
after a suicide

after a suicide

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This booklet has been written for the many people affected by suicide in Scotland each year. It is dedicated in memory of Jennifer Susan Ross, who took her own life on 4th February 2001, at the age of 23, after struggling with mental illness for 11 years.

Introduction

Over 600 people die each year in Scotland as a result of suicide. There are many more deaths where the cause is 'undetermined', and it is thought that many of these may be 'hidden suicides'. For every person who ends their own life, many people left behind are affected, such as family, partners, friends, workmates, neighbours, support workers and other people who may have been involved in the person's care or treatment.

This booklet is written for those who are likely to be most affected. It is in four parts:

Part 1 deals with the feelings and emotions that people may experience and suggests ways of dealing with these;

Part 2 covers practical issues, like registering the death, funeral expenses etc;

Part 3 explains the different investigations and inquiries that may take place; and

Part 4 contains contact details for organisations and groups that may be able to help those bereaved by suicide.

The circumstances around each death can be very different. This booklet aims to be a general guide and tries to address some of the common issues.

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1. The Grieving Process

Different people respond in different ways to losing someone as a result of suicide. Circumstances surrounding a death may vary greatly and some people may appear to cope better than others. What follows is an attempt to outline some common reactions and experiences.

Immediate responses

Nothing can truly prepare you for the news that someone you love or care for has taken their own life. Whether the news of the death has been broken to you by someone else, or whether you have had the uniquely traumatic experience of discovering the body, **shock and disbelief** are often the immediate responses to suicide. The emotions that you experience can be powerful, frightening and overwhelming.

You may feel that it has 'come out of the blue' with no warning. Even in cases where someone has previously shared the fact that they were feeling depressed or were experiencing problems, self-harmed or made suicide attempts, their death may still come as a shock.

However, in some cases, people may feel that they have 'seen it coming' but been powerless to prevent it. You may have had a loved one go missing and known in your heart that they would not be coming back.

The manner of death may be particularly hard for you to accept. Whatever the circumstances, finding out about a suicide is a deeply painful experience, which is unlikely ever to be forgotten.

The big question - why?

One of the first things that you might ask yourself, or others might ask you, is – why did they do it? This is something that you will probably never know for sure. Even if they left a note, this may not give you all the answers. Notes are generally written at a time when

the person was extremely distressed and they may not properly express how the person was feeling at the time. Inevitably, people will try to find an explanation, such as:

- It happened because of their mental health problem – they were very unwell at the time
- They were very depressed but didn't seek help in time or were unable to see a way forward
- They felt unable to cope with their life circumstances eg financial problems, relationship problems, bullying, a bereavement etc
- Perhaps they had a serious illness or disability and couldn't face the future knowing that they may be in pain, or lose control over their bodily functions.

It is sometimes hard to accept that you may never know the answer to this question.

Stigma and shame

Once the news has sunk in, you may find yourself wondering what to tell people - should you tell them that the cause of death was suicide? Sadly, there is still an element of stigma which surrounds suicide and mental ill health. This can make things even more difficult for people affected by the death. There are initiatives ongoing in Scotland to try to tackle this issue. Many people are simply ignorant about the extent of the problem and about the fact that it could happen in any family. For example, many people do not know that suicide is the main cause of death in young men aged 15-34. Or that one in four people will experience mental health problems at some point in their lives. Although there has been some progress in addressing stigma, there is still a long way to go.

Only you can decide what to tell people. You may wish to tell only the people closest to you, and others who 'need to know'. Or you may decide to tell anyone who asks. What you might wish to bear in mind is that sometimes people will speculate about what happened and that it is not always possible to keep things hidden.

Children affected by suicide

Depending on the circumstances, and the age and maturity of children affected by suicide, it may be best simply to be truthful about what happened, without necessarily going into too much detail. Children should be encouraged to talk about their feelings and not to bottle things up. Although it may be hard at the time, sometimes it is best to be open and honest about what happened and about how it is affecting you.

