

Hope and Healing

A Practical
Guide for
Survivors of
Suicide



July 2016

For more information about this resource visit: www.ahs.ca

Alberta Health Services

Hope and Healing: A Practical Guide for Survivors of Suicide

First printing: 2003

Second printing: 2006

Third printing: 2011

Fourth printing: 2015

Fifth printing: 2016

Copyright © 2016 Alberta Health Services.

This material is protected by Canadian and other international copyright laws. All rights reserved. These materials may not be copied, published, distributed or reproduced in any way in whole or in part without the express written permission of Alberta Health Services. These materials are intended for general information only and are provided on an "as is", "where is" basis. Although reasonable efforts were made to confirm the accuracy of the information, Alberta Health Services does not make any representation or warranty, express, implied or statutory, as to the accuracy, reliability, completeness, applicability or fitness for a particular purpose of such information. These materials are not a substitute for the advice of a qualified health professional. Alberta Health Services expressly disclaims all liability for the use of these materials, and for any claims, actions, demands or suits arising from such use.

Revised: July 2016 (A. Young)

Contents

| | |
|---------------------------------------|----|
| When Someone You Love Dies by Suicide | 3 |
| What Helps in the Short Term | 3 |
| Telling Others | 3 |
| Telling Children and Teens | 3 |
| Emergency Response and Investigation | 7 |
| Response to the Emergency Call | 7 |
| Investigation | 7 |
| The Scene After the Investigation | 8 |
| Practical Matters | 11 |
| Arranging a Funeral | 11 |
| The Estate | 12 |
| Financial Matters | 12 |
| Working Through Your Grief | 19 |
| Loss and Disorganization | 19 |
| Reorganization and Acceptance | 19 |
| What Helps Healing | 20 |
| Later Reactions | 20 |
| Support Groups | 21 |
| Looking After Yourself | 21 |
| Final Words | 25 |
| Beyond Surviving | 25 |
| Resources | 26 |
| Medical Examiner | 26 |
| Important Phone Numbers | 26 |
| Suicide Bereavement Support Services | 26 |
| Websites | 26 |
| Professional Therapists | 27 |
| Books | 28 |
| References | 29 |

THIS PAGE WAS INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK



**When
Someone
You Love
Dies by
Suicide**

THIS PAGE WAS INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK



When Someone You Love Dies by Suicide

You Will Survive.

Yes, the grief is overwhelming. It's hard to believe now, but one hour at a time, one day at a time, you will get through it. And then, as time goes on, the pain will lessen.

What Helps in the Short Term

Emotional reactions to a suicide are intense and overwhelming. Knowing what to expect will help you cope and begin healing.

What to Expect

Most survivors find it hard to think clearly. You may feel as if your brain is numb. You may forget things. You may replay the suicide over and over in your mind, and find you cannot stop asking "Why?"

It's not unusual to feel overwhelmed by sorrow, physically ill and angry. You may feel ashamed or guilty. It's important to remember that you are not to blame for the choice made by another person. Sometimes, survivors think about suicide themselves. These reactions are normal, as are other strong feelings you may have. You are not going crazy—you are mourning the loss in your own way.

If you are having suicidal thoughts, talk to a counsellor about how to cope with the situation and keep yourself safe.

**There is no timeline for grief.
Heal at your own pace.**

Let Others Help You

Your sense of confusion is likely so great at first that it can be very hard to cope—so let other people help you. Look to your friends, family, place of worship, community and others for support. They can deal with callers and help make funeral and other arrangements. They can also be there to simply listen.

Telling Others

What to Say

One challenge you might face is telling others about the suicide. Although it may be difficult to speak openly about suicide, it's important to tell family and friends the truth. This allows them to help each other cope with their grief and also helps you work through yours. In some situations, you might choose to say something as brief as, "His death was a suicide and I just can't talk about it yet" or "She was struggling with depression and died by suicide."

In addition to telling family and close friends, you will need to notify people with whom the deceased had regular contact. The list of people to inform might include: school personnel, an employer and work colleagues, a health care provider and a landlord.

Telling Children and Teens

Tell the Truth

You need to tell children and teens that the death was a suicide. While they may not need to know all the details, especially if they are very young, they do need to know how the person died.

Young people can sense when they are being lied to and this creates an atmosphere of mistrust, fear and loneliness. If you don't tell them the truth, eventually they will find out through someone else. That will be far more painful for them.

Make the explanation fit the age of the child e.g., "He was sad and didn't want to live anymore, he didn't know that there were people who could help him." Children and teens will tell you what they need to know, and you only need to answer what they have asked you about.



When Someone You Love Dies by Suicide

Show Your Grief

It's okay for young people to see your anger, helplessness and confusion. This helps them understand that their own feelings are normal and okay. Check in with them to make sure they don't take on responsibility for your feelings. They need to know it's not their job to make things better for the family. Reassure them that you and others will still be able to take care of them.

Listen and Reassure

Children and teens may be confused when they are told the death was a suicide. They may ask a lot of questions to make sense of the news: "Didn't he love us?" or "Why was she so sad?" Answer the questions that you can. Tell them that you don't have all of the answers but you are always there to listen. Encourage them to talk about their feelings. You may find there are times when young people benefit from talking to someone else, such as a family friend or a mental health professional.

Young people will need plenty of reassurance that the suicide was not their fault, that they are still loved, and that other people they care about will not die too. Emphasize that there are always other solutions to problems so that they don't see suicide as a way of coping with their problems.

Seek Help

Children and teens need a lot of support and comfort when a loved one dies. You may find it too difficult to support children or reassure them when you are in the early stages of grieving. If this is the case, call on someone you trust or seek the help of a mental health therapist or a bereavement support group.



**Emergency
Response
and
Investigation**

THIS PAGE WAS INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK



Emergency Response and Investigation



When the person dies by suicide, you face legal and emergency situations not typical of other deaths. The events and procedures that take place after a suicide can cause great anxiety for survivors. It can help lessens the distress if you know what will happen.

