



WHAT IT FEELS LIKE TO BE A SURVIVOR OF SUICIDE

BY NAN ZASTROW

This article is written from my personal reflection of what it feels like to be a survivor of suicide. It is not meant to ignore or diminish the experience of other types of traumatic deaths that may have similar responses. My responses are not unique to me alone and may agree with the thoughts expressed by others. In Memory of Chad Zastrow 12-4- 1971 to 4-16- 1993

Fall. It's that time of year when the annual walk for suicide awareness takes place in our community. Some people will see the posters, hear the advertisements, and think: "Just another walk/run for a cause. Aren't there enough of them already? What's the sense of it?"

For a smaller part of the community who see the awareness signs, there's a connection, because they have been touched by suicide, in some way. Ask any "survivor", "What's it like to be a survivor of suicide?" You might be puzzled by their surprise! Most people would never ask the question, partly because they really don't want to know; and, the other part is because it's never going to happen to their family.

Our son, Chad Zastrow, died over twenty years ago in 1993 as a result of suicide. His fiancé took her life ten weeks later. Each suicide death was very different from the other. Chad's was random and an emotionally charged response to the end of a relationship; the other, as a result of remorse, well-planned and carried out. Yet,

even today, I will meet someone who knew Chad—and didn't know I was his mother. It makes me proud when the person acknowledges knowing Chad. His life mattered, and regardless of the cause of death his life gave us 21 years of memories.

What is a survivor of suicide?

A survivor is someone who exists after a loved one has taken their own life and lives with the traumatic psychological and social distress that impacts their life forever. Survivors include family, neighbors, friends, co-workers, etc. who had a personal connection with the deceased. Statistics show that every suicide victim leaves behind at least 6 survivors of suicide. That's probably a low estimate. Some estimates I've read consider as many as 28 survivors. I am from a small family. When I count the 4 aunts/uncles, 4 nieces, and 2 living grandparents, I've already surpassed the count of 6 direct survivors. This excludes my son's dozens of friends, co-workers, fellow National Guards men/women, Scouting buddies, classmates, volunteer emergency personnel and many

more groups of Chad's social friends. We've well passed the 28 number of survivors. Statistics demonstrate that the loss of a family or friend by suicide is far-reaching. The level of impact varies depending upon the relationship; however, the event of suicide is never forgotten.

What makes suicide different from other deaths:

You can argue that the person made a choice to die while other types of death typically don't include a "choice". In Chad's situation, I felt comfortable believing his death was not a rational choice—but rather an explosive response to a heated moment of pain and the unfathomable burden of the loss of a relationship. There wasn't a cool-down period to work through his emotions and surprise.

As a survivor, I was emotionally and mentally absorbed feeling a sense of guilt, confusion, and disbelief. For years, I commented, if it had been any other kind of death, I probably could have accepted it easier than suicide. I believe, Chad would not intentionally "choose" to die.

Another thing that makes suicide "different" is it is tainted by stigma. When someone dies, most bereaved receive compassion and support. However, with stigma-related deaths, the survivor deals with some blame, judgment, and social avoidance. Whether this is actual or perceived, cannot be determined for a long period of time because the survivor is dealing with the uncertainty of why the death occurred.

Personally, I felt social judgment as a parent who failed her responsibilities. I also struggled with "if only" thoughts of what I could have done differently to prevent the death.

How people respond to survivors of suicide:

I am intrigued by Dr. William Feigelman, PhD's research. As a suicide counselor who lost a child to suicide, he compiled statistics about how people respond to survivors of suicide. He found that 53% of suicide survivors reported harmful responses from one or more family members following their loss and 32% reported harmful responses from a non-kin group. These responses were categorized into 7 types of responses.

1. **Avoidance (People would not acknowledge the death.)**
2. **Unhelpful advice.**
3. **Absence of caring interest (If I talked about my child, they changed the subject.)**
4. **Spiritual advice (He's in a better place, or it was meant to be.)**
5. **Blaming the victim (He did a selfish thing.)**
6. **Blaming the parent (Why didn't you see this coming?)**
7. **Negative comments ("Well at least he didn't kill anyone else.")**

In an article I wrote in 2006, (*Discovering Something Greater than the Answer to Why*) I stated, "When there aren't answers to satisfy us or the answers are contradictory to what we perceive, we feel resentment...The attempts to neutralize the pain are futile. Now I can live without the answer to why? "It doesn't matter anymore. I remind myself that knowing won't change a thing."

