

# *Suicide—*

## WHEN THE SILENCE STOPS



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Suicide doesn't just happen to the "crazy" teen down the block, the junkie on drugs or the intoxicated college dude challenging a "dare." It doesn't just happen to those who are dealing with depression and the side effects of antidepressants. It doesn't just happen to teens and young adults challenged by responsibilities, financial woes, parenting nightmares or stress in school or on-the-job. It isn't just carried out by a soldier overwhelmed by active duty and the atrocities of war. It doesn't just seek out the deceitful, the poor, the irresponsible, the desolate and the hopeless.

Suicide is random. It happens to those with fulfilling careers: the professional, the accountant, the politician, the physician and even the clergy. It happens to people we depend on for advice, support, guidance and motivation. It happens to role models: the coach, the teacher, the professor, the law enforcement officer and the military officer. It is steadily increasing among our elderly and our sick. It happens to the child, the sibling, the father and mother, the spouse, the provider, the soul mate and the best friend. It spans the width and breadth of our population, crossing cultures, manipulating the sliding scale from the young to the aging, infiltrating religions and spanning the globe.

It happens right under our noses and to those we least expect. It happened to the twenty-one-year old son with the world ahead of him and opportunities at his door—to our son who had a purpose and plans, who was head over heels in love and eager to begin a new chapter in his life. It happened to someone just beginning to “spread his wings” and taste the freedom of adulthood. It happened in a moment of anger. It did not build over days and months; it happened swiftly. It happened to my Chad. It brought with it *silence*, a silence so incredible and so humbling we couldn’t speak.

And then, ten weeks later, it repeated itself all over again when Chad’s fiancé, Jenny, became another victim consumed by her own grief and hopelessness. It happened again—not as silently—but just as devastatingly as the first blow.

Suicide reigns greedily as a Silent Killer stalking, exhausting, debilitating and smothering its victim until the only solution seems to be to “give in.” It beckons as a justified choice for unrelenting pain. It becomes reasonable in ways that makes no sense to its victim or to its survivors. When coping becomes unmanageable, suicide becomes a desperate decision and the final answer. Suicide is silent, not because there isn’t always a cry for help, but because it becomes the unspeakable demise. Survivors grow silent, stigmatized by the impending taboo.

## **When Suicide Becomes Taboo**

Suicide sneaks into our lives, disabling the survivors who spend the rest of their lives dealing with the residual taboo. Taboo is defined as a strong social ban against words or actions that are considered undesirable. Breaking a taboo is unethical and, therefore, survivors carry with them the stigma that results in embarrassment and often shame. The welcome silence of suicide (not talking about it) sometimes seems better than facing the struggles of survival. If we don’t talk about it, we might avoid imposed dilemmas or shade the truth that we have become a statistic in an unwelcome profile.

## **Survivor Dilemmas Create Silence**

Survivors face social and spiritual dilemmas that extend the silence. They may feel a sense of guilt or failure. Even though guilt may be perceived, society isolates the survivor by keeping its distance, often because someone doesn’t know what to say. This becomes another excuse to tuck neatly inside our shell and become silent and invisible.

Survivors may fear social interactions. Attending a social event sears the wounds of self-disclosure. Do I talk about my loss? (Someone may ask how he died.) How much do I tell? Or should I just remain silent? It took me years to

realize social isolation was because friends didn’t know what to say, how to act around us, or how to deal with our pain. We learned that some friends may never be able to give us the kind of friendship and support we once shared.

Spirituality and religious beliefs may present conflicting values for the survivor. The personal trauma of suicide requires integrating faith and acceptance. The survivor may feel hypocritical because of shame. Survivors without support from their pastor or priest often worry, “Will he or she be saved?”

After Chad’s death I searched fervently for any story that could confirm my belief that Chad was okay. I remember Jenny telling me that Chad had gone to a rummage sale one day and he came home with a bunch of “holy things” (i.e. a cross, a picture). He told her he believed in God and even made her pray before meals. When he came home from the army’s White Sands Missile Base training, he brought her a “Footprints” plaque.

