

INTRODUCTION

Anyone who has lost a loved one to suicide knows that it's a death like no other. Forevermore, you are a member of a group you never asked to join and would give almost anything to leave. The grief creates a ragged-edged wound that is all too easily and often reopened, even when years or decades have passed. Not only do those who are left behind pass over, around, and through their grief, they must contend with feelings of guilt and shame that may never completely dissipate.

The purpose behind this small book is simply to offer some thoughts and prayers that may be helpful for those who have been impacted by suicide, with the full understanding that words are often inadequate and each person processes loss individually. The reflections cover the traditional stages of grief

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first posited by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, but because death by suicide carries its own unique feelings, other stages, such as guilt and shame, are included.

As one left behind, be gentle with yourself. You may not move through the stages of grief as listed or read though this book in any particular order. You may skip over some stages, revisit and relive others, or find yourself going through the process more than once. This is perfectly normal and to be expected. You are walking in grief and grief-walking is not a straight path, nor does it have a final destination.

Finally, may you find some small measure of peace in the knowledge that the church now realizes that those who die by suicide are often not responsible for their actions: "Grave psychological disturbances, anguish, or grave fear of hardship, suffering, or torture can diminish the responsibility of the one committing suicide" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2282). The church prays for all who have completed suicide as well as for those who have been left behind, asking the Lord to comfort you in your shock and sorrow. May you and your loved one find peace in the mercy of God.

DENIAL

This can't be.

PONDER • Not believing the news that someone you love has taken his or her life is not only normal but necessary. The numbness and shock are a way of helping cope with something that is almost unbearable. Your mind may be blank. You may not be able to hear and understand what is being said to you. You may feel frozen. The one thought that prevails is *this can't be!*

PRAY • Lord, I don't know what to say. I don't even know what I'm feeling. It's all I can do to hold myself together right now. Surely this is all a big mistake. O Lord, be with me!

PRACTICE • Be gentle with yourself. Allow yourself to feel whatever you feel... even if all you feel is numb.

DENIAL*Did this really happen?*

PONDER • You may find yourself questioning if any of this is happening. On one level, you know that your loved one is no longer here, but on another level, your mind can't accept that. Your heart wants things to go back to where they were minutes, hours, or days ago. Understand that your shock is actually protecting you. Your body is shutting down into numbness so that you have the time and space to process what you have just learned.

PRAY • My God, I don't think I can handle this. I don't know how I can go on. People keep asking me questions and I don't have any answers. I feel helpless and hopeless. Lord, help me!

PRACTICE • Don't let anyone tell you what you should do or feel right now. Trust yourself and do what you know is best. Be alone if you need to, or find someone to be with you if you prefer.

DENIAL

There must be a mistake.

PONDER • Denial doesn't mean you aren't accepting reality. It can be a way to cope with the initial news, but it's also a way for your mind to slow down and attempt to make sense of something that doesn't make sense. The brain may have processed the information, but the soul operates on a different timeline. Questioning and denying allow you to survive the immediate impact of your loss.

PRAY • Lord God, can this be? Surely there is some mistake. Surely this is happening to someone else. Jesus asked that the cup of his death be taken away. I want that as well. But I'm trying to accept it as Jesus accepted his cup.

PRACTICE • Allow yourself to feel whatever you feel. Deep grief makes others uncomfortable and they make want to rush you to the "next" stage. Honor yourself and your own grief process.

DENIAL

How could this happen?

PONDER • At some point, denial begins to slide into the background. It's as if the soul finally agrees to what the mind knows, and you, however reluctantly, begin to accept your new reality. It may be the result of having to go to a funeral home or deal with authorities and official forms. Whatever the tipping point, you may begin to ask your own deep questions, often beginning with "How could this have happened?"

PRAY • Lord, I know that people want to help me right now. I appreciate their help, but I need your comfort more than anything. Give me the strength I need right now.

PRACTICE • Most often, it is wise to have someone with you as you deal with practical realities, but you know yourself best. If you need to do things by yourself, do them alone. If you need someone to be with you, ask for help.

ANGER

*How could you have
done this to me!*

PONDER • It's normal and necessary to feel anger when a loved one has died by suicide. Unlike other kinds of death, there isn't an "outside" source to blame. Yes, psychological issues can be the cause, but it's much harder to blame "mental illness" than it is cancer or a reckless driver. You may find yourself becoming angry, even furious, at your loved one for having left you.

PRAY • God, how could they have done this to me... to our family? Why didn't they tell me? Why didn't they trust me? How could they have been so selfish? Right now, I'm so angry at them, I'm not sure I can even pray to you.

PRACTICE • Anger is an absolutely necessary stage of grief. Denying your anger will only make it last longer. Accept that you are angry at your loved one for having completed suicide.

ANGER

I am so angry!

PONDER • Anger directed at your loved one may be only the beginning. You may be angry at other family members, counselors, doctors, friends, even the church. Understand that your anger is a way of regrounding yourself because anger may be the first feeling that arises after being numb. Think of your anger as a necessary part of your own healing.

PRAY • Lord, I don't know what to say. I don't know what to do. I'm so furious, it's all I can do to keep from lashing out at everyone around me. Help me not to make things worse by my anger. But help me to accept the fact that I am angry.

PRACTICE • See your anger as a temporary shelter in a storm of emotions. You won't stay there forever, but right now, your anger can help prepare you for the feelings to come.

ANGER

I'm so angry at myself.

PONDER • No matter how many times you are told it isn't your fault, you may feel deep anger at your own inability to have stopped your loved one. You may find yourself retracing all the events leading up to the death and questioning your every word and action. You may find yourself wobbling between feeling as if your heart will break and feeling so angry at yourself you can hardly breathe.

PRAY • Lord, I'm angry. I'm angry at my loved one. I'm angry at everyone who didn't help. But most of all I'm angry at myself. I feel like I let my loved one down. I feel like I let myself down. I'm not sure I can forgive myself. Can you forgive me?

PRACTICE • Think of your anger as a sign of the intensity of your love. Be compassionate with yourself and realize that your anger is helping you heal.

ANGER

Just leave me alone!

PONDER • You may find yourself becoming angry at what seem like irrational things—a clerk who is too slow, a bank that needs a death certificate, a friend who asks too many questions. Your anger feels free-floating, ready to latch onto anyone and anything. This, too, is normal, and it, too, will pass. Give it time.

PRAY • God, I feel like I shouldn't be so angry at everything, but I can't help it. I am angry at everyone and everything now. Even you. Accept my feelings, Lord, and help me not make things worse by lashing out.

PRACTICE • Find a short, simple phrase to calm yourself when you feel anger rising. Some ideas might be “This too will pass” or “It will be OK.”

A N G E R

Where were you, God?

PONDER • Some people feel God's profound presence after losing someone to suicide, but others feel abandoned and alone. If you feel God's absence more than God's presence, that's normal too. Remember that under your anger is profound pain and loss. It can be extremely difficult to feel love, even God's love, when you are submerged in loss. Just give it time. God hasn't really abandoned you.

PRAY • My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

PRACTICE • Good-natured people may try to help by offering platitudes like "She's with God now." If such statements make you cringe, try to let them wash over you and ignore them.