LOSS Teams: Helping Suicide Survivors Cope

The sudden, unexpected death of a loved one is an intensely traumatic event for those left behind. When that loss is due to suicide another level of trauma is often experienced as suicide deaths still carry great stigma in our society. Actor, Peter Greene, says, “As anyone who has been close to someone that has committed suicide knows, there is no other pain like that felt after the incident.” Survivors often feel more intense guilt, anger, and shame in addition to the normal bereavement emotions of longing, sadness, and hurt.

For close survivors, it is not uncommon to question one’s spiritual base, experience a decreased sense of satisfaction in activities once enjoyed and feel deeply empty and adrift. What we know about sudden and traumatic loss to suicide is that those family members left behind are themselves at a 9 to 12 times greater risk to die by suicide as well as at higher risk of experiencing health, relationship, and occupational difficulties.

Pre-event most individuals have usual life stressors but also have supports that mitigate life stress so that a level of satisfactory coping is fairly consistent. Common trajectories post-trauma are that an ability to cope erodes and a survivor can often slowly spiral from a productive, meaningful life to loss of meaning in life and perhaps descend further into maladaptive coping that might include addictive behaviors, relationship aggression, self-injurious behaviors and at times even attempting or completing suicide themselves.

Suicide survivor Patty Gallagher says this about the experience of losing a loved one to suicide, “When my husband died, more than anything, I wanted someone to talk to who fully understood what I was going through, someone who had been down this road and could understand all the emotions that go with it. After the funeral, everyone's lives returned back to normal. Mine would never be normal again. I wanted someone to talk to who understood that and could help me learn to cope.”

Across the country, progressive communities have found avenues to reach out and support survivors of suicide and traumatic death through the formation of LOSS teams (Local Outreach to Suicide Survivors). These teams have been highly successful in intervention that can prevent or mitigate a post-trauma downward spiral. A LOSS team is typically three persons; two persons that have survived the suicide or traumatic death of a close loved one along with a mental health practitioner. Data from other LOSS team programs have shown that immediate trauma response to survivors can greatly aid in processing and healing from a traumatic death. In fact, on average a suicide survivor will suffer for four and a half years before seeking professional help. With a LOSS team intervention that narrows to an average of 39 days.

The South Heartland Suicide Prevention Coalition is working to begin a LOSS team that can respond to deaths from suicide as well as other types of sudden, traumatic death. LOSS teams are activated by law enforcement with family consent to go to scenes of suicide and traumatic death to spread information about resources and to “be the breath of hope for the grieving
survivors.” The purpose is to reduce trauma, normalize grief, and role model healthy adjustment to loss.

South Heartland Suicide Prevention Coalition is seeking interested community members to volunteer for a LOSS team. Candidates should be two years or greater out from their own loss and will be asked to complete a rigorous screening process, attend initial trainings and participate in monthly training and debriefing meetings. Teams respond to an event within four to six hours and spend an average of 45-60 minutes on site. Follow-up contacts are also made at regular intervals to provide ongoing support. Typically, teams would be asked to be on-call for a month at a time and contact reserve members if they anticipate being unavailable during a time frame that month.

Those with an interest in volunteering or that would like more information should contact South Heartland District Health Department at 402-462-6211 or 1-877-238-7595.

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