

Suicide: Healing From the Trauma

Death by suicide has risen significantly in the past few years especially among the elderly and youth (ages 15-24). According to the Suicide Awareness Voices of Education, "suicide takes the lives of nearly 30,000 Americans every year." Twice as many deaths are due to suicide than from HIV/AIDS. A recent death that garnered a lot of media attention is the apparent suicide of Russell Armstrong, the estranged husband of Taylor Armstrong, one of the stars of the television show *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*.

The death of a loved one is a devastating experience but when the death is due to suicide, the experience is even more overwhelming and heart-wrenching. In addition to the loss the survivors are left with unanswered questions and turbulent emotions. Some of the most common feelings family and friends experience include the following.

Guilt - Scenes from the life of the deceased are replayed over and over. Thoughts such as, "if I had done or said something perhaps this wouldn't have happened" are common.

Shame - Suicide still carries a stigma. The survivors may wonder if others are blaming them or holding them responsible.

Anger - Feelings of being abandoned by the deceased as well as anger at themselves or others for not seeing and acting upon clues that might have been present.

Despair - Extreme sadness and feeling of hopelessness that could cause physical or emotional break down or even thoughts of suicide.

Survivors often continue to experience intense feelings and strong reactions for several weeks, months or longer after the suicide of their loved one. Nightmares, flashbacks, inability to concentrate, social withdrawal and lack of interest in everyday activities are common. If these or other feelings continue to intensify it's important to seek professional help.

In the meantime there are coping skills that you can use to help yourself.

- Stay in touch with family and friends. Share your feeling and thoughts with someone you trust and who is willing to listen without passing judgement.
- Reach out to others (spiritual leaders, counselors, etc.) for help and support. Having unbiased and professional guidance is crucial during this difficult time.
- Give yourself permission to mourn in your own way and at your own speed. Don't censor your feelings or deny them.
- Let go of blame toward yourself or others. Realize that the decisions that other people make and the actions they take are their own.
- Be patient with yourself. Healing is a process that requires effort, commitment and time. Continue to reach out and seek healing.
- Be prepared for setbacks. Healing doesn't follow a neat pattern. There may be moments of regression signaling that more work needs to be done.
- Join a support group designed to assist people affected by suicide. Listening to how others cope with their experience can encourage you and provide hope.

The loss of a loved one through suicide is a traumatic experience and, in one form or another, will always be with you. However, the raw intensity of your sorrow will diminish and the tragedy of your loss will not continue to control your life. Taking positive action and reaching out for help will enable you to achieve peace and healing and perhaps someday help others that are going through the same experience.

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