

# Coping after suicide loss

## Things to try

**This document was created to give an insight into coping strategies that might help you.**

**It was made by young people bereaved by suicide.**

**It was designed by Helix Centre, and the project was funded by Co-op Foundation.**

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Relaxation techniques or mindfulness often work for lower intensity anger like frustration or annoyance, but with a feeling as high energy as grief, try to let that energy out in a safe way.

# 1. Practical things that need to happen

## Letting people know

One of the first challenges you could face is letting others know what has happened: these may be family, friends, teachers, work colleagues, neighbours or other people in your life.

You are entitled to tell people when you are ready and to say whatever you want about how the person died. Some say that they found it helpful to be honest from the start as it meant they didn't have to keep any secrets, or worry about how and when the truth might one day be revealed.

You are also entitled not to answer any questions from other people if you don't yet feel able, or you feel their questions are inappropriate. You do not need to tell everyone right away, and you might prefer to ask a friend or family member to inform people for you.

It can be difficult to find the words to explain what happened, but some phrases that could be useful include:

- X (the person) has died, it was sudden/unexpected.
- X has died, it was difficult circumstances and I would prefer not to talk about how it happened.
- X has died, it's looking likely they took their own life.
- X has died, I wanted you to know but I would like a bit of space.

## People you may meet in the first few days

You may meet people from the police and from the coroner's office. It can be really difficult to have to deal with their focus on finding out how the person died. Even if the cause seems obvious, they have to do their job thoroughly. For some people, this can feel intrusive and inappropriate but, hopefully, the professionals concerned will be kind and sensitive when carrying out their work.

Appreciating this experience can be very difficult, you may prefer to ask a friend or family member - someone who is a little more removed from the situation or someone who is willing - to liaise with the coroner and police on your behalf.

## In the days and weeks after someone has died

The following information is designed to give you some idea of what practical things are likely to take place in the days and weeks ahead. Depending on the circumstances surrounding the death there may also need to be some specific considerations. Things to do include:

- Post-mortem examination
- The initial investigation
- Care of the body
- Choosing to see the person after their death
- Arranging a funeral
- Inquest
- The coroner reaching a conclusion on the cause of death

## Getting support from your GP

Your GP can support you with some of the things you are feeling and experiencing, following a death. This could be fit notes to support you in taking sick leave from school or work, through to medication for sleep, anxiety, along with referrals to other specialists like mental health specialists.

## Getting financial support

You and your family may experience financial difficulties following a loss. If there is inheritance, it can take months to get hold of the money and there may be inheritance tax to pay. There are support services that can help you with this.

## Letting your workplace, College, or University know

If you are working or in education at the time of someone's death, it may be useful to let them know what has happened to you. Taking time off is essential following a death, and even if you don't feel you can or do not want to take time off, it can be beneficial for your employer or tutors to know as a suicide bereavement will likely affect your performance. It is up to you about who to tell, and what details, but the HR department or student services should have processes in place to support you in the event of a bereavement.

## 2. Ways to regulate your emotions

Emotional regulation is the ability to better control our emotional state. Below are some ways that could help you control your emotions. The suggestions might help, but you might not be able to do this initially or until much later, and even then it can still be hard. What you are going through is an incredibly tough thing and you might not be able to notice, name or regulate your emotions initially or for some time and that is ok. It will hopefully get easier, with or without support, but it is likely to be very tough to begin with in such difficult circumstances and that is okay. These are suggestions to help, but do not expect to be able to do them immediately or all of the time. The suggestions are not in any order, and you can try any or all of them.

### Create space

Emotions happen fast, We don't think "now I will be angry" - we are just suddenly clench-jawed and furious. So the number one skill in regulating difficult emotions, the gift we can give ourselves, is to pause. Take a breath. Step outside. Slow down the moment between the triggering feeling and your emotional response to it.

