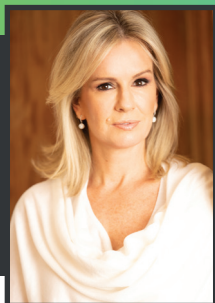


Surviving the Suicide of a Loved One



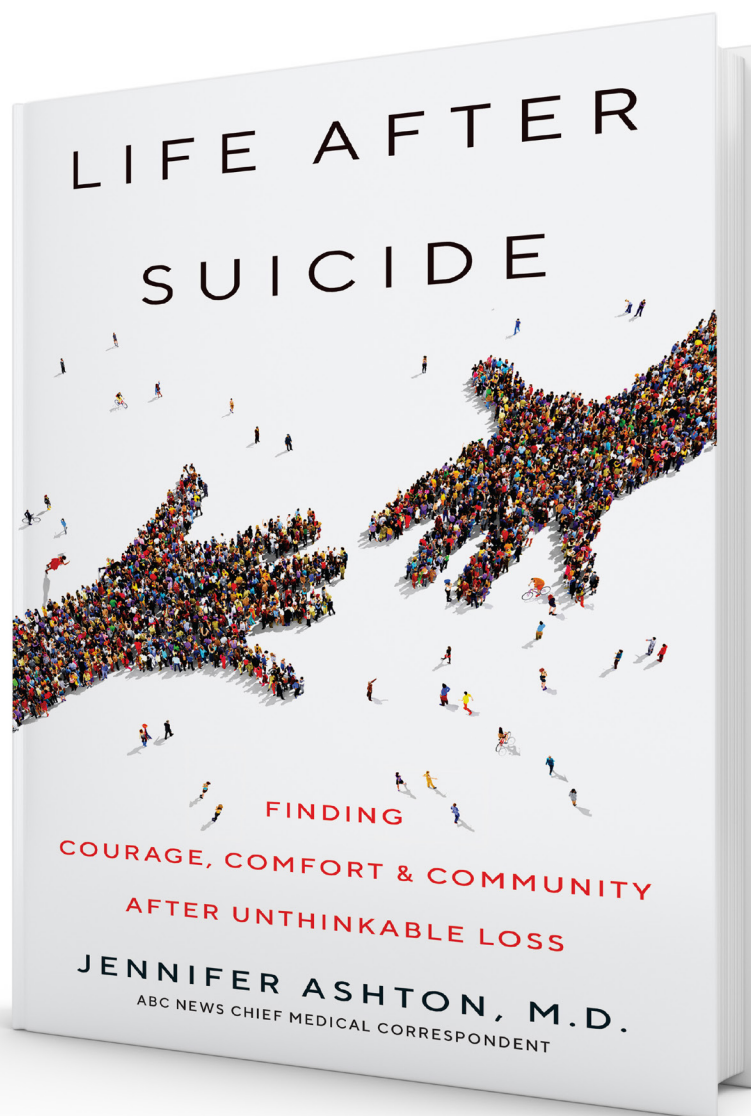
Jennifer Ashton, MD

A Companion Guide to 'Life After Suicide: Finding Courage, Comfort & Community After Unthinkable Loss' by Jennifer Ashton, MD, ABC News Chief Medical Correspondent

FROM THE EDITORS OF

EVERYDAY  HEALTH™

MEDICALLY REVIEWED BY ALLISON YOUNG, MD



Grief is overwhelming at best, no matter the **cause of death**. Survivors of loss by suicide face the same painful emotions as others who grieve a loss, but they also have to cope with messy and complicated emotions, like guilt, shame, and anger. They are forced to confront the stigma associated with suicide every time they answer a question about their loss.

There is no easy prescription for “getting over” unthinkable loss. Grief is a journey that changes over time, but it doesn’t necessarily end.

This guide is intended to help you navigate that journey through courage, comfort, and community.



FROM THE EDITORS OF
EVERYDAY  **HEALTH**™

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Chapter 1: It's Not Your Fault



Survivor's guilt is a huge obstacle on the path to recovery following a loved one's suicide. It's natural to get caught up in intrusive "what if?" thoughts telling you that you could have done or said something to have averted tragedy.