Response to the Emergency Call

When a sudden death is discovered, Emergency Medical Services (EMS), the fire department, police and the medical examiner's office all play a role when responding to the 911 call.

Emergency Medical Services

EMS provides medical assistance and determines if a death has taken place, or will take the person to a hospital for further care if death has not occurred. At this point the hospital takes over care.

Fire Department

The fire department provides medical assistance to Emergency Medical Services, as well as extra help where needed.

Police

The police become involved in a number of ways. They provide safety for emergency personnel and other people who are present. They secure the scene. They investigate the death, and collect identification, valuables and other items related to the person and the investigation. They may also take photographs at the site. The police

may ask the person who reported the death or identified the deceased to make a statement. The same may be asked of those who found or spoke to the deceased. The police will attempt to notify the next of kin.

Medical Examiner

The police notify the Medical Examiner's Office, who will investigate the circumstances around the death. In the case of a suicide, only the Medical Examiner can sign and issue a death certificate.

The police or Medical Examiner take control of the scene, which is considered a crime scene until the investigation is completed and the cause of death determined. This is done for your protection and the safety of others.

Victim Assistance

The police may request that Victim Services respond to the scene. They are there to offer immediate and ongoing support, information and referrals to local services. All services are confidential and available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. To find out more about victim services in your area contact your local police or RCMP or go to: www.victimservicesalberta.com

Investigation

An investigation is done to find out the circumstances of the suicide. This includes the identity of the person, the date, time and place of death as well as the cause and manner of death. The investigation often includes a review of the past medical history, an examination of the scene of the death and an examination of the body.

Medical Examiner

The Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME)¹ investigates all unexplained and all violent deaths, which includes suicides. The OCME pays the cost to transport the body from the place of the death to the facility where the body is examined by medical examiners (medical doctor).

¹The Fatality Inquiries Act requires that a medical examiner investigate any sudden, unexpected or unexplained death. The OCME is responsible for these investigations. https://justice.alberta.ca/programs_services/fatality/ocme/Pages/default.aspx



Items Collected at the Scene

The Medical Examiner's Office retains items related to the death, including suicide notes. These items can be returned to next of kin after the investigation, but **must be requested** and signed for. Suicide notes will be returned only to the person addressed in the note. Items collected by the Medical Examiner and not requested by next of kin will be stored at the Provincial Archives.

Autopsy

If there is some doubt about the cause or manner of death, an autopsy may be ordered by the Medical Examiner. An autopsy may include complex laboratory tests and often results are not known for several weeks after the death.

Consent from next of kin is not required for a Medical Examiner's autopsy to be done. Notify the Medical Examiner if there is any cultural sensitivity around the autopsy.

If an autopsy is preformed you can request a copy of the autopsy report. You will need to fill out an *Authorization for Release of Information* form. To download the form go to: www.justice.alberta.ca and enter 'settle estates' in the search box.

The Scene After the Investigation

If the death has taken place in the home, the next of kin are responsible for cleaning up the scene. Sometimes family members choose to clean the area themselves. However, when body fluids are present, it's wise to have a certified cleaning company perform the cleaning tasks.

To identify a suitable firm, consult the telephone directory or funeral home. Professional cleaning costs can be high but are often covered by household insurance. Contact your insurance provider for more information.

Tissue and Organ Donations

After a suicide, survivors may find some comfort in donating the tissues or organs of the deceased. If you wish to do this, notify the Medical Examiner. The police will tell the Medical Examiner if a donor card was found on the person.

Tissues can be donated within certain time limits (about 6 to 12 hours after a death), even when

death occurs outside a hospital. Whether or not organs can be donated depends on a number of factors, including the condition of the body.

Proof of Death

You can obtain two types of documents as proof of death in order to settle an estate:

1. Certificate of Death

A Certificate of Death is the official government document and is accepted by most organizations as proof of death. This certificate includes the name of the person, date and place of death, marital status, place of residence, sex and age. It does not give the cause or manner of death. This certificate may be obtained from a Registry office for a small fee (see Licensing and Registry Services in the yellow pages). The certificate will be issued one to two weeks after you apply for it. Several copies may be needed.

2. Certificate of the Medical Examiner

A Certificate of the Medical Examiner is issued by the Medical Examiner's Office upon written consent by next of kin. It includes the medical cause and manner of death as well as a brief description of the circumstances. This certificate is issued in place of the "Proof of Death" forms required by most insurance companies in order to settle life insurance claims. A small fee applies.

Note: In cases investigated by the Medical Examiner's Office only the medical examiner can sign and issue a death certificate. Neither a family doctor nor a hospital may complete any documents as proof of death.

Public Fatality Inquiry

A public fatality inquiry is a public hearing. The purpose is to determine who the deceased was and how, where, when and by what means the deceased died.

This is very rare in cases of suicide. However, if the person was in custody or was a ward of the court at the time of death, an Inquiry is mandatory. The Fatality Review Board determines which cases should go to Inquiry.



Practical Matters

THIS PAGE WAS INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK



A funeral is an important ritual that gives family and friends a chance to reflect and grieve while being supported by others who care. It allows them to say goodbye and begin accepting the reality of the loss.

Arranging a Funeral

Before organizing a funeral, survivors will need to determine who is legally responsible for making funeral arrangements. Many people have complicated relationships with the deceased, so it may not be clear who has the final say (Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, 2011).

You may find it helpful to appoint a family representative, someone who is a clear thinker and has the respect of most of the family members. This person could be a distant relative or a close family friend. It's not this person's role to make decisions; rather, he or she would accompany the family to the funeral home and help the family make decisions (CAMH, 2011). Family, friends, clergy or the funeral director can help you decide what type of funeral arrangements to make. Honour the wishes of the deceased as much as possible if he or she had communicated them to you or others.

Guidelines and customs of funeral services vary. Different cultures and religions have special rituals to recognize a death.

To choose a funeral home, ask for suggestions from family, friends, spiritual leaders or check local listings in a phone book.