## Noticing what you feel

An equally important skill involves the ability to become aware of what you're feeling. Which is why it can be beneficial to use practices to become more curious about your own physical reactions. Tune in to yourself and consider: in what parts of your body are you noticing sensations? Is your stomach upset? Can you see changes in your skin? Is your heart racing? Do you feel tension in your shoulders, neck or head?

Your physical symptoms can be clues to what you are experiencing emotionally. Looking into and understanding what is happening to you physically can distract your focus and allow some of the intensity of the emotion to go away.

It is important to notice your physical sensations but even noticing them and talking about them may not be enough for them to settle. But listing them, it can help you communicate them to your GP (for example symptoms of anxiety) and this can help them give you the most appropriate treatment (if required).

Also notice whose company you feel better in (and afterwards) and whose makes you feel worse. Feel confident to avoid the people who don't understand or say insensitive comments. Find out who you can trust and confide in and only spend time with these people.

## Naming what you feel

After noticing what you feel, the ability to name it can help you get control of what is happening. Ask yourself: what would you call the emotions you're feeling? Is it guilt, anger, sadness, disappointment, or resentment? What else is it? One strong emotion that often hides beneath others is fear.

Many of us feel more than one emotion at a time, so don't hesitate to identify multiple emotions you might be feeling. Then dig a little deeper. If you feel fear, what are you afraid of? If you feel anger, what are you angry about or toward? Being able to name your emotions will help you get one step closer to sharing your emotions with others.

## Journaling

Try everyday to allow yourself to spot patterns in your feelings which can then help you feel more prepared next time, and allow you to put things in place to make it a little easier next time.

Or write a 'thought record' where you write down your current situation or trigger and any thoughts and emotions it's made you feel. How intense did that emotion feel? Rate the feeling (0-100%). Think about the thought from a positive and negative perspective. Write down what facts support this thought and the facts that don't. Stop and try to think about the thought from a balanced perspective. What would you advise someone else in this situation?

## Accepting the emotion

Emotions are a normal and natural part of how we respond to grief and bereavement. Experiencing very strong emotions is normal too. Rather than beating yourself up for feeling angry or upset, recognise that all of your emotional reactions are valid. Try to practice self-compassion and give yourself grace. Recognise that experiencing emotions is a normal human reaction. You may hear comments such as, “oh you shouldn’t feel guilty” or “they wouldn’t want you to feel like that”) but don’t let others tell you how you should be feeling.

## Grounding techniques

For when you are particularly overwhelmed, panicking or have distressing thoughts, grounding techniques can help to bring you back into the room and refocus our attention to the present. They can also help with dissociation. Here are a few grounding techniques you can try:

Name 3 things you can see, 3 things you can hear, 3 things you can feel, 3 things you can smell and anything you can taste.

Pick up an object near you and describe how it feels and looks, describe its colour, texture, shape, weight, and any other features you notice.

Place your feet flat on the floor, wiggle your toes and focus on the sensations you feel. Stomp your feet up and down and pay attention to the sensations in your feet.

## Having a close person to talk to who listens non-judgementally

This could be friends or family, but equally professionals or charities if speaking to someone in this capacity is easier for you. Either and both can be helpful at different times. Whoever it is, the important thing is the role they take on as a listener: they should just listen to you.

## Put yourself first

Try to be ok with saying no to things or invitations if they will not help you. The same goes for replying to messages - it is fine if it takes you a week or more or if you can't face it, try not to worry about it.

If you need to lie in bed for a day that is fine. If you were unwell with the flu you wouldn't think twice. Some days it is just too much and that is ok, you are doing your best.

## Try to still have a regular life

It may help you to accept what has happened, and remind you that you are still here.

## 3. Some emotional release strategies

It is important to emphasise that these are just suggestions, and that suicide loss is really hard and these strategies might help on some days or some moments, but not all of the time and that is ok.

These are a few tools to help through an immensely difficult time, to help maybe make some days a little easier when you can use them. It's really important not to undermine the strength of the emotions that you might be feeling and you might need some external support.