This was a story a mother needed to hear. It restored my trust that Chad “believed” and Gary and I believe that our God is a merciful God who understands things we can’t comprehend. We felt comforted that Chad was okay. Practicing religious rituals such as prayer, meditation and reading the Bible may be challenged with temporary anger at God. In other cases, it becomes the only “rock” for survival. After suicide, spirituality creates a renewed search for meaning that causes us to evaluate our core beliefs.

Spiritual and social dilemmas are the scourges of living with the taboo of suicide. This is life turned upside down, inside out, and it creates a driving desire for personal peace. Healing begins first on the inside and then permeates to the outside from a healing heart and self-forgiving soul. With progressive healing, the silence ends.

## **How a Survivor Stops the Silence**

Survivors need not be silent any more. What they long for is the reverberating echo of acceptance, understanding and peace. When you allow a survivor of suicide to teach you about uniqueness of his or her grief, you may learn so much more about the sanctity of life.

I spent at least three years hiding from my grief, absorbing every bit of damaging pain, swallowing my hard-earned pride, admitting my feelings of defeat, and finding excuses for what seemed “hard-to-believe.” I was an actresses playing a role in a modern tragedy, writing my own script and hoping for an ending that could bring healing peace. But I learned that survivors have the power to stop the silence and “teach” society how to respond to their loss.

- **The silence ends when survivors are willing to accept no-fault accountability.**
- **The silence ends when survivors rise above society’s judgment, which is often misdirected, misinterpreted and heightened.**
- **The silence ends when survivors quit trying to figure out “why” and accept that they may never know.**
- **The silence ends when survivors realize their loved ones’ choice was not meant to destroy them.**
- **The silence stops when survivors are unafraid to expose raw pain, disappointment and unpretentious conclusions.**
- **The silence stops when survivors speak their loved ones’ names and honor their loved ones’ lives.**
- **The silence stops when survivors remember the awesome memories and tell the unforgettable stories that bring comforting peace to their souls.**
- **The silence stops when survivors hold their heads high and face adversity with determined pride.**
- **The silence stops when survivors vow to coach other survivors to work diligently through their losses, override the taboos and free themselves from lingering grief.**
- **The silence stops when survivors find peace in knowing they and their loved ones will “meet again.”**
- **The silence stops when survivors accept that God put them in their loved ones’ lives to love, accept and believe in them unconditionally.**
- **The silence stops when survivors choose to survive—and live beyond—the tragedies of life.**

Survivors want the silence to end. Survivors want to speak and be heard. Survivors want to let others facing the same tragedy know that they are not different—that loss of any kind still hurts.

Here’s a great story (compliments of the internet, author unknown) that uses humor to portray intervention. It can also illustrate a very important point: God is always there for us in one way or another, even though we may be so angry that we temporarily turn our backs on God while we work through the grief that seems so unjust. There may not be any time in our lives more challenging than accepting the death of a loved one and questioning, “Why me, God? Why did this happen to me?”

*An atheist professor was teaching a college class. He told the class that he was going to prove that there was not a God. He said, “God, if you are real, then I want you to knock me off this platform. I’ll give you 15 minutes!”*

*Ten minutes went by and the professor kept taunting God, saying, “Here I am, God. I’m still waiting.”*

*Nearing the last couple of minutes, a big, 240-pound football player happened to walk by the door and heard what the professor said. The football player walked in the classroom at the very last minute and hit the professor with a full force that sent him flying off the platform.*

*Obviously shaken, the professor got up and said, “Where did you come from and why did you do that?”*

*The football player replied, “God was busy; He sent me!”*

In April 2007, it will be fourteen years since Chad and Jenny suicided. Gary and I aren’t silent anymore. We speak openly to others who ask about the unique pain of being a survivor of suicide.

Available now from Centering Corporation is a new book I wrote called, ***Ask Me: 30 Things I Want You to Know About Being a Survivor of Suicide***. Its focus is to educate those who would support survivors of suicide. It speaks to the feelings of many survivors. It is meant to dispel the taboo of grief, break the code of silence and offer hope for survivors. It is our story of survival and stopping the silence.

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