



THE UNBEARABLE SORROW

When Suicide Hits Home

by Suzie Sallee & Rev. Wayne Palmer

Chances are if you picked up this booklet, you are a “survivor” of a family member or close friend’s suicide, or you may know someone who is. With a suicide comes a host of questions and sometimes few, if any, real answers. If you’re searching for answers to a loved one’s suicide, your efforts may lead to some illuminating insights, but one of the biggest questions of all may go unanswered: “Why?” One of the most difficult things we must acknowledge as survivors of those who have committed suicide is that some of our questions may not find a satisfactory resolution.

Our prayer is that you will find comfort and peace in your journey as the survivor of a loved one’s suicide. God is here to guide you each step toward the future. He not only knows your struggle, heartache, pain and grief, but He is here with you in this very moment, ready to support, comfort, encourage and strengthen you for the difficult journey you face.

That’s important because suicide is a punch in the gut. In August 2014, well-known comedian and actor Robin Williams died. How different would our reaction have been if the cause of his death had been reported as cancer, a heart attack, or a car accident? But in this case, Williams committed suicide. Somehow, that fact changed everything. To die at your own hand is a chilling thought.

In response to Williams’ suicide one of my friends wrote, “Jesus calls the devil ‘a murderer from the beginning.’ And, like every serial murderer, the devil is an opportunist, targeting the most vulnerable, when they are weakest. This is especially evident in suicide.”

Another wrote, “And lest we forget, constant drug use, alcohol abuse, and failed marriages can be a perfect storm leading to a final black hole of despair.”

I’m not saying these things were a part of Robin Williams’ decision. I don’t pretend to know the details of his struggle. I cannot be his judge. No one but God can know his state of mind or faith—just as your own problems and struggles are between God and yourself. But one of the greatest tragedies is the fact that no one seemed to see this coming—especially those who knew him: his friends and family. Looking back later they recognized signs, but the thought of him actually harming himself was beyond anything they could imagine.

That’s one of the things that lead to suicide. The human desire to be perceived in a favorable light can be life-threatening. It keeps people who are hurting from sharing their greatest burdens. The devil must love this trait in humans. The fact that we hide our insecurities, our hurts, our inadequacies, behind a veneer of socially acceptable behaviors gives him plenty of room to operate. It makes it doubly hard for those who are contemplating suicide to reach out for the help they so desperately need, to reach out to the people who love them and care for them. A burden shared is a burden lightened, but a burden hidden becomes an unbearable weight, according to Pastor Stephen Hower, senior pastor at St. John Church, Ellisville, Missouri.

SURVIVING SUICIDE

One of the hardest parts of surviving a loved one's suicide is battling guilt. Satan can twist this tragedy and turn it back on you, especially as you recall conversations or subtle clues that should or could have been warning signs. You're left with an internal nagging that will not quit, as you beat yourself up over actions you might have taken days or even weeks before the tragic event.

Years ago I lost one of my closest friends to suicide. I was working in a popular restaurant, preparing for the lunch rush. Returning from the supply room, a rookie waiter passed by me and asked, "Hey, did you hear about Kevin?"

Not giving much thought to who he was talking about my response was, "Kevin who?"

He nonchalantly replied, "Kevin who works here; he killed himself last night."

My head and heart crashed simultaneously. I couldn't breathe. Shock took over my brain and body. I couldn't move. Unable to bear my own weight, I fell to my knees. In that moment my entire world shattered.

Kevin and I had spoken on the phone less than 10 hours prior. I knew I was one of the last people to speak with him, before his suicide.

Looking back, our conversation wasn't out of the ordinary for us. We laughed and poked fun a bit. For a while we conversed on a deeper level, but then we ended on a humorous note. Speaking with Kevin over time I had come to understand how hurting people can hide a deep sadness behind a façade of humor. Kevin was that kind of person. It was obvious he was hauling a heavy load, and I always encouraged him to seek help from a professional. To this he would say he just couldn't find the strength to share it with anyone but me.

I can remember almost every word during that last conversation.

My phone rang. It was Kevin. "Suz, what's up, girl?"

"Hey, Kev! What'cha doing?"

"Hanging out at home. Exciting huh!"