Funeral Service and Burial or Cremation

The funeral service or ceremony is often held in a place of worship or a funeral home chapel. However, it's up to the family to decide what kind of ceremony they want and where it will be held. You can decide whether the service will be public or private. A committal service is a brief service where final words of farewell are spoken. It happens at the end of the traditional service and may be done at the graveside, crematorium or at the church/chapel.

A memorial service is similar to a funeral service, except the body of the deceased is not present. If you choose not to have a service, you can ask a funeral home to care for the body by arranging for burial or cremation.

Taking Children to the Funeral

Encourage children to take part in the funeral, it helps them as their grief unfolds. It's wise to talk with the children ahead of time about what will happen at the funeral and what behaviour is expected of them. If children don't want to attend the funeral, assure them that it's okay not to be there and help them grieve in their own way.

Talking About the Suicide at the Funeral

It's okay to talk about the suicide at the funeral service. Make sure any mention of suicide in the service is done without judgment. It may be appropriate to acknowledge the pain the deceased was feeling.

Celebrate the life of your loved one and talk about memories. Some survivors have found it helpful to place an open notebook on a table at the funeral and encourage others to write down their memories of the deceased. Allow yourself to grieve the relationship you shared.

Death Notification

Writing an obituary can be a difficult task. Some families feel comfortable being open and frank, others don't. Funeral home staff can help you prepare the obituary. Choose wording that does not perpetuate the stigma of suicide (CAMH, 2011).



Funeral Cost

The average cost of a traditional funeral in Alberta is between \$5,000 and \$7,000. This amount can be much less, depending on the services required.

Many families rely on the deceased's life insurance to help cover costs, although death by suicide often has an impact on a life insurance claim. An insurance broker should be able to help you with a policy claim.

Other sources of financial help include the Canada Pension Plan death benefit; Veterans Affairs (for war veterans or members of the Canadian Armed Forces); band councils (for status Indians); work related benefits programs; and your local social services department. Often, the funeral home has the resources available to assist you in completing the necessary forms when seeking financial help, or will contact the social services department for you.

The Estate

Disposing of a deceased person's assets is usually done through a Will. In some cases the Will may have to be probated which means that it has been proven valid by a court of law. If the estate is small or held jointly, there may be no need for probate. Any property held jointly (real estate, bank accounts, bonds) can be easily transferred to the surviving spouse or individual named. A bank may require probate if there is a large amount of money that is not held jointly, or for other reasons.

If There is a Handwritten Note

Sometimes a signed, handwritten note that distributes a person's property and possessions may be used as a Will. This includes suicide notes. You should be aware that this type of note might be challenged in a court of law. In Alberta, any Will that does not provide sufficiently for family can be challenged under the *Family Relief Act*. Contact your lawyer for more information.

If There is not a Will or Your Situation is Complicated

The Office of the Public Guardian and Trustee will protect the interests of potential beneficiaries if an Alberta resident dies and leaves an estate,

and there is no one to administer it. If your situation is complicated for other reasons, such as marital separation or common-law relationships, you may need to contact a lawyer.

Financial Matters

A number of financial matters need to be dealt with after a death. You may want to ask other family members or close friends to help you deal with some of these matters during this difficult time.

It's strongly recommended that you seek the advice of a legal or financial professional before making any major decisions that may affect your financial or personal situation.

First Step: Gather Documents

The first step in dealing with financial matters is to gather the deceased's documents. This must be done before you, your financial advisor or the executor of the Will can take care of matters related to the estate. Set up a folder to keep all the personal documents and records of legal and financial matters.

Personal Documents

Death Certificate

Phone: 310-0000, then 780-427-7013

You must have the death certificate before you can cancel, transfer and apply for benefits. If the funeral home doesn't provide them or if you need additional copies, you can obtain certified copies of the death certificate at www.servicealberta.ca

Birth Certificate

Phone: 310-0000, then 780-427-7013

The Will

A Will is a written record that details how a person's belongings, or estate, will be divided upon death. The executors are responsible for the estate and should be notified as soon as possible after the death.

Indian Status Card

Driver's License

You can cancel a driver's license and obtain a refund for the unused portion of the fee at any Registry Office.

Marriage Certificate



Next Steps: Cancel, Transfer and Apply for Benefits

Once all documents have been gathered, you will have to cancel, transfer and apply for various financial benefits or obligations. Be aware that there may be fees associated with some of these matters.

❑ **Passport**

Phone: **1-800-567-6868**

If the deceased held a valid passport at the time of death, you can make it null and void by diagonally cutting off the right-hand corner. Return it to the nearest passport centre or mail it to the processing centre. Include a copy of the death certificate or a letter stating why you are returning the passport

❑ **Social Insurance Number**

Phone: **1-800-206-7218**

You can cancel the deceased's social insurance number by mailing the card, along with a copy of the death certificate to:

Social Insurance Number Registration
Box 7000, Bathurst, NB E2A 1A2

Health Care

❑ **Alberta Health Care Number (AHCIP)**

Phone: **310-0000**, then **780-427-1432**

An authorized registry office can assist you in person. You will be asked to provide a certificate of death and the Personal Health Number.

❑ **Alberta Blue Cross**

Phone: **1-800-661-6995**

Alberta Blue Cross requires the name and Alberta Health Care number of the deceased, the name and address of the executor, and the name and address of the person providing this information.

❑ **Health Care Providers**

Notify doctors, dentists and other health care providers

Financial

❑ **Bank Accounts**

Contact all financial institutions that the deceased had chequing or savings accounts, and inform them of the death. Ask the issuing banks to cancel bank cards held by the deceased. Any accounts held in common can be transferred to the survivor. You will need to contact your financial advisor or the bank holding these accounts for specific information on how to transfer the accounts. If you require information on unclaimed bank balances you can contact the Bank of Canada
Phone: **1-888-891-6398**

❑ **Estate Account**

You may wish to open an estate account to protect estate funds. Seek advice on this matter from reputable legal sources and advisors.

❑ **Funeral Costs**

Take final invoices and a funeral director's proof of death or the certificate to a bank manager. Most financial institutions will draw up a bank draft from the deceased's account to pay for all funeral-related expenses.