Children are likely to need reassurance that they are not to blame in any way for the death, that people still love and care for them, and that it doesn't mean that other people in their life will die unexpectedly. If it is difficult for you to support or reassure children whilst you are grieving, you should try to ensure that other people are able to help with this.

How others react

Although you will probably find that most people will be extremely supportive, you may be disappointed by the way that some people react. This may simply be due to fear or a feeling of helplessness on their part; they may not know what to say to you, they may even say things that upset you or they might avoid talking about it at all. It is best to try and accept that this may happen and to try and focus on coping with your own feelings without dwelling on what others think or say.

Mixed emotions

Experiencing bereavement by suicide will mean dealing with a wide range of sometimes conflicting emotions, such as:

Guilt

You may feel that you should have seen it coming and that you should have done something to prevent it, or perhaps that something you did or said was partly to blame. This is a very common reaction. However, it is often impossible to know that someone was planning a suicide. People may go to great lengths to hide this from

their loved ones. Even if you suspected that the person was deeply depressed, it is often extremely difficult to convince people to get help, or to get help on their behalf. The reality is that you did what you thought was appropriate at the time; and that is all that can be expected of you. You cannot take complete responsibility for anyone else's life. Nor can you know exactly how someone is thinking or feeling. Perhaps you feel guilty because you may, in a sense, feel partly relieved that the person has gone and that you don't have to worry about them anymore. This is another common reaction, particularly when you have spent a long time caring for, and worrying about, someone who has been very unwell.

Loss

You will probably feel an overwhelming sense of loss, that a huge part of your life is missing. This is a natural reaction to losing someone you care about.

Anger

The fact that someone has 'chosen' to end their life may make you feel very angry. You may ask yourself 'how could they do this to me/us?' An acknowledgement of the pain and loss that you and others are experiencing may lead you to look for someone to direct your feelings towards, or blame. This may be the person you have lost, or it may perhaps be others who were involved with them. Coping with anger can be very difficult and you may need the help of others to work through this (see coping strategies below).

Confusion and helplessness

You may feel very confused and unable to concentrate. It can be very hard to make decisions when you are struggling to get through days which may be filled with exhausting and overwhelming emotions. Some people talk of feeling a sense of helplessness – that things are completely out of their control, and that they don't know how to help others who are also grieving.

Isolation

You may feel that no-one understands what you are going through and that you are on your own. People react differently to loss, even within close families. Some people may cope by talking about their feelings, others may prefer not to talk about things and feel that what they need is to 'put it behind them and get on with life'. This may lead to disagreements. It is worth recognising that although some people may not want to talk about their loss initially, this may change as time goes on.

Sadness/ depression

You may feel incredibly low and unable to cope. Your sleep, eating, and motivation may all be badly affected. You may even have suicidal thoughts yourself. This may simply be a normal reaction to loss. Grieving can be an exhausting process and can take a huge toll on your physical and mental health. If this is becoming a problem, you could try the coping strategies below or seek help from your GP.

You will undoubtedly hear clichés like 'time is a great healer'. Although you may not initially accept this, most people find that as they work through their emotions, it becomes easier to adjust to living with their loss. You may even be surprised that you find an inner strength which helps to get you through. For every person who has died as a result of suicide, there are many others who have somehow survived losing them. Learning to accept that the person has gone doesn't mean forgetting that they played an important role in your life, and that they always will.

Coping strategies

It is essential that you do not feel that you have to cope alone. You will probably need support to help get you through. This may be friends or family, or you may find other sources of comfort eg spiritual beliefs. In some cases, you may find it easier to speak to people out-

with your friends or family. Part 4 of this booklet gives details of organisations that provide bereavement counselling or local support groups. Support groups offer you the opportunity to meet with other people who have been bereaved and to talk through your feelings in a supportive environment. There are some groups in Scotland specifically for people who have been bereaved as a result of suicide.

Some people might find it helpful to read self-help books or poetry, perhaps written by others who have had a similar experience (see part 4 for some suggestions). Others may find an outlet for their emotions by writing about how they feel or keeping a diary.