Avoidance is probably the most hurtful response. Some think they don't want to stir up emotions that might cause the survivors to think of the suicide death, so they avoid contact, conversation, and any social interaction. I certainly felt social avoidance.

Answer to "Why did the person choose to take his/her life?"

Often there isn't a clear answer to why someone ends his/her life. For me, understanding "why?" became my quest. Even when there seems to be reasonable certainty why a loved one suicides, some doubt always surfaces. I was without exception in Chad's death. The word "choice" continued to annoy me. I don't think of suicide as an eny, meeny, miny, moe choice. Death may not be the intent...ending the pain is.

I read about a theory that there is an accumulation of pain from life's experiences that builds up throughout one's life and becomes unbearable leading to the suicide. Single incidents or accumulated responses to receiving bad news, misfortune, setbacks, and rejection create negative feelings about life. When these incidents multiply, life may be difficult to manage. I've visited with countless survivors of suicide and their stories support the fact that emotional or physical "pain" was a major trigger. Emotional pain creates sadness, anger and layers of suffering that may not be noticed or may be ignored. Every individual has a different tolerance level to the same kind of stressors, and each person's basic human needs differ. Over time or as an instinctive reaction, pain sparks fear and loss of hope. In my estimation, these two factors precede death by suicide.

We cannot exclude mental illness in suicide. Statistics confirm that 70% of suicide deaths are linked to depression, bipolar disorder or other mental illness. Undetected mental disease, uncontrolled disease while on medica-

tions, and a history of self-destructive behaviors can deteriorate a person's emotional health. I remind myself that because I am mentally healthy, I can't understand what it must feel like to face a problem that seems unresolvable. Suicide becomes the individual's permanent solution to a temporary problem. Prevention begins with aggressive detection of mental health issues in our schools and workplace.

How to let go of the why?

Even when I became comfortable with my story about why Chad died by suicide, I was reluctant to let go and live with my personal explanation that should have put me on a path to healing. It wasn't that easy to accept the outcome. I felt helpless. Every indication that life was good boggled my mind. We had a long discussion with Chad about moving home and saving money to buy some land. Within days before his death, he bought a fishing pole and had a picture of a boat he wanted to buy. Chad "made-up" time for his National Guards drill that he was going to miss so he could attend his EMT class. He bought his fiancé roses and paid his taxes. What was I missing that would allow me to move past letting go?

Understanding how grief works and how I had to heal myself was missing. It took me a long time to determine that I was focusing too much on how/why he died rather than remembering all the good times when he lived. Eventually, I conceded to "let it go" and live. Grief saps the energy out of every day and I didn't want to play the role of a bereaved mother (without a cause) any more. Letting go doesn't betray the love nor does it diminish the relationship we shared. Instead I wanted to turn my grief into healing by helping others in loss. This was my turning point.

Accepting the reality is the key to healing. This doesn't mean knowing your loved one is absent and the death happened. Acceptance means knowing the good and the bad and knowing the challenges and the failures in his life.

When mental health or destructive behavior issues preceded the suicide death, you accept those factors as contributors to the death. You accept that you cannot hold yourself responsible for curing things beyond your control. The cause of death does not define the person who died.

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ment...The attempts to neutralize the pain are futile.Now I can live without the answer to why?" "It doesn't matter anymore. I remind myself that knowing won't change a thing."

What does it feel like to be a survivor of suicide TODAY?

Even after twenty years, the stigma still has its hold. I feel that those who don't know Chad's "real" story have a very stereotyped concept of his death. I think, as a society, we sometimes focus too much on how someone died rather than how they lived; ignoring what they contributed to the community and our lives; and how much they mattered to their survivors. We may forget that their life was similar to ours until something "went wrong." It becomes easier to label the person with he/she "committed" suicide—a verb with a lasting effect that seriously makes the death appear ugly, selfish, and unforgiving. As a survivor, I'm not capable of changing anyone's opinion.