❑ **Investments (RRSPs, GICs, bonds, stocks)**

Ask your financial advisor or bank for information on how to transfer these assets.

❑ **Safety Deposit Box**

Make an appointment with the bank manager to review the contents of the deceased's safety box.

❑ **Credit Cards**

Contact the issuing institutions (such as banks and stores) to cancel. Most credit cards have a phone number on the back of the card. For joint-signature cards, you will have to provide a copy of the death certificate to cancel the deceased's signature.

❑ **Loan and Rental Agreements (monies owed or owing)**

These may or may not be insured. You need to cancel or transfer individual or co-signed loans from issuing bank or institution.

❑ **Canada Savings Bonds**

Phone: **1-800-575-5151**

For information on cancelling, transferring or redeeming Canada Savings Bonds held by someone who has died, go to: csb.gc.ca



Canada Pension Plan Benefits (CPP)

Phone: **1-800-277-9914**

You will be asked to provide the name, address and social insurance number of the deceased.

www.servicecanada.gc.ca

Old Age Security Benefits

Phone: **1-800-277-9914**

For more information go to

www.servicecanada.gc.ca

Veterans Services Benefits

Phone: **1-866-522-2122**

If the deceased was receiving benefits from other countries, notify the relevant agency of the death so they can cancel payments and provide benefits to survivors, if applicable. For more information, go to www.vac-acc.gc.ca

GST Credit

Phone: **1-800-959-8281**

If the deceased received the GST credit, his or her spouse or common-law partner may be eligible to receive the credit based on his or her net income. If the deceased was a child receiving the credit, payments stop the quarter after the child's date of birth.

Income Taxes

A final income tax return must be filed for the deceased. If the death occurred between January 1 and October 31, the final T-1 return is due by April 30 of the next year. If the death occurred between November 1 and December 31, the final T-1 return is due six months after the death. If tax returns from previous years have not been completed, they must also be filed. If an estate trust must be established, a T-3 tax return must be filed for each year of the life of the estate trust.

You may want to get a clearance certificate before you distribute any property. A clearance certificate certifies that all amounts for which the deceased is liable to the Canada Revenue Agency have been paid or that security has been accepted for the payment. If you don't get a certificate, you can be liable for any amount the deceased owes. For more information or to obtain the necessary forms, contact the Canada Revenue Agency

Phone: 1-800-959-8281 or go to www.cra-arc.gc.ca

Property

Land Title(s)

Phone: **310-0000**, then **780-427-7013**

If the deceased owned real estate and designated a beneficiary in his or her Will, the property can be transferred. Contact a lawyer and an Alberta Registries office for details.

Mortgage

Notify the mortgage holder of the death.

Utility Accounts

Cancel or transfer utility accounts, such as television, cable, telephone, water, electricity, gas and the Internet.

Home Insurance

Who can cancel or make changes to the policy can vary. You will need to provide the policy number of the deceased and in some cases, the name and address of the executor.

Canada Post

Phone: **1-800-267-1177**

Canada Post will redirect mail from the deceased's last known address. Canada Post provides service for one year at no charge. You need to apply for this service in person at a post office. You will need a copy of the death certificate and proof that you are the deceased's legal representative.

Vehicles

Vehicle Insurance

Who can cancel or make changes to the policy can vary. Most insurance companies require you to notify them about policyholder's death within 30 days. You will need to provide the policy number of the deceased; in some cases, only the executor can cancel the policy.

Vehicle Registration(s)

If the deceased had vehicles registered in his or her name, the ownership of these vehicles will need to be transferred. You will want to check if there is a lien on the vehicle or a Will directing disposition of the vehicle. A probate registry agent can help you do this.



Other Items to Cancel

❑ Disability Benefit

Phone: **1-800-277-9914**

You will need to cancel disability payments, both federal and provincial. Provincial disability payments may include AISH (Assured Income for Severely Handicapped).

❑ Memberships (sport clubs, professional associations, libraries)

Cancel the memberships or transfer them to another name if appropriate.

Life Insurance Policies

In Canada, life insurance policies must have been held for at least 24 months to be valid if the death is by suicide (check the policy to see if there are exclusions). There may be special circumstances where a policy held for less than 24 months may be challenged in court by the family of someone who died by suicide. Consult your lawyer or insurance provider for more information.

❑ Mortgage Life Insurance

If the deceased held mortgage life insurance, the mortgage will be paid upon death. The mortgage company will require a copy of the death certificate. Some policies will not cover deaths by suicide if they occur within two years of the start of coverage. Review the policy or consult with the bank for the specific details.

❑ Life Insurance

Notify insurance companies of the death and inquire about payouts. The deceased may have had more than one type of insurance policy. Check the policy or contact the insurance provider for more information.

Items to Apply For

❑ Allowance for the Survivor

Phone: **1-800-277-9914**

This program provides a monthly non-taxable benefit to low-income widows. This benefit is payable to someone who, at the time of death, was married to the deceased or living common-law (including same-sex relationships). This benefit is not retroactive and must be applied for immediately.

❑ Veterans Services Benefits

Phone: **1-866-522-2122**

If the deceased was a veteran, for one year after their death, the surviving spouse may be eligible to receive a pension equal to the amount that the deceased was receiving at the time of death. For more information, go to www.vac-acc.gc.ca.

❑ Canada Pension Plan Survivors Benefits

Phone: **1-800-277-9914**

The Canada Pension Plan (CPP) provides three types of survivor's benefits:

1. CPP Children's Benefit

To qualify for this benefit, children must be 17 years of age or younger; or 18-25 years of age and attending school full-time. If you are the caregiver of children of the deceased who are under age 18, you should apply for this benefit on their behalf. Dependent children between 18 and 25 and in full-time studies should apply for this benefit themselves.

2. CPP Death Benefit

This benefit is a one-time payment made to the estate of the deceased contributor, a surviving spouse, a common-law partner or other next of kin. The lump-sum payment is based on the CPP contributions of the deceased.