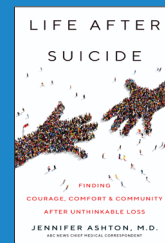
The "what ifs?" will keep you up at night. They'll sneak up on you when you least expect them. They'll ruin what you think might finally be a somewhat regular day.

- What if I made that phone call?
- What if I didn't start that fight?
- What if I didn't file for divorce?
- What if I didn't yell at my child over that poor grade?
- What if I had been more understanding?
- What if I paid more attention?
- What if I insisted on therapy?

- ✓ **Remember that intrusive thoughts aren't accurate thoughts. These thoughts don't paint the complete picture.**
- ✓ **Repeat after me: I am not responsible for my loved one's suicide.**
- ✓ **Write yourself a note. Text yourself reminders. Ask a close friend to remind you of this often. You are not responsible for your loved one's death.**

“*Suicide. Rob died by suicide. I couldn't begin to wrap my head around it. Through the haze of conversations, calls, and tears, only two moments managed to really penetrate the thick fog around me. One was being alone in my bedroom with my brother. I finally said to him exactly what I was feeling, and what I imagined everyone else was thinking — 'This is my fault.' He put his hands on my shoulders, looked directly into my eyes, and said, "Jen, you're a doctor, I'm a doctor, Rob was a doctor. He would have done this married to you or not married to you. ... The reality is, you cannot let this destroy you.*”

— from *Life After Suicide*,
by Jennifer Ashton, MD,
ABC News Chief Medical
Correspondent



Make a list of the ways you *did* support your loved one. Include both small and large acts of kindness and support. Tuck that list away somewhere safe and refer to it when the "what ifs?" sneak up on you again.

Chapter 2: Shockwaves



The shock that occurs upon learning of a loss by suicide feels overwhelming and possibly never-ending. You might feel frozen, like you don't know how to do the things that once came naturally to you.

Shock can make things like eating, showering, and sleeping feel impossible. You might find that you ignore your daily personal needs as you go through the motions of getting through each day. This is one of the natural reactions to traumatic information. For some, this is actually how the mind processes tragedy and protects you from experiencing overwhelming responses all at once. Shock allows you to function as you come to terms with the enormity of the loss.

Shock can weaken your natural defenses. It can put you at risk for illness, exhaustion, and poor emotional health. While shock is natural, it's important to call your doctor if it persists, to avoid health risks.

Your shock will subside as you get through the initial phase of grief, but everyone has their own timeline. Take your time.

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People don't always know how or when to help when friends or loved ones are coping with a suicide. They might attempt to give you space out of respect, but chances are you need hands-on support during those first few weeks. It can be difficult to ask for help when coping with tragedy, but social support will help you get through this.

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“Starting that night, and for weeks to come, I don't think I ever slept for more than two hours at a time. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't eat. I couldn't recognize myself, and the life I knew, in all this darkness. Maybe it was because, as of 12 short hours before, I wasn't whole anymore. Maybe it was because, 12 short hours before, I completely shattered.”

— from *Life After Suicide*, by Jennifer Ashton, MD, ABC News Chief Medical Correspondent



Make a list of ways that friends and family can provide practical support to help get you through the shock.

- Do you need groceries, meals, or other errands?
- Does a dog need walking?
- Do you have kids who need extra support?
- Do you need people to help make phone calls to share the information about funeral arrangements?

Chapter 3: The Road to Healing



You might be wondering when the “right” time is to seek help, or if you even need help at all. The truth is that it’s never too soon to seek support. Coping with a loss by suicide is complex. All people work through grief in their own ways, but because loss by suicide does come with a stigma, survivors of suicide can feel alone in their grief.

Rely on your support system. Think about people who have supported you in the past. Consider close family members, friends, colleagues from work, people from your faith-based community (if you have one), parents of friends of your children (if you have kids). It helps to think about your close friends first, and then zoom out.

Sometimes people resist relying on their support systems for help because they don’t want to be a burden. That’s an added layer of guilt that can sneak into the grief process, but accessing social support will help you feel less alone and relieve some of the stress of the day-to-day to-do list that feels overwhelming when you’re grieving.