When Gary and I speak at conferences now, such as the National Compassionate Friends Conferences, we wear a tag that reads: "Ask Me, I'm not afraid to talk about suicide." We accept that even today we are "pointed out" as survivors, and don't hide from the reality anymore. At one time, I couldn't say the word "suicide" when I talked about Chad. Today, I embrace the pain and feel blessed to have overcome the personal stigma in my mind.

I don't feel much different than anyone else who has lost a significant loved one in their life. We are all survivors, in our own ways. Suicide is just death by another name. It doesn't define who my son was, nor does it define how I lived my life after his death. I continue to heal. I continue to tell my story, and I continue to walk in the light of awareness.

And yes, we actively support suicide prevention and awareness. It's time for the Fall Walk for Suicide Awareness. I'll lace up my shoes. I'll put on that smile that makes people wonder what in the world I could be smiling about. I'll don the T-shirt that heralds the event and be proud. I am a survivor of suicide. "Because he lived, I remember. Because I remember, he will never die."

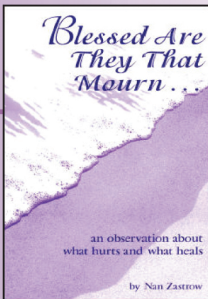
RESOURCES:

Discovering Something Greater than the Answer to Why, Nan Zastrow, Grief Digest magazine, 2006 and 2015.

Narratively stories/confessions-of-a-suicide-survivor, website, American Association of Suicidology, Washington, DC, Jeffrey Jackson

Who is a suicide survivor? John R. Jordan, Ph.D. Pawtucket Rhode Island.

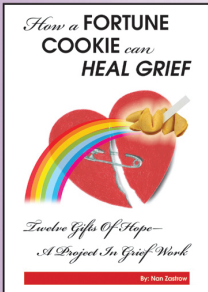
Books by Nan



Blessed Are They That Mourn....

\$7.95

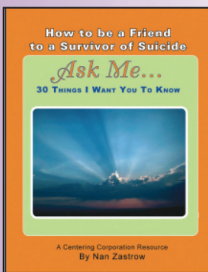
Written from the heart, Nan tells her story about their real grief experience and how the sudden death of her 21 year-old son impacted her future and loss of dreams. She candidly shares her attempt to resurface from unbearable pain when community and friends couldn't understand why her grief should last so long.



How a Fortune Cookie can Heal Grief

\$7.95

Did you ever think that a fortune cookie could offer a profound message of comfort, happiness and peace in a life stressed by grief? Nan weaves a modern parable of life and teaches the value of attitude and choice in grief work. Discover what you might be missing. Read personal stories with results by people who used the Twelve Gifts of Hope-a project in grief work.



Ask Me. 30 Things I Want You to Know

\$5.95

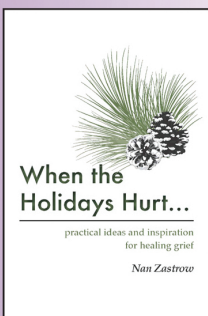
All grievers want to be heard, but many suffer in silence. This book speaks to "30 Things" you will want to know about surviving grief (not just suicide grief). ASK ME teaches you what to expect and how to plan your response to uncomfortable situations. "When I am most vulnerable, here is what I want you to know," says Nan.



Hitch Your Hope to a Star

\$7.95

Here is a collection of stories about HOPE. Each shares its perspective through analogies and lessons learned during the journey through grief. Give this as a gift book to someone who is hurting, someone who has lost a special loved one, or to someone who could use reassurance that we are resilient individuals who survive the roller coaster experiences of life and grow from telling our stories.



When the Holidays Hurt

\$7.95

For nearly two decades, Nan, and her husband, Gary, have inspired the bereaved through community holiday programs for those who grieve. They offer ideas to preserve holiday sanity and sanctity based on their own experiences. Learn how to unwrap and add heart-warming, commemorative rituals into the holiday that honors and remembers your loved one who died. In this book is a collection of stories meant to inspire you and encourage you as you plan your first holidays after your loss.

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