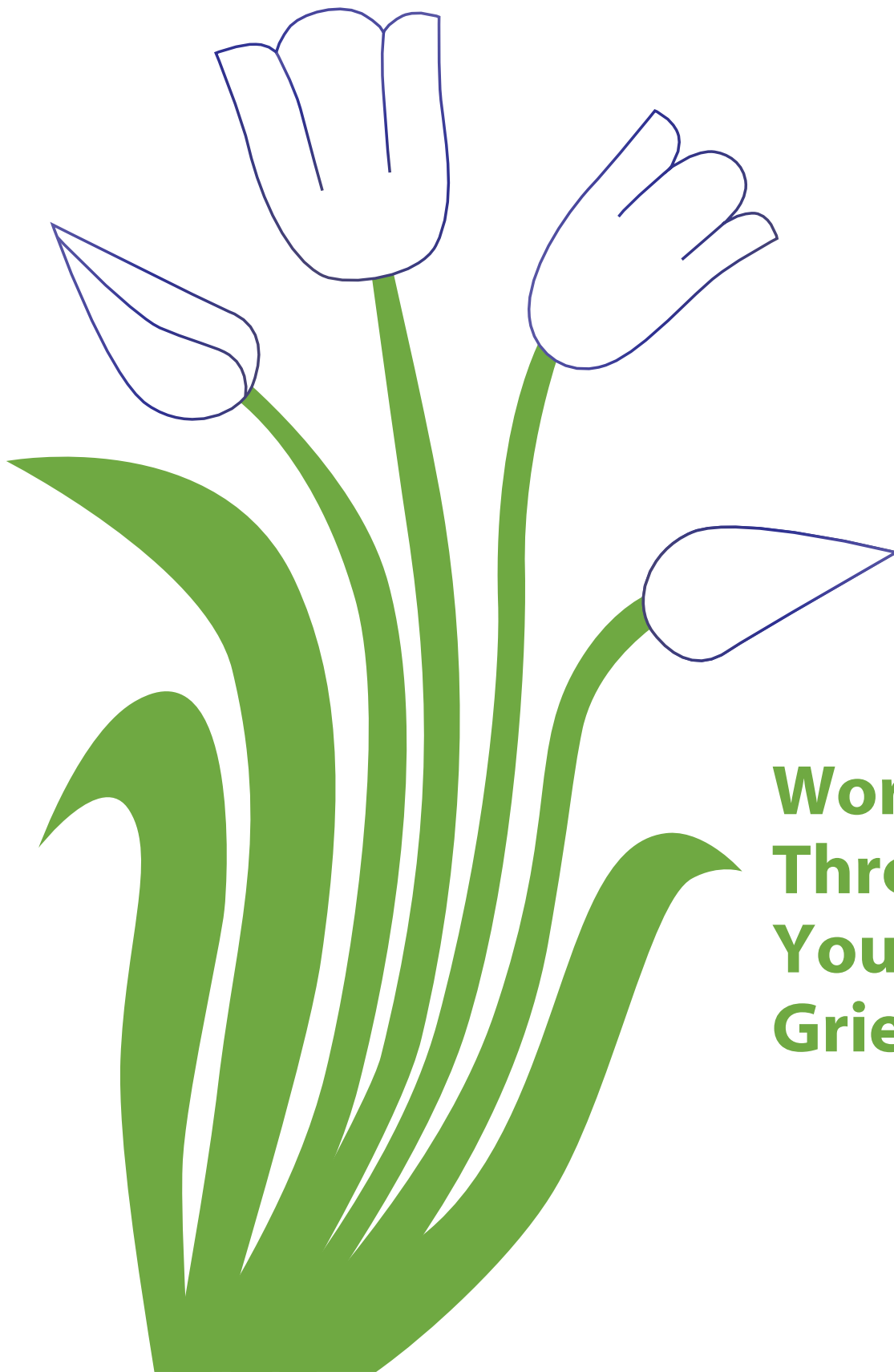
3. CPP Survivor's Pension Benefit

This benefit is paid to the deceased's spouse or common-law partner. Legally separated spouses may also qualify if the deceased did not have a co-habiting common-law partner. The amount of the benefit awarded will depend on the age of the surviving spouse or common-law partner and other dependency factors.

❑ Guaranteed Income Supplement

Surviving widows/widowers over the age of 65 may be entitled to this benefit. This benefit is based on income qualifications.

THIS PAGE WAS INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK



**Working
Through
Your
Grief**

THIS PAGE WAS INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK



Working Through Your Grief



Grief is more complicated when a death is sudden. There was no chance to say goodbye. Very strong emotions arise as a result of the suicide, such as extreme sadness, anger and shame, and this complicates your grieving. Survivors often feel guilt, you must remember that you are not to blame for the choices made by another person. The search to find out "why" is a painful yet important part of working through the grief. Often, there are no answers.

Your Grief is Unique

The grieving process is different for each person. How a person grieves can depend a variety of things such as: age, gender, personality, culture, and their relationship with the deceased. There isn't a 'normal' or 'expected' way to grieve but there are many aspects of grief that are predictable and are common to everyone.

Numbness and Shock

Survivors usually feel numb and in shock when they first find out about the suicide, and for several weeks after or even longer. This feeling is like sitting on the side of a play about your life, but not really taking part in life itself. Nothing seems real. The feeling of shock has a purpose, it cushions you from the pain of what has happened. Over time, the numbness fades and you will proceed with your grieving.

The grief process is different for each person.

Loss and Disorganization

As you grieve, you will experience a range of thoughts and very strong emotions. Survivors commonly feel intense anger, sorrow, loneliness and guilt. At times you might feel as if the suicide never really happened.

There can be times when everything in life seems meaningless. You might be obsessed with the thought that you could have prevented the death. It's common to have trouble sleeping and eating during these times.

Reorganization and Acceptance

As time passes, your thoughts and feelings will change. Instead of feeling pain all the time, you will feel it some of the time. "From a sadness that is with us frequently to a sadness that is always a part of us but no longer gets in our way. We can begin to be happy and move on in our lives."²

Grieving Takes Time

How long people grieve varies. Occasionally survivors get stuck as they work through their grief. If this happens, a counsellor can help. Clinical depression is different from normal grief in that it's more intense and prolonged. If you are concerned about depression, please contact your doctor.

