

Hope in the Aftermath of Suicide

Second Edition

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Lost and Found: rebuilding your life after loss © Jan McDaniel 2014, 2016

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Introduction

This book came from my experiences with love, suicide, and hope. After losing my husband of 33 years in 2007, I spent years talking to and working with other survivors who had lost precious loved ones to suicide and professionals who had dedicated their lives to caring for this population.

What I found was people reaching out to support each other during the darkest moments of their lives. By sharing both pain and healing, they hold each other up and begin to rebuild their lives, finding new meaning in tragedy. They remember those they lost by helping others, gaining strength from each connection. Their lives are changed and, though they will always miss those dear ones, they grow stronger and can move forward to experience happiness and joy once again.

If you have lost someone to suicide, this book was written just for you. If not, please share it with someone who needs to know he or she can survive traumatic loss. The short sections are designed to be easy to read at times when concentration is often difficult. If printed, the extra space on some pages allows readers to write down their thoughts and reactions (use a separate journal or notebook for the digital version). The simple messages can help in the early days after loss, and the suggested activities may provide help for rebuilding lives later on. Using this book for group study or in a support group setting can add extra support to existing programs.

I hope these pages help you.

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Hope

Hope is a fragile thing. All too often, it can be lost in the crush of modern life.

When hope dies, a person might feel there is no reason to live.

If you lost a loved one to suicide, you face the same questions other survivors ask. Why? How could such a thing happen? Didn't he know I loved him? Did she realize how much pain her death would cause those left behind? Was it my fault?

The answers to those and other questions are complicated. Circumstances or events that may seem to be responsible are often only part of a very complex story. Even with recent advances in medical science, much about the human brain remains a mystery.

Use the space below to write down the questions you need to ask. What answers come into your mind?

Where Do Thoughts of Suicide Come From?

Why does one person complete the suicide act when another faces similar stress without resorting to such drastic measures? The answer to this question involves many variables and can depend on past experiences, genetics, stress levels, personality traits, life experience, natural resiliency, injuries, mental illnesses, personality and mood disorders, and coping ability.

Stress, medications, and other things can cause physical changes in the brain, resulting in distorted thoughts, hallucinations, and/or a breakdown in logic and reasoning capabilities.

Often, thoughts are only of escaping this terrible pain. If family and friends are thought of at all, these thoughts may focus on death as a way to relieve loved ones of the burden of dealing with the person in pain.

To learn more, read “The Suicidal Trance,” by Richard Heckler here:

http://www.allianceofhope.org/survivor_experience/richard-heckler-on-the-suicidal-trance.html

Notes:

How Am I Going to Get Through This?

You will get through this, and you don't have to do it alone. It has been said that a suicide is like a grenade going off in the middle of a family. The destruction affects everyone, yet each person may react differently. Healing takes place in small increments, unnoticed at first, but healing is possible. Grief after suicide is much like grief after other kinds of significant loss, but there are additional issues survivors of suicide loss face.

Create a circle of support around yourself to help you deal with these issues. Counselors trained in traumatic grief – if possible, specifically suicide grief – other survivors, doctors, family members and friends...all can help. Reach out to people who understand that your life has been changed and that you will need to tell and retell your story in a safe, non-judgmental place until you can regain your strength.

While you are grieving, it is easy to forget about basic needs like staying hydrated (drink water), nourishing your body with healthy foods, getting as much rest as you can, and taking any medications that are required. Take care of yourself. Be gentle. You have suffered a deep, deep wound.

What can you do today that will help you begin to heal? Use the space below to outline a plan for your circle of support.

What Else Do I Need?

There are specific things that can help you take small steps toward healing. When you are ready, try something from this list.

- Write letters to the one you lost.
- Write in a journal to release negative feelings and thoughts.
- Exercise. Even a simple walk is a victory.
- Work on a project, such as a memory scrapbook or memorial garden.
- Search for other things that help and try to stay open to new ideas and resources.

What happened when you tried something from this list? How did you feel? Write down your thoughts here or start a separate journal.

We Do Not Heal Alone

When suicide occurs, chaos and family turmoil may or may not follow. There may be times when family members do not understand each other. Each person has had a different relationship with the one who completed suicide; each person may have a different reaction and/or set of coping skills. For those who had always been close, this is difficult, and for those whose relationships were already strained, healing may seem impossible.

For these reasons, survivors in the same family sometimes find it difficult to help each other. Denial can cause separation, but understanding that each person must do his or her own grief work and allowing this to take place with no pressure can go a long way toward reducing stress and healing the family unit.

Survivors can learn how to respect each other in new roles, how to listen, how to wait. Sharing available information, things that help, and a circle of support can lead to open, honest communication and a love that is stronger than ever.

Walking through grief is not an easy journey, but each step leads toward a new life that brings peaceful moments, contentment, even joy.

How can your loved one be a part of your new life? What can you do to honor his or her life?

How Do I Rebuild a New Life?

Oh, I did not want a new life after my husband died. I struggled to hold onto the old life, the one I knew had departed with him. At least I knew that intellectually. My mind had no trouble recalling the terrible thing that had happened, the details. My heart, on the other hand, lagged behind and refused to accept such loss. He was so much a part of me that I believe I went partway with him into death, into a limbo land between life and death, where I stayed for a long time.

