help and were encouraged to attend a suicide support group---this was the best advice we received and we pass it on to you.

We are forever changed by the loss of our son and have to learn what our "new normal" is---we are not the same people we were. But through our grief and the process of feeling and understanding each emotion, we know that life does go on. It's excruciatingly painful at first but each day is important and slowly the shock, guilt, denial, sadness, and anger diminish and the memories that initially hurt to remember our son now bring us joy. Even now through the tears, we remember a pleasant memory and can actually smile---and that feels good! We didn't think that was possible early on.

We confronted the confusing and troubling emotions that suicide left in us; we didn't brush them aside. Time can heal---but not time alone. You must take the time to heal yourself, be good to yourself, and lean on the help and support of others. We realized that at some point we had to accept our human limitations, our son's mental condition at the time of his death and live our lives that lay before us.

We want you to know that our experience with surviving has validated that each of us are different and that we must soul-search deeply and independently. This guide, other information and support are "out there" so use them and rely upon your own inner faith and hope to survive. Most importantly, we want you to know we can not only just survive, but can thrive again with living our life.

God Bless you,

David & Luanna Clark

# Resources

## Books

Books about suicide and healing offer great comfort and support for many survivors. A list of such includes:

### “Night Falls Fast”

by Kay Redfield Jamison,  
published by Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group

### “No Time to Say Goodbye”

by Carla Fine, published by Doubleday

### “Finding Your Way After the Suicide of Someone You Love”

by David B. Biebel & Suzanne L. Foster

### “Real Men Do Cry”

by Eric Hipple (former Detroit Lions quarterback),  
published by Quality of Life

### “My Son ... My Son ... A Guide to Healing After Death, Loss, or Suicide”

by Iris Bolton with Curtis Mitchell, published by Bolton Press

## Other Resources and Organizations

### Sedgwick County Suicide Prevention Coalition

635 N. Main, Wichita, KS 67203

316-660-7517 or [www.sedgwickcounty.org](http://www.sedgwickcounty.org)

Mission statement: To promote and implement evidence based approaches, local research and community change to reduce the impact of suicide with the ultimate goal of zero suicides in Sedgwick County.

### American Association of Suicidology

202-237-2280 or [www.suicidology.org](http://www.suicidology.org)

Promotes public awareness, education and training for professionals, and sponsors an annual “Healing After Suicide” conference for survivors.

## The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

120 Wall Street, 22nd Floor, New York, NY 10005

888-333-AFSP (2377) or [www.afsp.org](http://www.afsp.org)

Sponsors National Survivors of Suicide Day, the Survivor e-Network and survivor support group facilitator training program. Publishes an extensive bibliography, support group directory and information about suicide and mental illness.

## The Compassionate Friends

877-969-0010 or [www.compassionatefriends.org](http://www.compassionatefriends.org)

For all parents, siblings and grandparents who have experienced the death of a child, brother, sister or grandchild. Online support groups throughout the country, as well as an annual national conference for bereaved families.

## Suicide Prevention Resource Center

877-GET-SPRC (438-7772) or [www.sprc.org](http://www.sprc.org)

Features an extensive online library of information on suicide prevention and surviving suicide loss, a nationwide calendar of events, and customized web pages for survivors, teachers, teens, clergy, and more.

## The Trevor Project

310-271-8845 or [www.trevorproject.org](http://www.trevorproject.org)

The Trevor Project is the leading national organization focused on crisis and suicide prevention efforts among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) youth.

## Mental Health Emergency Contacts

### Emergency Medical Services (EMS)

9-1-1

### COMCARE 24-Hour Mental Health Emergency Services/Suicide Prevention Services

635 N. Main, Wichita, KS 67203

316-660-7500

Phone and walk-in services,  
24 hours a day, 7 days a week

### National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

1-800-273-8255

## Via Christi Hospital – Assessment Center

East Harry Campus

3600 E. Harry, Wichita, KS 67218

316-689-4850

## Prairie View Intake and Assessment Center

1901 E. First St., P.O. Box 467

Newton, KS 67114-0467

800-362-0180

## Veterans Crisis Line

800-273-8255 - Press 1

Visit [www.sedgewickcounty.org](http://www.sedgewickcounty.org) for upcoming suicide prevention activities.



*Sedgewick County...  
working for you*



For additional copies of this handbook,  
call 316-660-7517, or visit the Suicide Prevention Coalition website.

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