When Children Grieve

Children don't show their feelings in the same way adults do. Sometimes they look as though they have not been affected by the death. They may cry for a while and then return to play, not because they are not upset, but because their words and behaviour don't always reflect how they feel inside. You may see their grief expressed in their play. They may talk about their feelings with other children rather than with adults.

It's common for children, as they grow, to grieve the loss of their loved one at a later time. They may develop new feelings and new responses to the death, even years after the suicide. They often ask different questions as they try to understand what happened from a more mature point of view. And they may experience grief again as they pass through various developmental events, such

² Mertick, E. (1991). Yours, Mine and Our Children's Grief: A Parent's Guide, Alberta: Alberta Funeral Service Association



Working Through Your Grief

as graduations, proms, getting married and the birth of their first child.

Children need to deal with their grief. Be available to talk about the death with them or have them talk to someone else they trust.

When Teens Grieve

Teens grieve differently than adults and, because their brains are still developing, problem solving may not be a well-developed skill. Teen mourning rituals tend to be more collaborative and less private than adults'. Peer groups and other groups they may belong to (such as clubs, teams and cultural and religious groups) can be helpful to teens. Expressing themselves through technology is common and can be useful in the grieving process (for example, writing an online journal or blog)(CAMH, 2011).

Teens may exhibit more anger and feel guilty about not knowing about the risk of suicide or doing something to prevent it. Like adults, they will ask why and try to comprehend how someone can end his or her life. Teens need support, regardless of how they seem to be grieving (CAMH, 2011).

What Helps Healing

Healing does not mean forgetting. It means that the sadness and other feelings don't get in the way of your life as much as they did in the beginning. You will heal and the pain will lessen.

Keep on Talking

Some survivors seek out information about suicide and grieving; others choose not to do so. Many survivors say they talked their way through their grief. As you heal, talk about your memories of the person who died by suicide. Find a safe person, or several people, who will let you talk and are comfortable hearing about your pain. The people you choose to talk to may or may not have experienced the suicide with you.

When you are open about the suicide, you give others permission to talk about it too. Keeping the suicide a secret adds to the burden of shame. A lot more people than you realize have been touched by suicide.

At times you may need to be distracted from your grieving. That is okay. Don't feel guilty about losing yourself in something else for a while.

Hold on to Your Memories

Often survivors, both adults and young people, have found comfort in holding on to items that remind them of their loved one, such as furniture, clothing, jewelry or favourite objects. You might like to put together an album with photos of the deceased. You can also build a collection of memories by asking other people to tell you their stories of the deceased and recording them in a notebook.

Do What Works for You

Sometimes friends and family want to help but they don't know what to do. They may feel uncomfortable talking about suicide because of the stigma attached to it. They may be worried about making people cry when they bring up the subject. They might act strangely and not mention the suicide at all. Don't let this get in the way of your talking about it when you need to. Tell people it's okay to mention the suicide and let them know they can help you by simply listening. Most people really do care.

Remember to choose to do what feels right for you, not what pleases other people. It's okay to say "no" when invited to do something you don't feel ready to do.

Later Reactions

Some survivors feel even more pain and emptiness several months after the death. The tasks of planning the funeral and dealing with financial and legal matters have been completed. Friends and family have offered their sympathy and then needed to get back to their lives. Be prepared for this and reach out for help when you need it.

Difficult Days

There will be many times through the years when coping with the loss becomes more difficult, such as the anniversary of the death, birthdays and holidays. You may feel more on edge in the weeks leading up to them. It will help you to plan ahead and talk to other family members about how they want to spend the day. This gives everyone a chance to support each other and talk about their grief. Some ideas are to write a card to the deceased and place it in a significant place or remember the deceased by going to a place that has some connection with them.



Finding the Answers

You may never know the answer to, “Why?” Many times survivors mistake a “triggering event”, such as a relationship breakup, for the “cause” when, in most cases, the person was in extreme emotional or physical pain for a long time. As you work through your grief you will gradually learn to live with questions that cannot be answered.

Support Groups

You may find it helpful to talk to other survivors of suicide. The healing power of a shared experience is very strong and talking to others who have lost someone to suicide can help you work through your own grief. There are many bereavement groups available, through numerous organizations. If you would like more information on support groups in your area, refer to *Resources* section.

Looking After Yourself

In the Short-Term

Grieving takes energy, so forgive yourself when you simply can't do the things you think you 'should' do. In the beginning, your grief journey may use up all of your energy you just need to get through the day, especially if you have to care for others or deal with some practical matters. During this time you may find it difficult to make healthy decisions. The more you take care of yourself, the better you will be able to get through each day.

- **Make time for you.** Use your alone time to think, plan, meditate, pray, journal, remember and mourn.
- **Surround yourself with safe people and safe places to support you on this difficult journey.**
- **Accept help.** Don't be afraid to tell people what you need. Often, people may not know what to say or how to help unless they are told directly.

In the Long-Term

As time passes, you will find the courage and resources to keep going and have the energy to be more purposeful about taking care of yourself.

- **Manage your health.** Eat a balanced diet and get physical exercise. Drink plenty of water and avoid or limit intake of alcohol, caffeine and tobacco. Visit www.myhealth.alberta.ca for more information on all aspects of your health.
- **Keep a journal.** Record your thoughts, feelings, hopes and dreams. Writing them down may help make them more real.
- **Talk things out.** Confide in a trusted friend, family member, colleague, religious leader, or professional therapist.
- **Practise relaxation techniques.** Try relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, art therapy and visualization.
- **Create a list of resources.** Include the people and organizations that can help you when things are not going well.
- **Take a break from your grief.** See a movie, visit a museum or art gallery, pursue a hobby or go for a walk with a friend.
- **Re-establish a routine in your life.** Survivors often find the structure and distraction of returning to work or getting a new routine helpful.
- **Give back to your community.** Many survivors have found a sense of peace and fulfillment in shared compassion and using their experiences to help others.
- **Take small steps.** Recognize each step forward and reward yourself in some way.