Slowly, as my painful journey through grief continued (mornings insisted on dawning, one after the other), I began to make my way back to life. Unwillingly. But once I realized his love still held me up, that he was waiting on the new shore, I turned loose, floundered in the deep, dark sea of grief, and followed others like me into a new life.

It became a good life. I knew my husband's illnesses and injuries had caused his death, but they did not define him.

How can you honor the life of the one you loved? Read more about this topic in the following pages as you think about plans for your new life.

One Moment at a Time

Perhaps most importantly, take one day, one hour, or even one moment at a time. By focusing on one thing and doing only those things that must be done, you give yourself and others a precious gift – the gift of healing. Make a short list each evening of two or three things you hope to get done the next day. Prioritize the items on the list, from most important to least important.

Don't worry if you can't do anything except breathe. Another gift we are given while we are grieving is time. If, after a little while, friends want you to get back to being your old self, know that they probably mean well. Children must be cared for, and jobs won't wait forever. Bills continue to arrive, but grieving is exhausting, and new circumstances bring challenges. Follow your heart, and continue to take care of yourself. Ask for understanding because you are on a journey, not just a quick trip.

Though it may seem impossible right now, you will build a new life, one that includes joy and happiness, one that honors the life your loved one lived. Others have gone beyond just surviving, and you can, too. You are not alone.

What do you need right now? How can you find it?

Help Others Understand

Help others understand how they can support you as you work through the grieving process. Use the suggestions below in a letter or email. Change the wording, if you like, to reflect your own voice and concerns.

Please understand...

I've lost someone I love.

It hurts. Now and for some time to come, I will need your support. Please know that I care about you.

I may not know what I need at times, but here are things you can do to help:

*Listen without judging or trying to fix me.

*Invite me to join in activities, but know I might need to leave early or decline.

*Respect my need for solitude.

*Be patient. I'm healing, but I need to do it in my own time.

*Let me cry and ask the same questions over and over.

*Understand that holidays and anniversaries are especially difficult.

*Be okay if I respond to random things that remind me of the one I lost.

*Share good memories.

*Don't forget me or my loved one.

Thank you.

Reach Out to Others

A major step forward in my healing journey happened when I began to write about loss, reconnection, and hope for the *Alliance of Hope for suicide loss survivors* (AOH), a nonprofit organization whose members and whose founder/executive director share hope and help with each other. Here, in this online world, I witnessed the unfolding of a global miracle.

The *Alliance* started with one woman's grief. Ronnie Walker lost her step-son in 1995. A professional in the counseling field who is trained in all aspects of traumatic grief and who is experienced in working with survivors of suicide, individually and in group settings, she speaks of that time in her life with great compassion for those she helps now. Her personal experience made her realize there was a need for peer support guided by clinicians. Her ideas - with little to no funding - compelled her to found the organization, and her continuing vision is "changing the landscape" for survivors, worldwide.

Survivors moderate the online community forum, following guidelines based on Walker's professional experience. Moderators are trained to reply to posts by members as well as handle routine moderation tasks and flag those with special needs so that issues there receive proper clinical responses. Stewards greet new members and play an important part on this all-volunteer staff. Together, the team spends countless hours creating and maintaining a "sacred space for healing" that is nonjudgmental and safe. Other members of the *Alliance* instinctively post and reply in similar ways as they realize they are not alone and that they have found a community in which all are traveling together.

Members are encouraged to seek counseling for more detailed help, but AOH saves lives every day. The aftermath of suicide is very difficult and devastating, but having other survivors as part of a "circle of support" can make all the difference in the world for proactive healing, especially for those in areas where other services are limited or nonexistent and where counseling sessions or local support groups meet only once or twice a month. Survivors from all over the world can come to the *Alliance* forum at any hour of the day or night and find others who understand and who are willing to listen and respond.

To learn more about the AOH community forum, web site (full of helpful articles), and the blog, visit www.allianceofhope.org. To request information about becoming a sponsor for the tens of thousands of survivors who seek support through this organization, send an email to RonnieWalker@allianceofhope.org

Can you reach out to others, either online or in your local community? List the organizations and individuals who might be of help, and contact them.

How To Create A Circle of Support

If you have ever loved someone who died by suicide, you know the shock, confusion, utter pain and devastation that follow. One of the best pieces of advice I received after my husband ended his life was to create a "circle of support" around myself. I began this process soon after his death. My circle is composed of individuals, groups and professionals who play specific roles in my grief recovery.

Family members and friends were the first people I turned to for help. My daughters flew to my side and remained staunch supporters.

The members of my church helped me in countless small and large ways, by holding my hand as I waited for officers to finish their investigation and remove my husband's body from our home, by handing me a fishing pole during a sermon about those whose faith had been challenged by tragedy, by sitting quietly on the pew beside me and understanding while I cried. One of the most touching gifts was a card from a neighbor I had never met. Enclosed was two hundred dollars.

I had to work with my employer, handle final details, and notify others. The whole thing was overwhelming, but any kindness that was shown by those around me made a big difference. I learned that, in general, people do want to help, but sometimes they do not know how. Now, I ask for specific kinds of help and usually receive it.