Create a Support Map

Sometimes it’s difficult to know where to begin. One thing you can do is identify the places you have built-in support systems and start there. If you belong to a church or temple, for example, write that down. Underneath it, write down one or two supportive people there. Make another spot for family, work, and other important areas of your life. You’ll likely find that you already have a solid support system.

Chapter 4: Faith-Based Counseling



The decision to seek counseling can be a difficult one. It's hard to open up to a complete stranger, particularly about something as personal as working through a loss by suicide. If you feel this way and belong to a religious group, it may feel less overwhelming to seek help through your religious organization.

Pastoral counseling is a branch of counseling in which trained ministers, priests, rabbis, imams, and other faith-based counselors provide therapy services. Pastoral counselors often integrate modern psychological methods with traditional religious training.

Not all pastoral counselors are licensed mental health providers. Another option is to seek faith-based therapists who weave spiritual beliefs into the therapy process. Check with your religious organization to find a faith-based therapist in your area.



Notes

Chapter 5: Tackling the Stigma



People have all kinds of reactions to discussion of suicide and mental health, many of them blanketed in discomfort.

As a society, we don't know how to talk about such isolating topics, so we tend to talk around them.

But talking is exactly what we need to do to destigmatize suicide and relieve survivors of the unfair burden of protecting the emotional reactions of those around them. Using the right language is key. The expression "commit suicide" gives the impression that the suicide was done with intention or purpose. Describing the loss of your loved one as "died by suicide" or "death by suicide" removes the inference of intent, purpose, or blame.

The more comfortable you feel opening up to your support system about your loss, the more you reduce any perceived stigma within your social circle. You can widen that circle as you feel comfortable, but don't push yourself. While some survivors of loss by suicide take comfort in joining advocacy groups and speaking about loss by suicide, others need more time to heal before sharing their stories.

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You might expect to feel sadness, but loss by suicide can also trigger feelings of anger, guilt, shame, loneliness, shock, anxiety, confusion, and sometimes relief. Survivors of loss by suicide need to tell their stories, too. When you're ready, open up to your support system about the tangle of emotions that you've listed out.

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“ Together we can help one another heal. Together we can put an end to the mental illness and suicide stigmas that have caused an obscene amount of undeserved pain. Together we can make a difference, in honor of those we loved and lost. ”

— from *Life After Suicide*, by Jennifer Ashton, MD, ABC News Chief Medical Correspondent



Acknowledge and accept your emotions by writing down what you're feeling.

Chapter 6: Show Support



It's hard to know what to say to help a friend or loved one who has lost someone to suicide. Though you can't relieve your loved one's pain, there are things you can say and do to help your loved one through this difficult time. Simply checking in, even by text, offers a line of support.

It can feel awkward to start conversations about suicide, but survivors of loss by suicide need friends who are willing to listen. Don't be afraid to show up with support, even if your friend or loved one isn't asking for help.

“ While we're here on earth, we have the opportunity to evolve into the higher consciousness that illuminates our path; that shows us we are whole and complete beings just as we are, with all the raw materials we need to become our finest selves, if we simply learn how to make the most of them; and that the more in tune we are with that higher consciousness, the more heaven we can experience right here on earth in this chapter of our lives. ”

— from *Life After Suicide*, by Jennifer Ashton, MD,
ABC News Chief Medical Correspondent



If you notice that a friend or loved one communicates feelings of hopelessness or unbearable emotional pain, encourage professional help right away. It is common for grieving people to feel depressed, isolated, confused, and angry. Professional mental health practitioners can help your friend work through and cope with grief following suicide. If you or someone you love is considering suicide or shows warning signs for suicide, contact the **Suicide Prevention Lifeline (1-800-273-8255)** or call **911** for immediate assistance.

Jennifer Ashton, MD, *Life After Suicide* Author

Jennifer Ashton, MD, is the chief medical correspondent for ABC News and an ob-gyn in private practice. A known and beloved expert in medical health and specifically women's health, she is a published author, educator, and popular television personality. Her books include *The Body Scoop for Girls*, *Your Body Beautiful*, and *Eat This Not That When You're Expecting* (coauthored with Dave Zincenko). She lives in New York City.

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Book excerpts courtesy of HarperCollins.

For more resources on understanding suicide, go to www.everydayhealth.com/emotional-health/understanding-suicide/