Read about suicide, grief and the ways in which people have used their spirituality to cope in times of tragedy. Sources of information include your local library, bookstores, the Internet, funeral homes and community agencies.

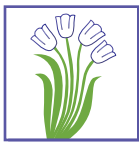
Whatever you do,
make sure it feels right to you.

THIS PAGE WAS INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK



**Final
Words**

THIS PAGE WAS INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK



Beyond Surviving

- Know you can survive. You may not think so, but you can.
- Struggle with why it happened until you no longer need to know why or until you are satisfied with partial answers.
- Know you may feel overwhelmed by the intensity of your feelings but all your feelings are normal.
- Anger, guilt, confusion and forgetfulness are common responses. You are not crazy; you are in mourning.
- Be aware you may feel appropriate anger at the person, at the world, at God, at yourself. It's okay to express it.
- You may feel guilty for what you think you did or did not do. Guilt can turn to regret, through forgiveness.
- Having suicidal thoughts is common. It does not mean you will act on those thoughts.
- Remember to take one moment or one day at a time.
- Find a good listener with whom to share. Call someone if you need to talk.
- Don't be afraid to cry. Tears are healing.
- Give yourself time to heal.
- Remember, the choice was not yours. No one is the sole influence in another's life.
- Expect setbacks. If emotions return like a tidal wave, you may only be experiencing a remnant of grief, an unfinished piece.
- Try to put off major decisions.
- Give yourself permission to get professional help.
- Be aware of the pain of your family and friends.
- Be patient with yourself and with others who may not understand.
- Set your own limits and learn to say no.
- Steer clear of people who want to tell you what or how to feel.
- Know that there are support groups that can be helpful, such as Compassionate Friends or Survivors of Suicide groups. If not, ask a professional to help start one.
- Call on your personal faith to help you through.
- It is common to experience physical reactions to your grief, e.g., headaches, loss of appetite, inability to sleep.
- The willingness to laugh with others and at yourself is healing.
- Wear out your questions, anger, guilt or other feelings until you can let them go. Letting go doesn't mean forgetting.
- Know that you will never be the same again, but you can survive and even go beyond just surviving.

Source: *Beyond Surviving—Suggestions for Survivors*. Iris Bolton, National Resource Center for Suicide Prevention and Aftercare, A Project of the Link Counseling Center.

THIS PAGE WAS INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK

Hope and Healing

A Practical
Guide for
Survivors of
Suicide



July 2016

Resources

Medical Examiner

Edmonton

Office of the Chief Medical Examiner
7007 116 St.
Edmonton, AB T6H 5R8
Phone: 780-427-4987

Calgary

Office of the Chief Medical Examiner
4070 Bowness Rd. N.W.
Calgary, AB T3B 3R7
Phone: 403-297-8123

For other locations in Alberta, contact the nearest of office.

Important Phone Numbers

Emergency

Phone: 911

Referrals to Community and Social Services

Phone: 211

Kids Help Phone

Phone: 1-800-668-6868

Health Link Advice 24/7

Phone: 1-866-408-5465 or 811

Alberta Mental Health Help Line

Phone: 1-877-303-2642

Crisis Line/Suicide Grief Support

Calgary

Phone: 403-266-HELP (4357)

Edmonton

Phone: 780-732-6654

Suicide Bereavement Support Services

Airdrie

Grief Support Program
Airdrie Family Services
Phone: (403) 988-4611

Lethbridge

Sharing Our Loss - Lethbridge Family Services
Phone: (403) 327-5724

Calgary

CMHA Suicide Bereavement Program
Phone: (403) 297-1744

Peace River County

Hope & Healing Through Grief:
Suicide Survivors Bereavement Support Group
Phone: (780) 624-6151