Joining the *Alliance of Hope for suicide loss survivors* broadened my circle and put me in touch with people who know the aftermath of suicide is complex and traumatic and that it takes a long time to process all of the associated emotions. The *Alliance* provides an information-rich web site and blog as well as a clinically moderated community forum. Here, I found survivors who share the burden of each other's pain and who give and receive encouragement and hope every day. Writing about what happened and reading what others who have experienced similar heartbreak have to say is one of the best ways to seek healing. In fact, it is when we first begin to reach out to encourage others that we can be assured our healing has started. By giving to others, we receive strength and compassion, a sense of belonging and survival.

Attending local Survivors of Suicide (SOS) support group meetings helped me during the first year, but I learned these resources are not always available. Mine disbanded due to so few people attending, but I found out that hospitals, funeral homes, and even churches sometimes have general grief groups. I went to several groups specific to suicide at mental health centers in Atlanta, but

they were too far from my home for me to go every week. Online connections are as close as my computer, so the *Alliance of Hope* works best for me. We never know where life will take us. Ultimately, I trained with *The Link National Counseling and Resource Center* (www.thelink.org) to lead the local SOS support group in my county.

My family doctor and several counselors guided me in different ways at different times, including prescribing medications for short-term use as they were needed. I found it made a difference when I worked with professionals trained in traumatic grief or who had experience working with suicide survivors, but I learned some useful things from all of them. I was diagnosed with "complicated grief." My research led to information about this and other lingering problems survivors can face, such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Survivors need help to deal with these issues, especially if they witnessed the suicide or found the bodies of loved ones. Here is a page that explains some of the common (and normal) reactions survivors may experience:

http://www.allianceofhope.org/survivor_experience/.

By creating a circle of support, I began to build a new life that has purpose, happiness, hope and - most importantly - a way to cherish the love I shared with my husband.

Refine your ideas for creating your own circle of support. What resources are available to you? Who can you turn to for help? What will you do if that help is unavailable?

Out of the Broken

I enjoy making jewelry from semi-precious gemstones. Many other kinds of activities have helped me at different times on my healing journey...and in different ways. These include swimming, other forms of exercise, knitting, traveling, writing, finding new friends, participating in support groups and training sessions about traumatic grief, and returning to church. They all had something to teach me. My faith had been tested to its limits and beyond, but I found that God was still with me, after all, and once again I see Him in my life every day.

One day, as I sat at the kitchen table with a sandwich bag full of itty-bitty stone chips in one hand and a circle of memory wire in the other, I wondered if working with the tiny discarded scraps was worth the effort. After all, the larger stone beads were complete, as close to perfect as they could be, and quite pleasing and easy to string. Their bright colors, hard to miss, beckoned from the box in their corner. Anyone would be proud to give or receive jewelry made from these. Intricate patterns and possibilities began to come to mind.

But something pulled me to the mismatched specks of tattered remnants in my hand. Once part of beautiful gemstones, these were the leavings. The other jewels had gone on to find a place around a neck or arm, working together in harmony, the way things should work, or parked royally in their own special containers, sorted by size, color, and type, waiting for new roles in which to shine.

So I began. Without much hope of seeing a result that pleased me, I sorted through the specks and larger dabs. Some had no holes; on some the drill had left a half-done job. I cast these aside into their own pile on the table. I didn't even try to construct a pattern. What was the point?

I continued sorting, fitting each chip at random over the wire. As the necklace filled in, I began to see how much these tired and broken chips had in common with survivors of suicide loss. If the stones had been able to think, I had no doubt they would see their lives as over. They would see themselves as destroyed, unlovable, and left behind, so much trash to sweep away.

I'm sure that happens to stones and people. But today, the necklace I was making suddenly looked beautiful. I did nothing to make that happen. The beauty from the stones themselves, connected as they were with others, took on a lovely

pattern. I could have spent hours rearranging the designs and not come close to what I was seeing now. I decided to make a bracelet. The same thing happened again.

Yes, these gems tell our own stories. Survivors are broken, lovely. Together, we are stronger. Our colors still shine, no matter the deep cuts and scuffs we've suffered. Together, our picture begins to emerge. It is a picture of strength, beauty, peace and hope.

At the *Alliance of Hope*, members from all over the world interact with respect and understanding. Respect for each individual's belief system and understanding because we have been there.

As for me, I believe that out of the broken, God makes something beautiful. I believe in all of us.

What are your strengths?

To help someone else who suffered a loss by suicide, you can do this:

- >Be there. Listen.
- >Don't forget after everyone else has returned to normal life.
- >Say the lost one's name. Share memories.
- >Be patient. Repeat the same reassurances over and over.
- >Offer specific help, and include survivors in activities.
- >Speak out against stigma.
- >Offer support to related groups and organizations.
- >Join people who lost loved ones to suicide and speak for them and for the ones they lost.
- > Encourage one survivor to reach out to another to share both pain and healing.
- >Participate in grassroots movements and nonprofit organizations to fight stigma and to provide education to first responders and medical and law enforcement personnel.

Instructions for the next two pages:

If you need help in the immediate aftermath of suicide, copy the next page and keep it with a pen or pencil in a central location, perhaps the kitchen table or a small table near the front door. When friends ask what they can do to help, show them the chart and allow them to choose what they can do.