Bereavement can affect your health, physically and mentally. It is important to take care of yourself – try to eat a balanced diet, get sleep and rest etc. Some people may be tempted to use alcohol or other substances in an attempt to numb their feelings, but this is not a solution, and may well simply make things worse.

When you are ready, it can help to commit some time to try and focus on things which help to take your mind off your bereavement such as hobbies, sporting and leisure activities, etc. Perhaps you may want to try something new, like meditation or yoga, which might help you to relax.

Inevitably, there will be difficult times such as the anniversary of the death, birthdays, family events etc. It might help to plan ahead for these times and to try and find ways to help make it easier to deal with them. Perhaps by talking through your feelings with someone, or by making a gesture in remembrance on significant days eg visiting a place that has a special memory, planting a shrub or flower.

2. Practical Issues

With any death, there will inevitably be practical issues to deal with. Whilst some people may actually find it helpful to focus on dealing with these, others may find it very difficult and might benefit from enlisting the assistance and support of others.

Registering the death

The General Register Office for Scotland keeps records of all births, deaths, marriages, divorces and adoptions.

Any death which occurs in Scotland must be registered within 8 days by the Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages. It must be registered either in the district where the death took place or in the district where the deceased person lived. You should be able to find out the contact details for the local registrar from the undertaker, the hospital, the doctor or in the local telephone book. Although a burial can take place before registration, a cremation can only take place after registration of the death.

The death can be registered by any of the following people:

- Any relative of the deceased person
- Any person present when the death occurred
- The deceased person's executor or legal representative
- The occupier of the property where the person died
- Any other person who knows the information to be registered.

If you are registering the death, you should take, if possible:

- The medical certificate of cause of death
- The deceased person's birth certificate and where applicable, their marriage certificate
- The deceased person's NHS medical card

- Any documents relating to the receipt of a pension or allowance from government funds.

Don't worry if you don't have any of these documents, as the death can still be registered without them.

After you have registered the death, the registrar will give you a certificate of registration to give to the person in charge of the burial ground or crematorium and a document which can be used for obtaining or adjusting Social Security benefits. You will be able to obtain extracts of the death entry on payment of a small fee.

If the death occurs abroad, it will have to be registered according to the rules of the country concerned. A record of the death will be sent to Scotland and a copy of this can be obtained from New Register House, Edinburgh, EH1 3YT, Tel: 0131 314 4411.

Letting others know

In addition to carers, family, and friends, there are likely to be other people who should be informed of the death. A solicitor might be able to help you notify banks, companies, creditors etc. However, there may be others that ought to be contacted such as any: employer or close work colleagues, school or university, doctor, dentist, group or club that the person was involved with etc. For some, a letter may be more appropriate than a phone call. You might want to ask someone to help you with this.

Money and possessions

There may well be financial issues which will need to be addressed if the deceased person has left savings, property and/or debts. It is best to try and gather together all of the relevant paperwork such as:

- any will
- bank or building society books or documents
- insurance documents
- benefit order books

- mortgage statements or rent book
 - savings certificates
 - credit card or loan statements
 - utility bills (gas, electricity, telephone)
- and to seek advice as soon as possible from a solicitor.

You should not dispose of any property until you have sought legal advice. If the person has not left a will, then there are rules about how the estate should be divided among surviving relatives. Funeral expenses (see the section on 'the funeral' below) take priority over any other debts on the person's estate. A solicitor will be able to advise you about this. Legal costs vary depending on how much work is involved in winding up the estate.

The funeral Funerals can be expensive and the costs can vary greatly depending on the requirements. Services can vary greatly taking account of different cultures, religions and beliefs.

It is best to check where the money for the funeral will come from before finalising the arrangements, otherwise you may find that you have to cover the cost. You can ask the funeral director to explain the costs and to give you a written estimate.

The total cost will cover the cost of services such as laying out the body, use of the chapel of rest, the coffin, the hearse etc and also any outlays that the funeral director makes on your behalf such as inserting notices in newspapers, fees for obtaining official documents etc.

