



# Surviving Suicide: A Healing Journey

by MARIE WALL

The road to healing after the loss of a boyfriend through suicide was unimaginable. It was 20 years ago this month and the experience has been a life-altering event. The pain was excruciating and the healing took years. The levels of loss were inconceivable. Now after numerous years and knowing that the grief has healed, I would like to share the story with you, in the hope that it helps you. It may assist in understanding your own experience or that of a student, colleague or friend. Maybe it will give you ideas as you continue on your journey without dishonouring the life of someone important to you. For people who have not experienced this type of loss, this article will help you to better understand loss after suicide.

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I would wish that this experience would never be felt by anyone again, yet I know differently. For those who are left behind, surviving the suicide of a friend or loved one is a journey that will change them forever. While the description of my journey may appear to be chronological, the healing journey is more layered than linear, more like a tapestry that interweaves many events, times and experiences that transported me to the health and happiness I experience today.

I was 21 years of age and by my family's standards, I was very reflective and driven to figure out what life was meant to be about (the ambitions of a young adult). Yet nothing prepared me for coping with a death and the challenges that faced me in the coming years. Bill and I had been dating for about 18 months and while I knew something was wrong, my naivety,

inexperience, and lack of skills resulted in my not acting on the concern I had over his behaviours. I did not know he was suicidal, nor did the campus chaplain, but I knew he was unhappy and that he was “down” much of the time.

Suicide has an unfortunate stigma attached. With our deeper understanding of mental health this stigma is changing, but survivors may still feel remnants of shame. Initially I felt this, but with understanding from others these feelings subsided. Suicide is more than the death of someone we know. A person who commits suicide has some form of mental illness. We do not judge a person who dies of cancer, or their family, and the same respect is needed in the case of mental illness and suicide. The need for the pain to end is the driving factor. The distress they experience is part of the pain we feel. The very act of suicide is often felt as personal rejection, combined with helplessness. The struggle to make sense is often a long and arduous journey. I believe that non-judgement is the only respectful response.

When Bill passed away I experienced both loss and hope. This was very confusing. The loss was understandable due to the pain of losing someone so suddenly. The sympathy of others was necessary for me to cope daily with life's tasks. The feeling of hope struck me as very peculiar as it certainly did not seem to be what would be expected. I remember the hope for me was in believing “he died, I need to live. What do I have to do to become fully alive?” This became the cornerstone to grieving his death and learning to live anew.

Dealing with the loss of this person in my life was paramount. I carried it with me every day. I continued to work and socialize but that first year presented challenges like no other. There was also a new level of awareness I have not experienced since. It was an acute gut instinct. I knew things that I had to do and no matter what others said, I had the fortitude to do them. At the time I could not imagine getting over the pain, but those close to me kept reassuring me that it would get better. They were right.

There were several things that helped it get better. I learned that time heals when you do something with it. Waiting for time to pass and letting things fester was not helpful. I talked and cried. I had one friend who I would check in with every day for months. This person just listened, whether I was feeling good or distraught – this was a key connection that reassured me that I was not alone. Ritual was also important. Regularly, I would mark the anniversaries and when the time was right I completed a ceremony to help honour our relationship and my need to let go of the grief. I realized that I had to remember a person who had shared my life and to do this I completed a cross-stitch in his memory. It was framed and hung in an important place. A funny thing happened during one ceremony. I noticed there were several stitches that were not complete, and the symbolism struck me. I was not finished my grief either.

Counselling was very helpful. I needed a safe place to process everything that was happening and to deepen my understanding of the relationship and the events. It was not just talking about the situation; the healing exercises were essential to continuing the journey. There were times when I made things happen and there were times when things happened for me. I just had to trust myself and others. The spiritual dimension of this grieving process was phenomenal. The prayers of my own and others brought a sense of not feeling alone and abandoned. It allowed a connection from which the meaning of life could be felt, even when it was not always understood. I also had several dreams throughout this time. Some were reassuring, while others were challenging. I have not dreamt of Bill in more than five years, but I now know they were a true gift. Although it is difficult for friends and family to always be around, their support and non-judgmental understanding is a key to working through the monumental grief. It was with their care that I was able to understand and grow from what had occurred.

This experience has helped me in working with people who feel suicidal. I have completed training in suicide intervention and have used these skills to help others. I have had to accept that I did not have the ability to help Bill at that time, nor could anyone else. The feelings of powerlessness have been very humbling.

I do not know all the reasons my friend found the pain of living such that he took his own life, but I am grateful for the time we did have and for all that I have learned through this experience. I would not be the person I am today without the love we shared or the pain I have lived through. Surviving suicide is the most painful thing I have ever experienced, but I have survived. I am stronger now than I ever could have been. I have empathy for those who are experiencing or affected by mental health issues. This journey has given me a

greater appreciation of the sacredness of life. We should always remember that we do not know how much time we have and to live each day as best we can.

If you are coping with the suicide of a loved one, friend, colleague or student, you are not alone. Many people have had similar experiences. It is painful, yet in the midst of that pain there is hope. It will take time to grieve the loss and find new ways of living. Remember, depression is more than simple unhappiness; it is the feeling of being in despair, an empty hole. If someone you know is suffering from depression, help is available. If you notice someone has been isolating themselves or their mood is bleak, inquire about how he/she is. The pain of depression can be healed and working with a professional is a step in that direction. Encourage them to call a professional, and your Employee Assistance Coordinators are available to provide help and support. Your intervention could save a life.

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