Further out from your loss, and you still need help. Ask for it. Use the next chart in the same way to allow family, friends, and neighbors to help out. Using an organizational chart like these can make things easier for you and them. Most importantly, this system can get you the help you need.

HOW TO HELP CHART

Kind friends ask what they can do to help us right now. These are some of the things we may need today and in the next few days. If you are able to help, please list your name and number. Your help is appreciated.

NEED	Your Name/Phone	Best Day/Time
Pick up out-of-town family		
Run errands (pharmacy, grocery)		
Make calls to family and friends		
Answer telephone/greet visitors		
Help in kitchen (note who brings food and type of dish)		
Occupy children in quiet room (read stories, draw, games)		
Walk and feed pets		
Make a monetary donation		

OTHER: _____

HOW TO HELP CHART #2

Kind friends ask what they can do to help us during this time. These are some of the things we may need in the weeks ahead. If you are able to help, please list your name and number. Your help is appreciated.

NEED	Your Name/Phone	Best Day/Time
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Make brief visits or calls

Run errands/drive to appointments

Take shopping or out to lunch

Help with household chores

Make small repairs/cut grass

Babysit/transportation for older children

Walk and feed pets

Attend a support group meeting

Share helpful resources

Make a monetary donation

OTHER: _____

Lost and Found: rebuilding your life after loss

I knew that my husband's suicide did not define him, but I had been letting it define me. When I realized it didn't have to – suddenly – it didn't anymore.

Love and Suicide

I began the most profound journey of my life by leaving it. To be more precise, my life left me. If the people around me on May 22, 2007, could have seen the wounds my husband's suicide caused and the slow unwinding of each fresh realization that was to come over the next five years, they would have airlifted me to the Intensive Care Unit of the closest major Trauma Center. As it was, they rushed me – after an interminable brush with horror – to the local hospital emergency room.

I was twenty-one years old when I met my husband, and we married a year later. For the next thirty-three years, we were as close as two people can be. He was good and kindhearted, not just to me and our daughters, but to everyone. I trusted him completely. That was why it was so difficult for me to understand when he ended his life in 2007.

He had handled a lifelong struggle with Major Depression fairly well, but he was overwhelmed in his mid-50s and diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder in 2004. During the worst of his illness, I tried to educate myself on what he was going through. I took courses and did a lot of reading, talked to doctors and even created a manual for our family to help them understand what was happening and what could happen.

Now, however, I know there is no way to prepare adequately for the sudden and violent loss that is suicide. I know there are far more stages of grief than the handful that are often mentioned. And I know that for a small percentage of people with mental and behavioral issues, these illnesses are terminal.

My husband's illness and death put my life “on hold” for a number of years. For months after he died, I could neither read very much nor write, but gradually, as I began to look through the eyes of survivors in all stages of recovery, I felt once again the familiar tug all writers know, the need to put into words what I saw. As the years passed, I wanted to go beyond being comforted myself to helping guide others through the many stops and starts on the journey of grief, and the *Alliance of Hope for suicide loss survivors* gave me that opportunity. But the *Alliance* gave me a lot more. It gave me a way to grow stronger and to find hope. I became a

forum moderator and started writing again when I was asked to compose short daily tips for surviving the holidays. From there, I began to write for the *Alliance* blog, occasional articles at first and then a regular column, “This New Life.” More importantly, the *Alliance of Hope* gave me a way to lead my family out of the shambles our lives had become.

As I read posts on the community forum at the *Alliance* and replied to strangers who shared similar tragedies in their own lives, I was allowed to bear witness to the amazing depths of the human heart, and what I learned enabled me to reconnect, if slowly, with the world around me. I borrowed strength from people all over the world who understood how I felt.

Even though loss destroys the life we have, recovery can and does take place. Each individual is unique. Each relationship with a lost loved one is different from that of anyone else. And, there is no one timetable that fits all. However, there are similarities we can use to connect with each other and with the world again. With the support of those who understand what we are going through, we can build a new life, one that is productive and even happy. Though our lives are changed forever and the loss of the ones we love can never be forgotten, we can experience a deepening of existence and – though it may seem impossible – a resurgence of joy.

Survivors look for and need specific answers and guidance throughout the post-traumatic healing process, no matter how long it might take. Since each individual is unique – brought to this point in life by a pool of genetic predisposition, past history, environmental influences, and variables such as quality or lack of support system, ongoing physical issues or job/family responsibilities, and hard-to-define characteristics such as resiliency, emotional temperament, and outside influences (i.e. lifestyle choices including but not limited to friends, drugs, and alcohol) – each relationship with the person who completed suicide is equally as unique. The process itself must be created for and by survivors on an individual basis.

The beginning of healing often goes unnoticed. Almost impossible to accomplish alone, sometimes leading to many years of suffering related to unexpressed grief, this type of healing is accomplished in tiny increments. The most effective way to ensure a successful journey through grief is through co-support. A recognition bond creates itself immediately when two survivors meet. That bond is strong and leads both to engage in a natural form of “grief talk.” As a fire sparks through

combustion, so does survivor healing, but the journey does not end there. It is only the beginning.