Edmonton

CMHA - Suicide Grief Support Program
Phone: (780) 482-0198

Red Deer

CMHA Bereavement Support Program
Phone: (403) 342-2266

Fort McMurray

Some Other Solutions Society for Crisis Prevention
Phone: (780) 743-8605

Vermillion, Lloydminster, Wainwright

Walking Through Grief Society
Phone: (780) 846-2576

Grand Prairie

Catholic Family Services
Men's Support Group
Phone: (780) 532-9381

Websites

Alberta Health Services

www.ahs.ca/4875.asp

The American Association of Suicidology

www.suicidology.org

The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

www.afsp.org

International Association for Suicide Prevention

www.iasp.info

The Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention

www.suicideprevention.ca

Centre for Suicide Prevention

www.suicideinfo.ca

Choose Life

www.chooselife.net

Canadian Mental Health Association

www.cmha.ca

Books

- [In the Wake of Suicide: Stories of the People Left Behind](#). Alexander, V. (1998).
- [Life After Suicide: The Survivor's Grief Experience](#). Barrett, T. (1989).
- [After Suicide Loss: Coping with Your Grief](#). Baugher, B. & Jordan, J. (2002).
- [Suicide Survivor's Handbook: A Guide to the Bereaved and Those Who Wish to Help Them, Expanded Edition](#). Carlson, T. (2000)
- [Not Yet: A Memoir of Living and Almost Dying](#). Choy, W. (2009).
- [A Mourner's Kaddish: Suicide and the Rediscovery of Hope](#). Clarke, J.C. (2006).
- [The Seven T's: Finding Hope and Healing in the Wake of Tragedy](#). Collins, J. (2007).
- [Transcending Loss: Understanding the Lifelong Impact of Grief and How to Make it Meaningful](#). Davis Prend, A. (1997).
- [Bye Bye...I Love You](#). Dawson, K. (1998).
- [Journaling a Pathway Through Grief: One Family's Journey After the Death of a Child](#). Dean, W. (2002).
- [The Empty Room: Understanding Sibling Loss](#). Devita-Raeburn, E. (2007).
- [Chee Chee: A Study of Aboriginal Suicide](#). Evans, A. (2004).
- [After Daniel: A Suicide Survivor's Tale](#). Farr, M. (2000).
- [No Time to Say Goodbye: Surviving the Suicide of a Loved One](#). Fine, C. (1999).
- [The Grieving Teen: A Guide for Teenagers and Their Friends](#). Fitzgerald, H. (2000).
- [Straight Talk about Teenage Suicide](#). Frankel, B. & Kranz, R. (1997).
- [The Gift of Grief: Finding Peace, Transformation and Renewed Life After Great Sorrow](#). Gewitz, M. D. (2008).
- [Bart Speaks Out: Breaking the Silence on Suicide](#). Goldman, L. (1998).
- [After Suicide](#). Hewett, J. H. (1999).
- [Why People Die by Suicide](#). Joiner, T. (2007).
- [Katie's Diary: Unlocking the Mystery of a Suicide](#). Lester, D. (Ed.). (2003).
- [The Cruellest Death: The Enigma of Adolescent Suicide](#). Lester, D. (1997).
- [Do They Have Bad Days in Heaven? Surviving Suicide Loss of a Sibling](#). Linn-Gust, M. (2002)
- [Silent Grief: Living in the Wake of Suicide](#). Lukas, C. & Seiden, H.M. (1997).
- [In Search of April Raintree](#). Mosionier, B. C. (2008).
- [Coping with Teen Suicide](#). Murphy, J. M. (1999).
- [Touched by Suicide: Hope and Healing After Loss](#). Myers, M. F. & Fine, C. (2006).
- [Seven Choices: Finding Daylight After Loss Shatters Your World](#). Neeld, E. H. (2003).
- [Night Falls Fast: Understanding Suicide](#). Redfield Jamison, K. (2000).
- [But I Didn't Say Goodbye: For Parents and Professionals Helping Child Suicide Survivor's](#). Rubel, B. (2000).
- [Goodbye Jeaning: A Mother's Faith Journey After Her Daughter's Death](#). Sackett, J. (2005).
- [Turn Again to Life: Growing Through Grief](#). Schmitt, A. (1987).
- [The Suicidal Mind](#). Schneidman, E. S. (1996).
- [Healing After the Suicide of a Loved One](#). Smolin, A. & Guinan, J. (1993).
- [A Time to Grieve: Meditations for Healing After the Death of a Loved One](#). Staudacher, C. (1994).
- [When Life Hurts: A Three-Fold Path to Healing](#). Stiller, B. C. (2000).
- [Before Their Time: Adult Children's Experiences of Parental Suicide](#). Stimming, M. & Stimming, M. (Eds.). (1998).
- [Talking to Heaven: A Medium's Message on Life After Death](#). Van Praagh, J. (2001).
- [When There are No Words: Finding Your Way to Cope with Loss and Grief](#). Walton, C. (2003).
- [A Special Scar: The Experiences of People Bereaved by Suicide](#). Wertheimer, A. (2001).
- [The Journey Through Grief: Reflections on Healing](#). Wolfeslt, A. D. (2003).
- [Understanding Your Suicide Grief: Ten Essential Touchstones for Finding Hope and Healing Your Heart](#). Wolfelt, A. D. (2009).

References

- Alberta Funeral Service Association. (2001). *Funerals: An Information Guide*. Retrieved from: www.afsa.ab.ca/infoguide.html
- Alberta Health and Wellness. (2000). *Suicide Grief: Let's Talk About It*. [pamphlet]. Alberta: Alberta Health and Wellness.
- Boles, M. (2002). [Personal communication, July 10, 2002].
- Bolton, I., Mitchell, C. (1994). *My Son...My Son...A Guide to Healing After Death, Loss or Suicide*. Atlanta, GA: Bolton Press.
- Bolton, I., National Resource Center for Suicide Prevention and Aftercare, The Link Counseling Center. (2006). *Beyond Surviving—Suggestions for Survivors*. Retrieved from: <http://thelink.org/index.htm>
- Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. (2011). *Hope and Healing After Suicide: A Practical Guide for People Who Have Lost Someone to Suicide in Ontario*. Retrieved from http://knowledgex.camh.net/amhspecialists/resources_families/Documents/hope_and_healing.pdf.
- Centre for Mental Health, NSW Health Department. (1999). *Care and Support Pack for Families and Friends Bereaved by Suicide*. New South Wales, Australia: NSW Health Department.
- Chance, S. (1993). *Knowing "What to Expect" Helps Survivors Cope*. *Surviving Suicide*. p. 2-3.
- Fine, C. (1997). *No Time to Say Goodbye: Surviving the Suicide of a Loved One*. New York: Doubleday.
- Goldman, L. (2000, May/June). *Suicide: How Can We Talk to the Children?* The Forum Newsletter. p. 1-3.
- Grollman, E. (1988). *Suicide. Prevention, Intervention, Postvention*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Mertick, E. (1991). *Yours, Mine and Our Children's Grief: A Parent's Guide*. Alberta: Alberta Funeral Service Association.
- Mertick, E. (1998). *Grieving: "Our Time"*. Alberta: Alberta Funeral Service Association.
- Paraclete Press. (2000). *Journey Through the Shadows. Hope for Healing After Someone You Love Has Completed Suicide*. [videotape]. Massachusetts: Paraclete Press.
- Paraclete Press. (2000). *Light Amongst the Shadows. How to Help Those You Care For When Suicide Occurs*. [videotape]. Massachusetts: Paraclete Press.
- Red Deer City RCMP Victim Services. (2001). *Dealing with the Loss of a Loved One*. Red Deer: Red Deer City RCMP Victim Services Unit.
- Ross, E. (1987). *After Suicide: A Unique Grief Process*. Iowa: Lynn Publications.
- Supporting Suicide Survivors. (1999, November). SIEC Alert, p. 1.

Acknowledgment:

Some content on pg. 11 & pg. 20 has been adapted from: Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (2011). *Hope and Healing After Suicide: A Practical Guide for People Who Have Lost Someone to Suicide in Ontario* which was adapted from the original work developed by Alberta Health Services (former Calgary Health Region, 2003, 2006, 2011). Updated by the Provincial Steering Committee on Suicide Prevention 2015/2016.