I could hear in his voice he was struggling. "I know you like the back of my hand, mister, something is wrong."

"Nah, I'm fine."

"So what world problem should we solve tonight?"

"Well, first I wanna tell you, I wish I was like you."

"What? Trust me you don't want to be like me. That would be scary if there were two of me! Besides, I like you too much to give you up."

"You're the strongest person I've known. You know how to get stuff done—raised a kid by yourself, work, and you're not afraid of anything. I can't even get my laundry done."

“Yeah, well, I didn’t get this way overnight. I had lots of help, and sometimes I feel like I’ve spent more time in the therapist’s office than at home. And trust me when I tell you I have lots of fears.”

“Still, ‘you’re the man!’ I mean woman!”

“So what are you thinking about tonight? I know it’s not the laundry situation.”

Kevin would deflect my questions with humor. But most of the time I was able to push past this wall, and then he’d let me in. He opened up by sharing he knew there were things he had done that he felt sure were “a one-way ticket to hell.” He confessed many things—things he felt were unforgivable by anyone—especially God. Again, this wasn’t an unusual conversation when he was under the influence of alcohol.

“Suz, I’m going to hell. I just know it.”

“Wow, Kev, that’s a pretty intense statement, and it breaks my heart you feel that way.”

“No it’s a fact. I’m gonna burn.”

“What makes you say that?”

“I can’t begin to tell you the things I’ve done.”

“Probably not much worse than me.”

He blurted out, “I had an affair with a married woman!”

“Wow, that’s some pretty heavy stuff. That must have been hard keeping that secret. I appreciate you sharing with me.”

“Now you know what a jerk I am.”

“You told me before you believe in God.”

He always answered “yes” with a “but” attached to the end of the sentence. “I do, but I’ve done too much wrong.—I do, but I know He’s blacklisted me.—I do, but He won’t let me in after what I’ve done.”

I would respond by saying, “God doesn’t work that way. He knows everything about you, your heart, your problems, your despair, and your pain. And He knows the battle you’re fighting right now in this very moment.”

We kept bouncing things back and forth, but his increasing sarcasm showed he couldn’t go deep anymore.

During the 90-minute call I asked him if he was thinking about hurting himself or ending it, in as many ways as I could think of.

He laughed out loud and said, “Come on, Suz, you know me better than that! I’m a sissy when it comes to that. Heck, I pass out at the sight of blood!”

I did what I thought I could to ensure his safety, just as I had done so many times before, finishing with the customary question: “How ‘bout I come over, and we hang out?”

He responded with the same answer: “No, I’ll be fine. I’m actually gonna go to bed now.”

“I love ya.”

“Thanks for listening, you always know what to say, and I love ya too! ‘Night.”

While I was sleeping, he was alone—drinking, suffering depression, fighting guilt and shame, until he ended his life.

In that moment I became a survivor of suicide.

According to CDC data collected in 2011 (its most recent study), 39,518 suicides were reported in the United States, making suicide the 10th leading cause of death of Americans. In that year alone, someone in the U.S. died by suicide every 13.3 minutes. Each year the numbers CDC reports show suicide is on the rise.

There are also startling statistics about suicide survivors (i.e. family members and friends of a loved one who died by suicide):

- It is estimated that each suicide intimately affects at least six other people.
- Based on 39,518 suicides and using six survivors per suicide, the estimated number of survivors in the U.S. for 2011 was 237,108.
- If there is a suicide every 13.3 minutes, then there are at least six new survivors at that exact moment.

Many experts agree that one of the most common causes of suicide is some type of mental illness. Depression and schizophrenia are the two most common mental illnesses linked to suicide. An estimated 1 in 10 U.S. adults report depression. It’s also reported that roughly one out of every six people in the United States—and almost half of all people who commit or attempt suicide—have been diagnosed with some type of mental illness. But suicide isn’t limited to mental illness; other reasons may be marital or relationship issues, financial problems, unemployment, bullying, and the list goes on.

Those who abuse alcohol or other mind-altering substances are also considered to be more likely to commit suicide. Individuals under the influence are often more impulsive, since most substances impair their judgment and lower their inhibitions. Alcohol and drugs act as mood-enhancers and, combined with major depression, they can possibly push someone to do things he or she normally wouldn’t do like attempt suicide.