Connective healing is an emotional – and sometimes a literal – life-line.

Who has become a life-line for you? Where can you turn when you're feeling overwhelmed? Make a list, with phone numbers and other contact information. Carry the list with you in your pocket or purse. Put a copy by your phone. Include the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 800-273-8255.

The Mind-Heart Connection

Eight days after I lost my husband to suicide, I returned to my job as a newspaper reporter, but it took much longer for me to return to life. For the first couple of years, I avoided stress as much as I could and tried to take good care of myself and my daughters. I did only what I had to do. I might have been surviving, but I was doing little else.

Intellectually, I knew what had happened, but my heart was not ready to accept what my mind already knew as fact. This conflict between what I knew to be real and what I felt to be impossible put my mind and heart in direct conflict with each other and created a situation in which my internal balance was off. I could not rest. I felt the disharmony continuously. It felt like being torn, quite literally, in two.

I felt disconnected from other people and even from the physical world around me. I moved through time as if the hours were an alien landscape. In this limbo world, I realized I had followed my husband as far as I could into madness and beyond life itself, but I was still tethered to the world of the living, no matter how slender the thread. When I could go no further, he continued his journey alone and left me adrift in a cold, dark sea of sorrow between my old life and the unreachable shore of my new one.

In this icy darkness, alone and almost drowning, I struggled. For a long time, my focus was on looking backward and trying to hold onto the life I once had, even as it slipped through my fingers. Later, when I realized that was impossible, I released myself to the mercies of time's rip tide. At that point, I really had nothing to anchor me. It is at that point that many survivors lose hope and think of leaving a life that has become tasteless and bitter. The view from there is one that will never change. At least, that is what I thought when I lost the protective shock that had enabled me to breathe in and out, to complete chores automatically, to lumber along woodenly through the interminable moments of grief.

Eventually, however, the pace of my new life changed. Gradually – very gradually – my heart began to catch up with my mind, and the distance between the two narrowed but not without a difficult struggle. With lifelines thrown from my family and other survivors who became new friends, I moved through the days on a "one step forward, two steps back" journey toward healing.

What I found was that each year the pain seemed easier to bear, the loneliness less threatening. Comfort and peace came back into my life--gradually at first--and I rediscovered some of the joy I had always known. I rediscovered myself, too.

What started as recovery for the sake of my children became a life I wanted to live. Along the way, I rediscovered the love I had for my husband. That love had never left me, but now it was untainted by the pain and confusion surrounding his death. The memories were good memories; I could think of him and smile. So much had been taken from me. I wanted to make sense of the life I had left. And then, I made a crucial mistake. I took on too much work. The experience triggered some health issues, a huge setback. Now, what was I going to do? Could I rebuild-again?

The lesson I learned is that we still need to take care of ourselves even after the initial period of intense grief. Overdoing, as some of us may be tempted to do, can complicate our lives in ways we don't imagine when we make the initial commitments. Here are a few simple lessons, gifts from the journey that helped me survive.

- Going back to a "one moment at a time" approach to life is always an option.
- Using a calendar or weekly "to do" list makes handling chores or errands easier.
- Eating healthy foods and drinking water provide needed energy.
- Taking time to exercise is worth the effort.
- Reconnecting with old friends and support groups is as valuable now as it was the first year.
- Naps are restorative, and a good night's sleep is vital to well-being.
- Consulting doctors and going back to counseling can be helpful.
- Saying "no" is an important skill worth developing.
- Taking a step back is a step forward in disguise.

Surviving

The world is changed forever for survivors after the deaths of loved ones by suicide. They will not be the people they once were and, for a long while, they may not want to be anyone new. Part of the pain they experience comes from mourning lost lives and their lost futures, themselves, but mourning is a healing process involving decisions and actions, and there are actions they can take to make the transition easier.

From the earliest days, when all they can do is breathe, they are doing something to survive. They keep busy. They fight stigma. They make changes in their lives. Instinctively, they yearn to turn on a light in their darkness, to bring meaning to the incomprehensible. They face more never-ending questions. *What will I do now? Will I challenge myself? Will I find ways to make my life honor the one I lost? How will I contribute to the healing of those around me?*

If you are a survivor, there *is* something you can do. Here are a few ideas that might be useful anytime but especially around holidays.

- Find (and give) comfort wherever you can.
- Accept invitations, knowing it is perfectly okay to leave early, or decline if you don't want to go.
- If crowds and holiday trappings set off unpleasant emotions for you, shop online and have gifts sent directly to recipients. Many stores offer last-minute delivery, personalized messages, free shipping, and for a small charge, gift-wrapping.
- Keep only the traditions you love and think of new things to do, too. Each year can be different.
- Ask a friend over, or plan a lunch out.
- Find time to rest each day. If recent activities have depleted your strength, make time for yourself and choose ways to rebuild that strength.
- Reach out to others. Don't wait for someone to offer help. Ask for specific things to be done.
- Talk about your loved ones when you wish. You may be surprised to find that family and friends are only waiting to take their cues from you.
- If you do not write in a journal or meditate, try it now. Meditation can be as simple as finding a quiet place for contemplation or prayer.