In some cases, the funeral expenses will be covered entirely by the person's estate. In other cases, depending on the circumstances, help may be available to cover the costs.

Funeral payments from the Social Fund

You may be able to get help towards the cost of a funeral from the Social Fund if your **partner** has died and you or your partner are receiving one of the following: income support, income based jobseekers allowance, housing benefit, council tax benefit or tax credits. You can apply any time after the death and up to 3 months after the date of the funeral. Contact your local social security office for a claim form. You will have to produce documentation to support your claim. It must have been reasonable for you to take responsibility for the costs, rather than any other person. If there are any other funds available to pay for the funeral, this may affect your claim.

Other benefits and allowances

If you are a widow or widower as a result of the death, then you may be entitled to receive:

- Bereavement payment – a one-off tax-free lump sum payment
- Widowed parent's allowance – a weekly payment made to a widow or widower with dependent children
- Bereavement allowance – a taxable weekly benefit paid to a widow or widower for 52 weeks from the date of death
- Bereavement premium – a widow or widower who is able to claim income support, income based jobseeker's allowance, housing benefit and council tax when his/her bereavement allowance stops, may be entitled to have a bereavement premium added to increase the amount they receive.

There are rules and conditions about eligibility for these. You should seek advice from your local social security office, Citizens Advice Bureau or welfare rights adviser (see page 18) to find out if you are entitled to any payment.

3. Investigations and Enquiries

There are a variety of different agencies which might be involved in investigating the circumstances surrounding a suicide. The type of inquiries that may be carried out will depend very much on a person's circumstances at the time of, and leading up to, their death. As a result, **some of this part of this booklet may not be relevant in your own case.**

You may not always be told that an inquiry is taking place, or given copies of reports that are produced. SAMH is interested in hearing about cases where people have difficulties in finding out about inquiries, or are refused access to reports. See page 16 for our contact details.

The Police

The police have a duty to investigate and report deaths to the Procurator Fiscal in a number of circumstances, including where:

- The death is sudden or accidental
- There are suspicious circumstances
- The Procurator Fiscal requests a report.

When a body is found under circumstances which clearly point to suicide, the police will:

- Secure any article or implement having an obvious connection with the death
- Record the position and appearance of the body in writing and by taking photographs
- Examine any notes or letters left by the deceased which indicate a suicidal intention
- Make enquiries to establish the deceased's state of mind prior to death.

Police enquiries can take many different forms and often involve interviewing potential witnesses. Police Officers, in the course of their duty, are often called to

inform people of the death of a relative and should carry out this duty professionally and sensitively.

If a suicide occurs whilst someone is in police custody, the police will investigate and inquire into the circumstances surrounding the death. A Fatal Accident Inquiry (see below) will also be held.

The Procurator Fiscal

The Procurator Fiscal (PF) has a duty to investigate all sudden, suspicious, accidental, unexpected and unexplained deaths and any death occurring in circumstances which give rise to serious public concern. The PF must enquire into any death where the circumstances point to suicide. After a death has been reported, the PF will investigate the cause and circumstances and will then decide whether any further investigation is needed. Once the PF has all the information he/she needs, a report will be sent to Crown Office, the headquarters of the Procurator Fiscal Service. In most cases, there will be no further proceedings once the case has been reported to Crown Office.

However, in some cases of suicide, a decision may be made at Crown Office to hold a Fatal Accident Inquiry (FAI). This is a public enquiry into the circumstances of a death which is held in the Sheriff Court. Generally speaking, an FAI will only be held in cases that involve issues of public safety or public concern, although if the death happened when the person was working, or in legal custody (eg in prison or police custody), an FAI must be held.

In any case where there may be an FAI, the PF will normally contact the next of kin at the earliest opportunity and offer a meeting to discuss matters. The next of kin will be informed about the decision to hold, or not hold, an FAI. If there is to be an FAI, and you, as the next of kin, wish to raise issues that won't be covered by the PF, then you may wish to contact a solicitor for advice.