### Throw or break something (safely)

Physically throwing something can relieve stress and be helpful in the immediate moment. Do you have access to a garden? Get out there with a ball or find some rocks to throw if you have enough space. Or smash something, like a mug or old piece of junk that you've been meaning to get rid of. If that's not a realistic option, get creative - throw something soft (like balled up socks or a roll of toilet paper) against a blank wall. You can also just punch a pillow or a soft toy.

### Scream (in private)

When you can feel anger boiling inside you, yelling is often incredibly cathartic and can pull you out of that blind rage you may be experiencing. Take care to not startle or worry anyone (including nearby neighbours) by screaming into a pillow. If you're at work, you can take a short break.

## Sing it out

Put on some music that has strong emotions in it, such as anger – even if the artist’s anger is different from yours. Channelling your own feelings into the song and expressing that emotion can help release some of your own. Find music that you like and that resonates with you, there is no right or wrong music to listen to.

## Dance it out

Dancing can be a great way to express your emotions, especially when they are so powerful that you can physically feel them in your body. Dance to angry music, happy pop music, or no music – just get that excess energy out.

## Other forms of physical release

You may not have any energy, you may be exhausted a lot of the time. Some people report they feel like ‘a zombie’ after a suicide bereavement, and struggle to get out of bed. However, at times, you may feel a strong build up of emotion and excess energy. In times like that it may help to release some of this energy. If dancing isn’t your thing, try another form of high energy exercise, like boxing or sprinting. You can search for free workout videos online or do your own thing. It might feel silly but yelling or grunting while working out might even help you exert more energy. However, it is all about listening to your body: if your body feels like it would benefit from going on a run, do that. If your body is in so much physical pain from the trauma, then listen to your body and rest.

## Consider getting a therapist

What you are experiencing is life changing and you have every right to be angry, this is not the path you chose in life or planned for. Such complex issues may benefit from a trained professional to help deal with these feelings. This can be challenging and is unfortunately not always straightforward, but there are people there to help. There are several organisations who can help you with this, otherwise speak to your GP who can start the process for you.

## Journal

Putting your feelings into words isn't always easy and writing may not be your go-to technique, but if your mind is spiralling with angry thoughts, dumping them all out onto paper can bring some peace. It doesn't have to be a big ordeal – even just typing a stream-of-consciousness note on your phone during a quick toilet break can help calm your mind.

Journaling can be helpful to do when you are most angry. You can explore what is it about these situations that make you feel the anger more intensely, with the goal of working to avoid these situations.

## **Draw or paint**

Art is often a powerful way to confront your big feelings and turn them into something beautiful. Let go of your work being “good” – allow yourself to create solely to express yourself. Do what feels good rather than focusing on what will look good.

## **Change your surroundings**

When you can't quiet your thoughts, a change of scenery – even just going into the next room or stepping outside for five minutes – can disrupt the track that your mind is on.

## **Destroy a physical representation of your anger**

Print out that photo that set you off or write down the things that are upsetting you. Then scribble all over it, tear it up, or put it through the shredder.

## **Verbalise your anger**

You can always vent to a trusted friend, but sometimes it feels better to pretend you're talking directly to the person you're angry at. Pick an empty chair, imagine they're sitting in it, and yell, scream, or tell them exactly why you're so mad – whatever feels best to you.

## About this resource

This resource was co-produced with young people aged 16–20 who experienced the loss of a parent, friend, or loved one to suicide. It was created to provide peer-led support and practical guidance for others going through similar experiences.

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The project was led by a team at Imperial College London (Helix Centre) in collaboration with the UCL Division of Psychiatry and UCL Division of Psychology and Language Sciences.

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### Find out more

- Co-operative Foundation #iwill Bereavement Fund: [coopfoundation.org.uk/blog/apply-for-iwill-fund-bereavement-grants](https://coopfoundation.org.uk/blog/apply-for-iwill-fund-bereavement-grants)

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