Remember that you can build a full and productive life, even if you don't think you can right now. Be realistic and open to re-evaluating your needs and making changes along the way. Allow time for your heart to begin to heal that wounded place inside you.

Make your own emotional and physical needs a priority. If you have obligations or others who depend on you, it is even more important to take care of yourself.

Receiving reassurances from those who have been on this journey longer can assist in helping a survivor look forward to better times. Even before that, and often very soon, a survivor can begin to reach back to lend encouragement and hope to even newer survivors.

No one wants a new world without a beloved family member or friend. The wound is too deep. This is why it is so difficult to reintegrate into life after loss. It is also why survivors can feel abandoned or betrayed over and over as those who mean well move on and expect the survivor to do the same. Attempts to urge or force reintegration often wound the survivor even more.

If you are reading this book with the hope of helping someone heal from loss, be patient. Imagine the person closest to you suddenly gone from your life, perhaps with no warning at all and by his or her own hand. Take time from reading right now to sit with this idea for a few minutes. Then imagine the pain involved if those few minutes turned into a lifetime.

Unspeakable Love

“There is a sacredness in tears. They are not the mark of weakness, but of power. They speak more eloquently than ten thousand tongues. They are messengers of overwhelming grief...and unspeakable love.” -Washington Irving

All of the cares of the world faded away when I lost the man I had been married to for thirty-three years, my soul-mate. The things that had meant so much to me just a short time before, the things we both had worked hard for, became as nothing. I feared nothing, even death. The world – at least our world – stopped.

Shock took over; the degree to which suicide affected my life was intense and very severe. Though my husband had struggled with depression his entire life, though he had suffered from active bipolar disorder for at least five years before he died and had tried to complete suicide several times before, the loss felt sudden and violent.

Like other survivors, I became a different person, set on a new path. I learned this process varies with each individual, but there are certain things we all face and specific guidelines we can work with to sculpt our journeys in a way that ultimately returns us to health and wholeness. It is then that we can form new relationships with the ones we lost.

I had no idea of what I would do until that happened. I didn't understand how I could cope or continue to function at work or to care for my daughters. I knew they still needed me, especially now, though they were both young adults. I didn't even know how to take care of myself.

Beneath those immediate concerns, I asked myself another question. *How can I be living when so much that was a part of me is gone?*

I knew that all humans experience loss, that my husband's time on earth was always limited. I tried to recognize the similarities and honor the differences between suicide and other types of loss. I mourned. I felt lonely. But there were issues surrounding suicide that I did not know how to handle.

Healing was not taking place, at least not that I could see. I felt “stuck.” With the help of professionals trained specifically to work with those experiencing traumatic

grief and the aftermath of suicide, I began to see how “stuck” I really was and how healing was happening in small bits and pieces anyway. I joined support groups and read everything I could find about suicide, techniques and therapies like Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) and hypnosis. I tried guided meditation and began to see some peace in my life.

I faced a lifelong fear of water and learned to swim. I challenged myself to improve my health and change my life through diet and exercise. I sought advice from counselors. I changed jobs and moved closer to one of my daughters, bought a house. Above all, I didn't give up.

And it made a difference. It continues to make a difference each day, as I put one foot in front of the other. Sometimes I fall back a few paces. I still miss my husband, and sometimes can't believe he is not with me. When I feel the worst, I go to the *Alliance of Hope for suicide loss survivors* forums and always find someone, somewhere who understands. My life has become a healing journey ... and that's okay.

Despite trauma, confusion, and challenges, there is hope beyond traumatic grief and a real possibility that the future can be satisfying and productive. Though it may be unimaginable at first, happiness can return. Love and good memories can become powerful motivators in a world that desperately needs hope. As survivors who have been on this journey longer will tell you, the pain softens as healing takes place. It is replaced with strength, wisdom, and compassion.

No one wanted suicide. None of us deserved to lose our loved ones or our old lives. And we didn't have a choice about it, but there is a choice we can make now.

Use a journal or simple spiral notebook to pour out your pain, frustration, and longing, to write letters to the one you lost, and to record the smallest victory. You can start today and, as the pages fill, you can begin to think about your new life and what you want it to be. That is something within your control.

As survivors, we are able to live in two worlds. We learn to balance them both. We still love the ones we lost, yet we love the ones we still have in this life. Or, if we have no one left, then we learn to love ourselves.

Maybe that's what healing is, the ability to survive, to live even though part of you has gone to another plane of existence. Take heart, and know that you do not have to choose between those who left and those who are still beside you.

This New Life

It hurts to lose someone you love to suicide. Working toward healing is heartbreakingly difficult. To complicate matters, it often feels like no one else understands. I can't bring my husband back to life, no matter how much I want that, but there are things I *can* do to help myself. Furthermore, there are people who will help me build a new life.

On the *Alliance of Hope* community forum, ordinary people challenge some of the issues survivors face: being told to "get over it," stigma, and shunning. They do this by sharing their personal stories and strategies for survival. What they say makes me stronger. What they say makes me know I can go on. The world expected a lot of me when I was at my most vulnerable, just days and weeks after my husband's death. Grief and healing have no timetable, but work demands and social interactions sometimes forced me into compliance with a society that values "masks" and shallow answers like "I'm fine."