The next of kin are entitled to be represented at an FAI, and can lead evidence and question witnesses.

The purpose of an FAI is to assess the circumstances surrounding the death and to identify any issues of public concern or safety. The Court will identify whether anything might be done to help avoid similar deaths in the future. It will not apportion blame for the death or make any findings of fault.

The NHS

It is good practice for NHS Trusts to carry out a 'critical incident review' in any case where someone who has been receiving treatment, either as an in-patient or as an out-patient, has died and suicide is the most likely cause. The aim of the review is to find out whether any steps could have been taken which might have prevented the suicide and whether any lessons can be learned in order to reduce the risk of future suicides.

At the moment, there seems to be considerable variation in the way that the NHS deals with reviews (eg whether they are carried out at all, how they are carried out, and whether bereaved carers are informed about them and invited to give their views or receive copies of reports).

The Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland

The Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland (MWC) is an independent organisation set up by Parliament with the responsibility of protecting the welfare of people with 'mental disorder' in Scotland. ('Mental disorder' covers mental illness, personality disorder, learning disability and dementia.)

As part of the MWC's responsibilities, it regularly enquires into the deaths of people who have been receiving psychiatric care and treatment where suicide is suspected. Once it has been informed of a death, the MWC will make enquiries to find out more about the circumstances. This usually involves obtaining a report

from the NHS and from the Procurator Fiscal. Information might also be obtained from the person's general practitioner (GP) or others involved in their care.

When all the information has been obtained, the MWC will decide whether any further information or action is needed. In the majority of cases (around 85%), no further action will be taken. In other cases, the MWC may seek further information or take up any outstanding issues. Very rarely, the MWC may decide to carry out a formal investigation into the circumstances surrounding the death. If so, the aim will be to ensure that lessons are learned, and practice improved, rather than to blame individuals.

Care Services

Where, at the time of their death, someone has been receiving care and/or support from a care service eg a supported accommodation service, it is possible that the service provider may carry out their own inquiry. This will probably be limited to considering the role that the service and its staff played in the time leading up to the death. Again, this is likely to consider whether any lessons may be learned as a result of the death.

The Care Commission (see page 18 for contact details) is responsible for regulating and inspecting care services in Scotland and also deals with complaints.

The Scottish Prison Service

Like other agencies, the Scottish Prison Service (SPS) has a strategy in place which aims to prevent suicides from occurring. Where a suicide does occur in a prison or young offenders institution, a review is undertaken locally to try to identify whether there are any issues that could have been handled differently or better. It is SPS policy that prisons and young offenders institutions should try and ensure that family and friends of the deceased person are supported after the death. A Fatal Accident Inquiry will also be held (see 'The Procurator Fiscal' above).

4. Useful Contacts and Resources

If you have any queries or comments about this booklet or would like information or advice about mental health issues, please contact:

SAMH Information Service:

By telephone: 0141 568 7000 (Mon - Fri, 2pm - 4.30pm)

By email: info@samh.org.uk

In writing: SAMH, Cumbrae House, 15 Carlton Court, Glasgow, G5 9JP

Website: www.samh.org.uk

For information or advice about depression, contact

Depression Alliance Scotland:

By telephone: 0131 467 3050

By email: information@depressionalliance.org

In writing: Depression Alliance Scotland, 3 Grosvenor Gardens, Edinburgh, EH12 5JU

Website: www.depressionalliance.org

Bereavement support

Cruse Bereavement Care Scotland offers free bereavement care and support through one-to-one counselling or local support groups. To find out about the availability of services in your area, contact the National Office:

By telephone: 01738 444 178

By email: info@crusescotland.org.uk

In writing: Cruse Bereavement Care Scotland, Riverview House, Friarton Road, Perth, PH2 8DF

Website: www.crusescotland.org.uk

Samaritans provide confidential emotional support 24 hours a day for people who are feeling distressed or need to talk to someone. You can contact them:

By telephone: either the national help-line 08457 90 90 90 or your local branch – details in your local phone book