CONFRONTING THE FEELINGS

Powerful emotions pour forth in the initial aftermath of a suicide. Grieving the loss of a child, spouse, parent, sibling or other close relative, or friend is intensely painful. As a suicide survivor you face a more complicated grief because you must also deal with the fact that your loved one’s death was voluntary.

Survivors often feel numb, sometimes even denying their loved one committed suicide, as a way of dealing with troublesome, immediate needs. Planning a funeral, fielding difficult questions, and responding to sympathy offered by other people can seem too much to bear. It takes a lot of energy to grieve the death of someone you love, but eventually you must move past this phase and analyze your feelings. Denial (“It can’t be true.” “It didn’t really happen.”) is one defense against

trauma. Family members sometimes go to extremes to persuade themselves the person's death was accidental or possibly due to a homicide, even in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. This is a natural protection mechanism, but it isn't healthy in the long term.

Guilt is one of the most common and devastating emotions experienced in the aftermath of a suicide. To find fault with your lack of awareness of the situation is natural. You may blame yourself and begin to question everything you remember doing or saying in the days or weeks before the death. The unanswerable *whys* haunt you, along with the *what ifs*.

What if I had paid closer attention? Why didn't I see the signs?

What if I had done something to stop him?

Why didn't I try harder to talk her out of it?

Struggling to find an explanation, you imagine how you could have prevented that final decision. No matter how pleasant or unpleasant your last moment with your loved one was, a flood of guilt and self-doubt comes rushing in. It is one of the many sad legacies of suicide, but you can heal.

You may feel tremendous fear in dealing with all that is now left to you, regarding family, business, finances and other details. You may be afraid someone else you love will commit suicide, or you may fear the world is not safe, if something so horrible could happen.

Anger is also common among survivors. You may be angry at your loved one for abandoning and rejecting you. You may be angry at God for allowing this to happen. You may even be angry at someone else you blame for "causing" the suicide. Holding someone else responsible for your loved one's suicide is a way to avoid the greater hurt of acknowledging that person's decision to end his or her life. You may be angry at yourself for not having done enough to make your loved one want to live.

Shame is another complicating outcome of suicide. Survivors often feel a deep sense of personal failure. The family feels indicted by the fact a loved one voluntarily abandoned them. How can that be explained? If we don't understand it ourselves, how can anyone else? Suicide is stigmatized in our society, and survivors often feel as if they are spreading some terminal disease. Suicide becomes the defining moment of the loved one's life, and the family feels responsible. Outsiders, on the other hand, might view the suicide as the consequence of a seriously flawed family.

You may become depressed or overwhelmed by feelings of hopelessness when the reality of your loved one's suicide finally sinks in. "I couldn't save my loved one; therefore, nothing I do makes any difference." Shame, confusion, guilt and sadness can cause you to withdraw from friends and usual activities, and isolation fuels your depression. You may contemplate suicide, paradoxical as that may seem, since you know the effect it has on loved ones left behind. Depression skews your perspective and distorts your thinking. If you reach this point, please get professional help. Surviving a suicide is traumatic and causes deeply felt pain, but it can get better.

All of the feelings described, and any others you may experience, are normal. Allowing yourself to acknowledge and experience your feelings is the beginning of healing. It is very painful, but there is no other way to recover from your loss. Talk and share your feelings with close relatives, friends, support groups, or a professional therapist. Being alone with the memory of your loved one's suicide is a dark and lonely place where the suicide can become an all-consuming obstacle to moving forward. It is possible to remember what you cherished about your loved one's life, even though you're dealing with painful memories. It will take time, but hope and meaning will again be significant to you.

SPIRITUAL QUESTIONS:

Does a person who commits suicide go to hell?

The Bible includes the accounts of three people who took their lives.

King Saul had turned against God and repeatedly disobeyed His commands. Though God frequently spared his life, Saul continued to seek his own glory. Finally, God rejected Saul, and chose David to be the next king of Israel. At his final battle, King Saul was badly wounded by archers. Fearing the thought of falling into enemy hands and suffering torture, he fell on his own sword (see 1 Samuel 31:1-6).