Sometimes, well-intentioned friends are still not sure what to say. They may be afraid of "attracting" loss to their own lives or of reminding me of my pain. Pain is always with us ... until it isn't. But our loss is still there. I long to hear someone say my husband's name. My heart thrives on shared memories. I want him to be remembered. So, I asked myself what I could do to honor the wonderful man he was, the good life he lived. At first, I felt helpless, but others survivors taught me that I *can* do many things to accomplish this and to contribute to a "new" view of suicide:

- Tell the truth. Share my story without hiding that my loved one's death was by suicide.
- Gather family and friends. Use age-appropriate language to talk about him and to show others it is okay to cry and to remember.
- Actively seek healing. Projects that honor his life build resilience and strength, whether done alone, with family, or alongside community members.
- Be open to the pain of others. Patience and counseling, if needed, can go a long way toward mending broken hearts.
- Accept opportunities to share what I've learned with individuals and groups.

Suicide is not contagious, but compassion should be. Suicide has been cloaked in secrecy until recent years, but that is changing. The truth about suicide is beginning to emerge, and it is survivors who are leading the way.

In the aftermath of suicide, survivors often see great changes in themselves. Life has been interrupted by tragedy and everything from core beliefs to everyday interests may seem different. Survivors may ask if they will ever feel “like themselves” again. Such soul-searching brings many other changes that must be dealt with ... questions about faith, reevaluations of what is really important, and reluctance to engage with people and activities that used to be central to existence. Grief can be almost unbearable while exhaustion and new responsibilities only add to the feeling of being isolated and alienated from everything familiar and comforting.

It can be tempting to “run away” and seek out a new place to live, even though the loss cannot be escaped in this way. Decisions feel overwhelming, and survivors may feel trapped, unsure of what to do. Conventional advice suggests waiting one to five years before making major life changes, but circumstances sometimes dictate otherwise. Traumatized survivors might be unable to stay in the home where a loved one died, especially if they found the bodies or were present as the suicide took place. They may fear staying alone at night when anxiety can exaggerate the slightest sound.

As strength grows, however, survivors reconnect with the selves they used to know and find new insights and dimensions to their personalities.

Most of us are familiar with the beautiful music of Judy Collins. After her thirty-three-year-old son's suicide in 1992, she struggled as all survivors do. But then, she did what she knew how to do best. She communicated. Drawing on her own experience and conversations with hundreds of people who have grieved the tragic death of a loved one, she began to write.

One of her books about loss and recovery is *The Seven T's: Finding Hope and Healing in the Wake of Tragedy*. Ironically, it was published just days after my husband's suicide in May of 2007, and when I read it, I found compassion and comfort and a plan for healing.

The seven "T's" are Truth (don't hide it); Trust (let it happen); Therapy (find some); Treasure (cherish your loved one); Thrive (live in the best way possible); Treat (nourish yourself); and Triumph (this is the goal for your new life).

Survivors are creating themselves and their new lives. One of those who has been leading the way is Iris Bolton, founder and emeritus executive director of The Link Counseling and National Resource Center (www.thelink.org) in Sandy Springs, Georgia. Bolton's 1983 book, *My Son, My Son*, was inspired by the suicide of her twenty-year-old son. She shouldered the additional burden of being director of the counseling center at the time. Even professionals in the mental health field are not immune to loss by suicide.

This book and Bolton's ongoing support for survivors worldwide focus on the “gift” that comes with unimaginable loss. Her words help heal broken hearts. Part of each survivor's personal healing journey is finding that gift. At first, seeing such a thing in loss seems impossible, but the gift will be revealed with time and seeking, and then the choice is the survivor's.

What will he or she do with this gift? It may not be writing a book. It may be as simple as standing silently aside and listening to the pain of someone else. It may take the form of sharing grief support resources with community leaders, first responders, coroners, hospital personnel, and law enforcement. Local Survivors of Suicide (S.O.S) groups add important support to communities, and someone must be trained to lead these. Part of Bolton's legacy is this kind of preparation at The Link as well as ongoing support groups and mental health training and support for law enforcement.

What is your gift? Keep a list of things that interest you and talents you have. Survivors often gain compassion and wisdom they never experienced before. An open mind and an open heart can help uncover treasures in this new life.

Baby Steps

The pain and confusion of losing my husband overwhelmed everything I tried to do in the beginning. But as I worked through the hours and days, I grew a tiny bit stronger all along and began to experience moments of comfort and peace. I didn't even realize healing was happening until later on when I could look back to see the progress I had made.

Grief work means doing things to heal from deep wounds (or coping with what happened) psychologically. Survivors often ask me how I healed, how I survived. I can honestly answer that finding my "grief legs" and regaining the first, tentative balance in life came about because of simple and specific things that helped me actively work through the worst of my grief.

I feel my husband's presence around me most of the time, not in any physical or mystic sense but in the peace and contentment that has grown inside me. That is why I'm always surprised when I think about or write about his death. It seems unreal or false to think of myself as a widow, not as it did at first when the pain was unbearable, but because I know now that death really does not separate us. When I came to that point, I knew I could heal. I realized that the physical body is only one connection. The love we shared lives on and, if I can hold on, it can outlast the pain. It wasn't always this way for me. Sometimes, it isn't now, but that bit of knowledge and confidence was there all the time, buried under the shock, confusion, conflicting emotions, terrible pain, nightmare existence and just plain yearning I felt for my precious, one-of-a-kind husband and the old life that was forever lost to me in 2007.

