After my husband took his own life, I knew almost immediately that I needed to see a therapist. Looking back on it today, I can’t say that I knew exactly what I expected, I just knew I had to see a therapist. I knew that I needed to talk. And I knew that I needed to talk with someone who was knowledgeable about suicide and its aftermath. Beyond that, I had no preconceptions. I know today that seeking therapy in the wake of my husband’s death was one of the most important things I’ve ever done for myself. But is it right for you? In the survivors of suicide support group I’ve heard survivors advise others to see a counselor. And I’ve heard some of the recipients of such advice question why, asking what benefit they might receive. Here are some thoughts.

**My grief seems bigger than it should; My grief feels unmanageable; My grief scares me; The things I’m doing scare me.**

Loss of a loved one to suicide rocks our world, turns it upside down, sometimes shatters it into pieces then scatters the pieces far and wide. In its wake we may find ourselves thinking or doing things that feel, well, “crazy,” that cause us to worry about ourselves and our sanity. I have a friend who, in the aftermath of her son’s death by suicide, would stand at her kitchen counter for hours, not noticing the passing of time. Other friends report experiencing endless crying jags, from which they thought they might never recover. After my husband’s death I wrote in my journal that I was scared of the pain I was feeling, that it was “dangerous pain.” Some of the things we think and feel and do in our grief are so beyond “normal” that we hesitate to share them with others, in fear of divulging what may not be understood and in fear of being judged. At times like these we might find it helpful to talk with a counselor who can assess our thoughts and feelings and determine if some intervention is necessary or who can simply assure us that what we are experiencing is not abnormal, given the circumstances, but is the result of the unfathomable pain we are feeling.

**Why did she do it? What did I miss? How could I not know he was in such pain?**

For many suicide survivors, the suicide death came as a complete shock. They did not know that their loved one was in such pain; they had no idea that he or she was contemplating suicide. Sometimes survivors wish to talk with a professional about their loved one’s death - and life - in search of answers to the question why, “Why did he do it?” They also sometimes wish to explore their own actions, to deal with those other, guilt-filled, questions of why - “Why didn’t I know?” “Why didn’t I see the signs?” - in the presence of a nonjudgmental therapist who is also knowledgeable of suicidal persons and their behaviors.

**My friends don’t really understand, and their efforts to comfort me are making me angry.**

Oftentimes in the grief process we feel all alone. Well-meaning friends may assure us that they understand how we feel, that they know what we’re going through. But we discover that unless someone has lost a close loved one to death, they do not really understand. This is particularly true of survivors of suicide. Suicide grief carries with it characteristics that differentiate it from other forms of grief, including guilt, feelings of rejection, and anger toward the deceased. We oftentimes find that these distinct characteristics of our grief tend to distance us even further from those who want to love and comfort us but who don’t understand some of the thoughts and feelings that send us reeling. Being able to talk in counseling with someone who does understand - and who can help us work our way through our newly challenged life - can provide us with an outlet that will then allow us to accept what our friends and loved ones can offer without our experiencing so greatly the negative feelings that the limits of their understanding may bring.

**What do I tell the children?**

Especially when they are in the midst of their own grief, parents may be confused about what to tell children about the death of a parent, a sibling, or other loved one, wondering how much a child can handle, how much detail should be provided. A counselor can help a parent determine what to tell the child, when to tell, what amount of detail to give, and so on.
My wife just cries all the time. My husband won’t talk about it; he’s shut me out. I think my daughter blames me for her father’s death.

Everyone grieves in his own way, but different styles of grieving can cause problems within families when members attempt to cope as individuals and as a family unit. Sometimes families find it helpful to talk together with a counselor, to work through periods of grief together with an objective, neutral party who can help family members understand each other’s efforts to cope and help them learn how to best help each other and themselves through this difficult time.

I can’t get the picture out of my head. I awaken at night seeing her body.

Those who have witnessed a suicide or found the body may be plagued by painful, intrusive memories, including vivid visions of the scene itself. It is not unusual for such survivors to experience symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder. For these survivors especially, therapeutic assistance may be in order, helping them learn to manage the disturbing thoughts, memories, and feelings that interfere with daily life and efforts to heal. In addition, those who have witnessed the suicide or found the body may feel the need to talk about the experience but may be hesitant to share such details with friends or other relatives, out of concern for their ability to hear sometimes gruesome details. Seeing a counselor can provide a survivor the opportunity to fully talk about such details absent the fears we have of the effects the details might have on friends and family.

There may be myriad other reasons for seeing a counselor. Some persons who take their own lives may have been suicidal for a period of time before ultimately killing themselves. Survivors who lived with loved ones who talked about or made previous attempts to kill themselves may find it helpful to talk with a therapist about that time, about their efforts to love and support a suicidal person, their efforts to prevent the suicide from occurring. And survivors who are finding that the magnitude of their grief is affecting their ability to manage their current life may find it helpful to work through their grief with a skilled therapist who can provide suggestions for different ways of coping.

Not everyone who loses a loved one to suicide needs to see a counselor. But many find counseling to be beneficial. Therapists cannot take away our pain, nor would we want them to. But they can be an objective, nonjudgmental presence, a warm and comforting person with whom we can talk about our pain as well as the things we think and do and feel in the wake of a suicide death. Counselors can listen to us talk about things that we may be hesitant to talk about with others. And they can provide suggestions for ways of coping. Sharing our grief, this deep, most personal feeling, with a counselor can help us feel less alone, at a time when we feel most alone. And that may be all the reason we need.

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