Ahithophel was King David's trusted advisor. When David's son Absalom rose up in rebellion against him, Ahithophel betrayed David, and lent his support to Absalom. When Absalom refused to follow his advice he seemed to know the conspiracy was doomed. At this prospect he killed himself rather than face punishment for capital treason when David triumphed (see 2 Samuel 17:23).

In both these Old Testament cases, these men viewed suicide as a way of escaping earthly punishment. This has often been the resort of felons and war criminals. But all of them disregarded the fact that even though they escaped earthly punishment, that very moment they had to face God's eternal judgment. Without faith in God's forgiveness through Jesus Christ, they faced an eternal future of torment in hell. Ideally, they should have pleaded to God for forgiveness and found His strength to sustain them through the earthly consequences of their sins.

The New Testament records the suicide of Judas Iscariot, one of Jesus' 12 chosen apostles. He betrayed Jesus to the Jewish religious leaders for 30 pieces of silver. Hours later, seeing that Jesus was condemned to death, Judas was overwhelmed with guilt and went out and hanged himself (see Matthew 27:5; Acts 1:18-20).

Judas wasn't seeking to escape earthly punishment like King Saul and Ahithophel. He felt overwhelming remorse over what he had done—so much so he punished himself by taking his life. That might seem a sufficient payment for sin, but in His prayer after the Last Supper (see John 17) Jesus calls Judas the "son of perdition," a term for hell. Judas was condemned to hell because he didn't believe God could forgive him; and his solution—his own death—could not satisfy God's wrath at all his sins.

Does God forgive my loved one?

This is one of the most haunting questions a God-fearing survivor faces. In the Bible God offers only one way for a human to escape His wrath and receive forgiveness and eternal life. Each of us must put our trust in Jesus Christ, God's only Son. Jesus became human and lived a sinless life. He took our sins upon Himself and suffered and died on the cross to completely pay for all our sins.

The sufferings that drove your loved one to commit suicide are not enough to earn God's forgiveness; only Jesus' sufferings can do that. For your loved one to be forgiven, they had to regret all their sins and trust in Jesus Christ as their Substitute and Savior.

But isn't that impossible when a person takes his own life? In every suicide there is a brief window of time between the suicidal act and the death itself. Sometimes that window is extremely brief, in other times it lasts a matter of seconds or even minutes. It is during this window the Holy Spirit is working in your loved one's heart and mind to produce repentance and create faith in God's forgiveness for Jesus' sake. But we must also remember the Holy Spirit never forces faith upon anyone.

Ultimately, it is impossible for us to know what happened in that brief window of time. We must simply leave our loved one in the hands of our loving God—just as we must leave every other loved one who dies naturally.

I've heard suicide is the greatest sin against God. Is that true?

Suicide is indeed a sin, but it is neither the greatest sin, nor is it unforgiveable. Jesus spoke of only one sin as being unforgiveable—the sin against the Holy Spirit (see Matthew 12:31). The work of the Holy Spirit is to create faith in Jesus Christ in the heart of sinners. He leads us to recognize and regret our sin; He then comforts us with the assurance that Jesus Christ died in our place.

The sin against the Holy Spirit is a persistent refusal to allow the Holy Spirit to work regret and faith in our hearts. (If you ever have fears that you committed this sin, the regret and fear themselves are proofs you have not sinned against the Holy Spirit).

Is suicide an example of the sin against the Holy Spirit?

In the moment someone is acting upon the urge to end their life (pulling a trigger, swallowing an overdose of pills, jumping from a bridge or tall building), they are clearly refusing the work of the Holy Spirit. But that does not stop the Holy Spirit from trying to create regret and faith in the interval between this act and death. Since regret and faith is the work of God, it can take place instantaneously within someone's heart. Clearly, the longer the interval between the act and actual death, the more opportunity the Holy Spirit had to work that repentance and faith.

Why did God let this happen?

First, we must lay the blame squarely where it belongs—on our loved one. All the struggles your loved one faced are the result of a world broken by sin and the sins others committed against him or her, as well as the consequence of their own evil deeds. The decision to die was certainly colored by that person's sufferings, compounded by emotional and psychological factors. But despite all the suffering, God was there offering His hope and promises to encourage, heal and strengthen. This suicide (as well as every other sin) happened because God gives each of us the choice to follow His perfect path or follow Satan's. God gives us permission to love Him or not, to follow His ways or not. That does not give us the right to blame Him in any way. The wonder of His grace is that God gave His Son to provide a way to forgive and save such rebellious creatures as ourselves.