I had to feel the grief to work through it. In the process my faith, always strong, had disappeared. My universe was altered on a molecular level. I thought I would never be myself again or feel any happiness or joy. I had lost all that. Now, that new life I dreaded has become a refuge of comfort, a haven of safety. I am still on my life's journey, but now - rather than looking back and mourning what I have lost - I feel like I face forward toward the unknown...and the ultimate rediscovering of the one I believe waits for me.

Gifts on the Journey

One day I saw a man who looked very much like my husband. That's happened before. It used to hurt, but now it makes me smile and brings back some wonderful memories.

Suicide covers up a lot of precious memories. Science tells us our brains are wired to remember trauma and dangerous encounters in hopes that such knowledge – quickly called up when needed – will protect us from future harm. Other parts of our minds and hearts keep all those kinder bits of information tucked away for the days when we are ready for them.

This stranger had no idea of what I saw in him or of the "gift" he gave me. Neither did the tired office worker wearing a business suit in the grocery store several years ago. That time we were both choosing cuts of meat around six o'clock in the evening. He leaned against the counter, obviously tired from a full day at work, and carefully picked up one package and then another. That must have been how my husband looked as he stopped to pick up something special for his family even though he was so exhausted he barely kept his feet.

Seeing these two men triggered so many memories of my husband's love. The first time, I stopped and just stared, still in shock from losing my soul mate. The tableau in front of me brought pain but also affirmation. I imagined some young family eagerly waiting for "Daddy" the way I and our children had. His homecoming was the highlight of our day...and there were many homecomings.

Now, the pain is only slight and fleeting. The memories, thousands of them, bring me joy.

When you are discouraged and believe you cannot make it through another day without the support and love of the one who was so close to you, hold onto the knowledge that one day you will see that kind of love repeated somewhere else, and you will be able to recall why you hurt so badly. We hurt so much because we love them so much. That kind of love is a gift not everyone experiences even once in a lifetime. That kind of love is worth the pain.

That kind of love never dies.

Whenever I feel compassion for another survivor, whenever I reach out to try and comfort someone else, I do it as an extension of the love my husband and I shared. The years spent watching him interact with the world taught me to respect others.

Caring for people and even animals came naturally to him. There were so many moments that expressed that clearly in just a blink of time.

Our dog had puppies one year. We lived on a nonworking farm, an oasis of peace in the country that he created to keep us safe and that must have been a huge comfort to him.

I remember the evening we found the tiny pups, their eyes and ears still sealed. Carefully, he lifted them, one at a time, and held them close. Before gently returning each to the watchful mother, he placed it close to his ear in a moment of communion. When the last was safely tucked away, he turned and looked up at me and smiled. “They each say something different,” he said.

That was his gift. He could see into the hearts of others, man and beast. It was a compassion and wisdom born of struggle and hardship. I think of those puppies when I encounter a survivor in pain. I can see more clearly now the kinds of things he saw, the kinds of things he talked about.

Whenever I listen to those around me, I try to really listen to the message of their hearts. And I try to answer the way he would. In this way, I carry on for him. I do what he would do if he could.

Because of his influence, still strong in my life, I am not alone. In building a new life based on compassion and respect for a pain-filled world, I honor his memory and make him a part of my days.

Navigating this alien landscape for the first time takes courage. Obstacles, stumbling, errors in judgment, and uncertainties are waiting. Also waiting are the treasures of a new land.

Other people may not understand what drives you or why your pace is erratic. They may disagree with your decisions. Sometimes they are right. Listen to them, but then listen – and respond – to your own command. Balance is there inside you. As your new life unfolds, you will find it. You will find yourself again.

Hearing the call is only the first step. There are many, many directions you can take your new life, and just as in your old life, trial and error is okay. Give yourself permission to fail, but give yourself permission to try.

What was special about your loved one? What would he be doing now if he could?
What was important to her? How can you carry forward the love you shared, the
influence they had on you and on the world?

Love is Hope.

My husband loved life. He was the strongest man I ever met. He fought a tremendous battle against Major Depression for many years. At the same time, he made everyone around him happy, most of all me. I never knew how difficult it was for him until the last few years of his life.

After he was diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder, we went on fighting what was happening to him together as long as we could. In the end, I could not go where he was going. He fought on alone until he could fight no more. In May, 2007, he ended his life. In his suicide note, he said no one could have stopped it, even he. I know he tried.

These materials are dedicated to his memory. When he was alive, he was always helping someone. Whatever I do now, I do because of the impact he had on my life. I learned to help others from him.

-Jan McDaniel

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

- Alliance of Hope for suicide loss survivors – www.allianceofhope.org
- HelpGuide – www.helpguide.org
- GriefShare – www.griefshare.org
- Military OneSource – www.militaryonesource.mil
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline - **800-273-8255**
- Suicide Prevention Action Network – www.spanga.org/span
- Veterans Crisis Line – www.veteranscrisisline.net

