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## Practical information for immediately after a loss

The immediate aftermath of a loved one's suicide is a challenging, confusing, and painful time. The information below will help get you through the first few days with a better understanding of the things you're likely to face.

*Adapted from After Suicide Loss: Coping with Your Grief (2nd Edition) by Jack Jordan, Ph.D., and Bob Baugher, Ph.D.*

### Do the police have to get involved?

Because suicide is considered an unnatural death, the authorities are required to investigate. Suicide is not against the law, but given that there are cases where a homicide has been made to look like a suicide, the authorities will want to make certain that the suicide has not been staged to cover up foul play.

At the scene of the suicide the police may limit your access to the body—and to your home, if that's where the suicide took place—until their initial investigation is complete. They may also take some of your loved one's personal belongings, including any notes or messages that they may have left. If the police take personal possessions, be sure to ask for an inventory so you can keep track of what should be returned to you. You have the right to get all of these possessions back once the investigation is complete.

As part of the investigation, the police will want to question you. You should cooperate with them, but you have every right to ask them to conduct their investigation quickly and sensitively.

**Remember that neither you nor your loved one has committed a crime.**

### Can I/do I have to view the body? Will there to be an autopsy?

If you are the immediate next of kin but not the person who discovered and



identified the body at the scene of the suicide, you will be asked to identify the body either in person or through photographs. You may choose not to identify the body yourself and ask someone else to do so.

Even if the body has already been identified, you have the right to view it, and also to request that the coroner or medical examiner give you time alone with your loved one.

Whether you view your loved one's body is up to you. Research conducted with people who chose to view the body indicates that most survivors later on feel they made the right decision in doing so. While they may forever carry that last image in their mind, they also feel that the experience helped them come to terms with the reality of the death. But this comes down to a difficult and obviously stressful decision on your part - take your time, and try, as best you can, to decide what will be best for you in the long run.

Before you view the body, it is a good idea to have a friend or relative view the body (or photographs of the body) first to determine if the sight might be too traumatic for you.

The medical examiner or coroner may discourage you from viewing the body if the suicide method has caused significant damage on the grounds that the sight will unduly upset you. This is a legitimate concern, but the decision about whether to view the body and how much of the body to view is yours to make.

In the event of a suicide, the medical examiner or coroner may be required to perform an **autopsy** on the body, which is a surgical procedure used to determine the cause of death. The next of kin have a right to request a copy of the autopsy report.

## Living with Suicide Loss

Connect with others who have lost a loved one to suicide, hear how they have navigated their loss, and learn how to support loss survivors.

[Watch the videos](#)

### What do I tell people about what happened?

You may be hesitant to share with others that your loved one took their own life. While we cannot determine what is right for you, please note that in the long run, most survivors are glad that they decided to be honest about the facts of the death. One of the most important reasons to be honest about the way your loved one died is that it will give your friends and family the opportunity to support you in an appropriate way.

### What do I tell my children?



If you are the parent or guardian of minor children, it is up to you to determine whether to tell your children the truth about what happened. Please do bear in mind that people talk, and while you may not (yet) wish to share the nature of your loved one's death with your children, it's very possible that they will overhear adults discussing or speculating about the nature of the death.

When explaining the suicide to a child or adolescent, provide truthful information, encourage questions, and offer loving reassurance.

- Reassure children that they are not responsible, and that nothing they said or did caused anyone else to take their life.
- Be prepared to talk about the suicide multiple times during the first days and weeks, and later throughout the child's life.
- Consider a children's bereavement support group for your child if they are having difficulty adjusting. Learn more about these groups through the [Dougy National Center for Grieving Children and Families](#).

AFSP's *Children, Teens, and Suicide Loss* booklet, written in partnership with the Dougy Center, provides indispensable information about how young loss survivors understand and grieve a suicide death, guidance on age-appropriate language to use when speaking about the loss, and how best to provide support for them. [Click here](#) to view an online copy of the booklet, or [click here](#) to purchase a paper copy.

*Note for school administrators and teachers: for information on how to support students after a suicide loss, see our [After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools](#).*

## **How do I handle the media if the suicide has caught the public's attention?**

You are under no obligation to talk to the media about your loved one's death, but if you choose to do so, it can be helpful to designate someone as the family's spokesperson and for that person to have prepared remarks. You can also choose to give exclusive rights to the story to just one reporter. This way, if other reporters contact you or show up at your door, you can refer them to the reporter you've already entrusted with your story.



## What do I need to know about planning the funeral?

If you have any concerns that the funeral home where you would like to hold your loved one's funeral might not be comfortable handling a suicide death, ask up front (or have a family member or friend ask for you).

If the funeral is to include a member of the clergy, talk to them in advance to explore their understanding of suicide and consider educating or avoiding those who hold views about suicide being sinful. Research shows that suicide relates to a combination of health and psychosocial (life) factors, and there are many clergy who will be both sympathetic and supportive of you and your family, so there's no reason to settle for someone who is not.

If you'd like to memorialize your loved one with charitable donations, provide an "in lieu of flowers" statement in the obituary or at the funeral home that informs people where they can send monetary donations in your loved one's name. For information on how to memorialize someone by supporting the work of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, visit [AFSP's Memorial Fund page](#).

## In my loved one's obituary, do I have to say the death was a suicide?

Do what feels comfortable to you. However, by including the cause of death you will avoid repeated questions and rumors about how your loved one died later on, and you will again give people the opportunity to support you in a way that is appropriate.

### Connection makes a difference

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