Martin Luther, the voice of the Protestant Reformation, adds this point about those who commit suicide:

“I don't share the opinion that suicides are certainly to be damned. My reason is that they do not wish to kill themselves but are overcome by the power of the devil. They are like a man who is murdered in the woods by a robber They are examples by which our Lord God wishes to show that the devil is powerful and also that we should be diligent in prayer. But for these examples, we would not fear God. Hence He must teach us in this way. However, this ought not be taught to the common people, lest Satan be given an opportunity to cause slaughter.”

Are you contemplating suicide? Suicide often emboldens other suffering souls to take the same path. You might find yourself tempted to take this way to escape the pain, guilt and sorrow in your life. But God stands beside you offering help and grace. Today may seem dark and hopeless, but God will always be there to walk through that darkness with you. Just hold on and you will find He is faithful to all His promises for you.

If that doesn't seem to help, remember that the sufferings you are enduring today will not last forever. The Bible teaches us that our physical life on earth is short, and it is followed by an eternal future. That future holds two possible destinations for you: heaven or hell.

Hell is a place of unending suffering, far worse than anything we could possibly suffer on earth. That is the tragic thing for someone who sees suicide as an escape from earthly punishment or sufferings. Anyone who dies without faith in Christ enters an eternity of ceaseless pain, grief, guilt, regret and torment, far beyond that which drove him or her to suicide.

The greatest danger in seeking a way out of your earthly suffering by ending your own life is that self-murder is a rejection of God's promise to help you endure your sufferings, and bring you to a brighter day. It is failing to trust in His love for you in Jesus Christ. And unless, in that brief final window you yield to the Holy Spirit—regretting your decision to end your life, and seeking forgiveness in Jesus Christ—you are putting yourself at risk of far greater suffering in hell.

God does not want that for you. Instead, He has given His own Son, Jesus Christ, to offer you forgiveness, comfort and peace here on earth—and an eternity with Him when this life is finished. Through Jesus Christ He offers us joy, peace, comfort and pleasures in His presence in heaven; these are unimaginable here on earth. It is living with God in a perfect body, surrounded by those who have been made perfect through the grace of God. In that place the Bible promises,

“... And He (God) who sits on the throne will shelter them with His presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb (Jesus Christ) in the midst of the throne will be their Shepherd, and He will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (Revelation 7:15b-17).

And in another place it says, “... ‘Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be His people, and God Himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” (Revelation 21:3b-4).

This eternal life is only possible because God sent His Son Jesus Christ to take our place. There on the cross He suffered His Father's great wrath at our disobedience and selfishness. Jesus died in our place on the cross so that we can share His resurrection life here on earth, and live with Him in heaven forever.

Surviving the suicide of a loved one is painful and difficult. But turn your eyes to Jesus Christ, your Good Shepherd, and He will be with you to protect you, encourage you, and bring you to everlasting comfort.

RESOURCE INFORMATION:

Find a Christian counselor: if you are suffering from a loved one's suicide, or struggling with suicidal thoughts yourself, please seek a Christian counselor who can guide you to God's promises in the Bible.

To find one near you, visit www.aacc.net/resources/find-a-counselor/.

American Association of Suicidology crisis help line: 800-273-TALK (8255)
www.suicidology.org
5221 Wisconsin Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20015
Telephone: 202-237-2280

Statistical data was taken from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Data & Statistics Fatal Injury Report for 2011, (www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention).

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Rev. Wayne Palmer graduated from Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne, Indiana, in 1992. Over the next 15 years he served two parishes in southeast Missouri—Trinity in Friedheim (1992-1999) and Concordia in Frohna (1999-2007). In 2007 he left the parish ministry to begin graduate studies at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis and to work as theological editor/writer at Lutheran Hour Ministries. In 2014 he received an MFA in writing from Lindenwood University. He lives in St. Louis with his wife Pam and son Jacob.

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