By email: jo@samaritans.org

In writing: Chris, PO Box 90 90, Stirling, FK8 2SA

Website: www.samaritans.org.uk

Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide (SOBS)

offer emotional and practical support to people bereaved by suicide. You can contact them:

By telephone: national help-line 0870 241 3337 (9am - 9pm)

By email: sobs.admin@care4free.net

In writing: SOBS, Centre 88, Saner Street, Hull, HU3 2TR

Website: www.uk-sobs.org.uk

The Compassionate Friends is an organisation of bereaved parents and their families offering support to others who have experienced the death of a child. You can contact them:

By telephone: national help-line 0117 953 9639 (10am - 4pm, 6.30pm - 10.30pm)

By email: info@tcf.org.uk

In writing: TCF, 53 North Street, Bristol, BS3 1EN

Website: www.tcf.org.uk

Information and support for children and young people

Childline is a free 24 hour help-line for children and young people throughout the UK. Children and young people can call and talk to a Childline counsellor about any problem, including coping with bereavement. Telephone: 0800 11 11

Welfare benefits advice

For advice on welfare benefits, contact: Your local **Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB)**. You will find their details in your local phone book or by telephoning the national office on 020 7833 2181.
Website: www.citizensadvice.org.uk

The social work department of your local authority will be able to advise you as to whether there are any **Welfare Rights Teams** in your area.

Other agencies referred to in this booklet

You can contact the **Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland (MWC)**:
By telephone: 0131 222 6111
By email: enquiries@mwscot.org.uk
In writing: MWC, K Floor, Argyle House, 3 Lady Lawson Street, Edinburgh, EH3 9SH
Website: www.mwscot.org.uk

You can contact the **Care Commission** at their national headquarters:
By telephone: 01382 207100 or 'lo-call' 0845 60 30 890
In writing: Care Commission, Compass House, 11 Riverside, Dundee, DD1 4NY
Website: www.carecommission.com

Books that might be of interest

Choice of reading material is very personal and subjective. Some people may really enjoy or identify with a book or poem, whilst others may not. The following are suggestions which some people have recommended:

- *A Special Scar: The Experiences of People Bereaved by Suicide*, Alison Wertheimer, Routledge, 2001, ISBN: 0415220270
- *Healing After the Suicide of a Relative*, Ann Smolin, Simon & Schuster Inc, 1993, ISBN: 0671796607

- *No Time to Say Goodbye: Surviving the Suicide of a Loved One*, Carla Fine, Main Street Books, 1999, ISBN: 0385485514
- *All in the End is Harvest: An Anthology of Poetry for Those Who Grieve*, Agnes Whitaker, Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd, ISBN: 0232516243

Scottish Executive initiatives

In December 2002, the Scottish Executive launched **Choose Life: A National Strategy and Action Plan to Prevent Suicide in Scotland** which is aimed at reducing our rising suicide rate. The plan has seven key objectives including raising awareness of risk factors, improving and increasing service provision and providing support to people affected by suicide. Choose Life is a key part of the National Programme to Improve Mental Health and Well-being.
For more information:
Telephone: 0131 244 4007
Write to: Mental Health Division, Health Department, Scottish Executive, St Andrews House, Regent Road, Edinburgh, EH1 3DG
Website: www.show.scot.nhs.uk/sehd/mentalwellbeing

The 'See Me' campaign was launched in October 2002 to challenge stigma and discrimination around mental ill-health in Scotland. For more information:
Telephone: 0131 624 8945
Email: info@seemescotland.org
Write to: See Me, 9-13 Maritime Street, Edinburgh, EH6 6SB
Website: www.seemescotland.org

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Further copies of this booklet can be obtained by contacting
the SAMH Information Service (see page 16) or can be
downloaded from the SAMH website www.samh.org.uk



The information contained in this booklet is believed,
but not warranted, to be accurate as at the date of
publication. If you have any queries as to how any of this
information may apply in your own particular circumstances,
it is recommended that you seek advice from a solicitor
or other appropriate adviser.





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