

8 Ways to Cope *After a Suicide Loss*

By Carla Stumpf-Patton

Coping with suicide loss can feel devastating. In its aftermath, it can bring overwhelming, mixed emotions and questions about how and why this happened. More importantly, we wonder how we are going to survive with what feels like an insurmountable level of pain and loss. But, we can and do survive, and there are fellow survivors who offer us hope that our hearts can heal. A group of military survivors who lost a loved one to suicide offered some unique suggestions and creative coping skills, knowing that what works for one may not work for another. They shared what has helped them along the way, hoping to help the next person looking for answers.

1. Basic needs, self-care and emotional wellness are critical for daily living and functioning. It can feel overwhelming just getting through the day, so it helps to be gentle with yourself and patient with the process as to not get discouraged. Grief recovery takes time. Basic needs such as regular sleep, eating well, hydrating and regular medical care are critical. Self-compassion means allowing yourself to go at your own pace, to smile, laugh or feel joy again. It means giving and accepting love from others, knowing you don't have to do everything alone. Keep a "to-do" list and notepad for important details or reminders. Take things one step at a time, one day at a time and, when need be, go back to the basics and just focus on breathing and keeping your stress levels under control.

2. Physical needs are equally important and some people find that "doing" can be a comforting, healthy outlet to channel grief. Physical activity is important to our overall health and can help relieve levels of stress and regulate sleep and mood. Some examples may be walking, biking, hiking, kayaking, yoga, meditating, rock climbing, traveling, gardening, spending time in nature, running and animal-assisted therapy like equine therapy or getting an emotional support animal.

3. Seeking grief supports and professional counseling can offer tremendous help. Many sought out a private therapist to discuss feelings openly and learn new coping skills. This was especially important with high levels of trauma where survivors needed a safe place to discuss the graphic details around the loss. Many shared how grief support groups were helpful to sharing their stories, as was seeing a psychiatrist when medically necessary. Don't get discouraged if you don't find the right fit immediately. Keep searching until you find a therapist you trust. Remember that TAPS can help make these counseling referrals should you need any assistance.

4. Connecting with others who understand can remind you that you aren't alone. It helps to have a safe place to connect with others who won't judge or tell you what to do or how to feel — a place where you can share, listen and be heard. Surviving military loved ones found support through local groups like TAPS Care Groups as well as online forums like the message boards and chat rooms of the TAPS Online Community. For some, it helped to stay connected with battle buddies of the deceased and maintain some connection to the military community.

5. Learning about grief and suicide are important starting points to understand what you (and your loved one) may have been experiencing and how important it is to feel and express emotions that come with such a loss. We learn there is no time limit on grief and we all have different paths. This information can come from reading books, doing research on the subject and attending seminars or workshops. After a loved one dies by suicide, it can help to learn more about mental health and how it impacts thoughts and behaviors that can lead to suicide. While it cannot bring back our loved ones who have died, this knowledge can bring forth a new understanding and a hopeful encouragement of how education and prevention efforts can save lives.

6. Tapping into creativity can be healing and gives another outlet for expressions of grief, particularly when you can't find words to express your emotions. Some examples of this might include writing, journaling and blogging, crochet, quilting or knitting, making a memory garden, scrapbooking, making homemade cards, doing puzzles, painting, meditative coloring, baking, cooking and canning. These activities can be calming and therapeutic in nature and can help with feelings of productivity. It also is a unique way to offer handmade, heartfelt gifts to others.

7. Honoring and remembering are important ways to keep the memories alive and a powerful tribute to life that was lived. This can come in many forms, often occurring after there has been some time to process the grief. This may happen when there is a shift in focus to the life lived instead of the death. It may come in the form of giving back or doing things that give a sense of pride around your loved one's life and service, a desire to create a legacy or simply make you feel closer to them. Take flowers to the cemetery, plan a special event on important dates like birthdays or anniversaries, go to a favorite restaurant or make a favorite meal at home. Do something special your loved one would

have enjoyed; go fishing or see their favorite movie. You might even run in an event with Team TAPS as a way to do something in your loved one's memory. As you are honoring and remembering your loved one, know that your TAPS family is here for you. TAPS Togethers are a wonderful way to bring together surviving military families in local communities by connecting them with others who understand and where survivors can honor their loved ones together.

8. Meaning and purpose are about you moving forward and still living a meaningful life in spite of the grief — when you feel ready. Some survivors feel empowered by the thought of surviving something so painful, which can ironically bring a newfound sense of purpose. You may choose a new path for your life's plan; you may begin a new career, find new hobbies, create new relationships, start traveling or shift your focus to new or different priorities. For some, it might involve advocacy work around mental health or suicide prevention. It might involve giving back and helping others, such as with the TAPS Peer Mentor

Program, which makes connections between bereaved survivors of military loss. Grief can bring new knowledge, which in turn brings new strength, which brings a renewed sense of hope.

No matter what your paths you take to find healing, you are not alone. Others have walked this path and are here to offer encouragement. You can survive. You can even thrive.

From the pen of...

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