

*Illuminating experiences,  
skills and knowledges  
around suicide:  
An invitation to practitioners*

**From Marnie Sather, David Newman and Dulwich Centre**

This project aims to assist individual's families and clinicians in navigating the loss of a loved one through suicide. I (Marnie) lost my husband from suicide in March 2004. The process of swimming through the waters of shame and guilt has been rocky and sometimes I've been swept out by the strong currents. Now, with this project, we hope to collectively come up with ideas and actions that will make a difference to others who have lost loved ones to suicide. We hope this project will assist people to hold their heads up in difficult times.

We have included below a range of questions for those who have lost loved ones to suicide. Our hope is that you or others may choose to respond to these questions in writing. We will then collate people's responses and gather together a range of specific skills and knowledges that people are using to reclaiming their lives after the suicide of a loved one.

The questions below can be used with clients or you may wish to draw upon your own experiences. Please feel free to only respond to the questions you wish to. There is no need to respond to them all. There is also no need to respond to the questions in the order they are listed here. You may wish to consider whether you'd like to answer in collaboration with a friend, family member, or counsellor.

If you need support in drawing from your own experience, please feel free to contact me (Marnie) on [marnie3@mac.com](mailto:marnie3@mac.com). This project is close to our hearts and we hope it will end up being of benefit to others.

Thank you for showing interest in helping us to collectively develop strategies in response to people making sense of a loved one's suicide. If you do wish to send us a response, please email it to: [dulwich@dulwichcentre.com.au](mailto:dulwich@dulwichcentre.com.au)

Thank you.

## **MAKING SENSE OF THE SUICIDE**

What are some of the efforts you and/or others have made to try to make sense of your loved one's suicide? What has this been like?

Have you found yourself reviewing the person's life? If so, have you ever felt that the person's suicide was somehow understandable, or have you felt that it just doesn't make any sense, or has it been different at different times?

Have there been certain ways of making sense of the person's suicide that have made the path more difficult or brought more turmoil for you or those you care about? If so, please tell us about these.

Have there been certain ways of making sense of the person's suicide that have made the path easier for you or those you care about? If so, please tell us about these.

## **THE INITIAL NEWS**

When you found out about the news, was the trauma so powerful that you felt like joining your loved one? Or did it have you wanting to cling on to life even more tightly? Or did it affect you in quite different ways?

If the suicide was some time ago, do you ever still experience the responses you had when you first heard the news?

What was helpful or not helpful in the initial 24 hours after discovering your loved one's suicide?

Was there anybody with you when you found out? If so, were there things they said or did that settled you in any way at all?

As the days or weeks went on, were you able to talk about your loved one's suicide freely? Did you detect any ideas about the importance of protecting others, especially children, from the news or details of the death? If so, what was that like for you, and have there been any long term effects (positive or negative) of this notion of protection?

## **COMMUNITY RESPONSES**

What were the ways that members from your community responded to you and to the suicide of your loved one? Are there any particular responses that stand out? Could you tell a story about that?

What did others do that have made things a little lighter?

Were there particular conversations that stand out as more helpful? What was the tone of them?

Is it like you carry forever gratefulness for those who stood with you or those you love during your most anguished times? How does this gratefulness contribute to those who responded to you or those you love in such a way?

What difference do you think your interactions together in the aftermath of the suicide made to those members of your community who responded? How might it have contributed to their lives?

## **GUILT, SHAME OR BLAME**

Has guilt, shame or blame visited you or even swamped you in response to your loved one's suicide? If so, what effects have these forces had on your life?

Do you find you have to regularly negotiate shame, blame and guilt, or do they only visit occasionally?

Is there anything that makes these forces of guilt, shame or blame less powerful?

Were you visited by regrets, second-guessing, or if-only thinking about the days and weeks and months leading up to your loved one's suicide?

Is there anything you have learned from these regrets, second-guessing or if-only thinking? Or anything you have learned about keeping them at bay?

## **PLACES, PEOPLE OR THINGS**

Have there been any special people, places or things that have helped re-shape a positive meaning to your life after your loved one's suicide? Who or what are they?

Could you tell a story about these places, people or things that evokes how meaningful they are for your life?

## **PREPARATIONS MADE FOR THE SURVIVORS**

Did you have a sense, or did you see evidence, that the person, in their suicide, prepared you and/or others for the fallout?

What steps were made or do you imagine were made by the person to prepare you and/or others for the fallout?

What is it like to think about such steps?

If you had a sense that your loved one didn't make preparations for you and/or others, has it been difficult living with such a guess? Have you come up with ideas as to why your loved one seemingly didn't make preparations for the fallout? Do you have some ideas for what might have made it difficult for your loved one to take such steps?

## **CONSIDERATIONS OF FAMILY AND CULTURE**

Have there been other familial or cultural aspects that have assisted you in your path?

For instance, has music, art or creativity in general assisted?

Have there been particular stories, rituals or values from your family or culture that have been lighting a path for you?

If so, what kinds of stories, rituals or values have you been drawing upon? Did you do anything to unearth such stories, values or rituals or were they already known?

## **ONGOING RELATIONSHIP**

Does the person live on with you in some way? In what ways does this happen?

If your loved one was still here, what would stand out to them the most in how you have carried on?

What do you imagine would stand out for them in how you have cared for those who they love?

What do you imagine the person would want to say to you when speaking about these things?

## **LEGACY**

What would you say about how this person's suicide has shaped your life?

Has this person's suicide meant that you have commitments in your life or work that you wouldn't have otherwise had? Has it shaped particular life purposes?

## **A MESSAGE TO OTHERS**

If you were to pass on a message to others who have lost a loved one to suicide, what would it be? Why?

## **FEEDBACK**

We would welcome your responses to these questions. We would also welcome your feedback about them and the effect that reflecting upon them has had for you. Please feel free to write to us at [dulwich@dulwichcentre.com.au](mailto:dulwich@dulwichcentre.com.au)

Thank you again.