

Will you be a friend? Or just an acquaintance?

This is a plea for all of us to be more compassionate about a specific issue. A plea to accept a bit of discomfort on our part to support another who desperately needs it.

I'll bet you are already feeling uncomfortable about where this is going even though you have no idea what it is about.

If you are a compassionate person, you will continue reading anyway. And if you are the kind of person who wants to become a better person each day, then you will read all of it and give it some serious thought.

Note: If this sounds to you like a lecture, please consider it to be a classroom lecture where the objective is expanding understanding of the subject. It is not intended as a remonstrance toward anyone. That is neither my place nor my purpose.

When we are presented with something that is emotionally upsetting, we have a strong impulse to shy away from it.

That is entirely normal and natural. It is our 'fight or flight' instinct kicking in. We spend many years from early childhood well into adulthood, learning how to deal with that instinct. Learning how to overcome that flight reflex and deal constructively with the situation before us. We are developing courage, judgment and compassion. Compassion takes courage.

Quoting a line from a John Wayne movie:

"Courage isn't not being afraid. It's being scared to death and saddling up anyway."
That is, 'doing it, scared.' That applies to emotional situations every bit as much as to physical danger.

Now I am going to talk about a situation that makes just about everybody uncomfortable. It is an extremely complicated issue, and I am not going to sugarcoat it. I am going to speak plainly and directly. It is not my intention to be brutal, but rather to break through the barrier quickly as in removing a band-aid rapidly. So, 'read it scared.' This needs to be said and heard.

The subject of death makes us a bit queasy.

Even though it is a normal part of life, we aren't entirely at ease talking about it unless it is in a movie or a book. But we develop the ability along the way of handling those necessary conversations that arise when someone we know or to whom we are related dies. Except for one particular type of death: suicide.

When we are informed that someone has died, we have no problem asking if it was an automobile accident, or cancer, or something else. And then we talk about the victim and their demise. Unless it was suicide.

Then we abruptly revert to hushed voices and end the conversation pretty quickly. But what do we actually do for the grieving relatives of the person who completed suicide?

Some of us attend the funeral and try to comfort them. We offer our support. Perhaps we check in on them occasionally for two or three weeks. Others just send their condolences, and that's the end of it.

The rest simply don't respond at all. Those folks just avoid the whole thing. It's too uncomfortable, and they push it away. It is the rare exception when a person continues to provide emotional support to the person who lost their loved one to suicide.

We simply don't want to be there. It's too depressing and awkward FOR US. Besides, WE don't know how to help them. And therein lies the problem: our focus on OURSELF.

The absolute worst situation in suicide is that of the parent(s).

Losing grandparents, or parents, or aunts and uncles, or even a close sibling does not begin to compare to the loss of your child. All of those together do not prepare you to pick out a casket and flowers for your son or daughter. Ordering the marker for their grave is just as tough.

Please note that I am using the term 'child' to denote relationship, not age. It is just as painful to lose a 35-year-old son or daughter as to lose one who is 17. Also, note that this is a paternal perspective.

The maternal perspective has its framework and priorities that should also be explored. *Now let's examine this situation through a Us vs. Them comparison to lay the groundwork for becoming more compassionate people.*

Perhaps I should say becoming more EFFECTIVELY compassionate people. Horsepower that doesn't get to where the tires meet the road is just so much noise in the exhaust pipe. Here is a sample of what is going on in peoples' minds in this situation.

US:

- This is so upsetting.
- This hurts
- What should I say to them?
- What should I avoid saying?
- I don't know how to help them.
- Why did the son/daughter do it?
- How did they do it?
- I'm so glad it's not me.
- My child would never do that.
- Is the parent ashamed of what their child did? Worried about what others will think?
- Did the parent do something that caused or contributed to the child completing suicide?

These things rattle around in our minds for anywhere from a few hours to a few days, but they probably don't keep us awake at night. We quickly revert to attending to our normal, daily lives. We are only too happy to tell ourselves that we have fulfilled our moral obligations to the bereaved and can now push this unpleasantness into the background. The quicker, the better. And our continued contact with the bereaved also fades away very quickly.

We float away because this unpleasantness makes US feel uncomfortable.

THEM:

- This hurts so bad!
- Come back. Please come back.
- How did I not know they were in such pain?
- I failed them.
- There is this enormous hole in my heart and my life.
- There is a dense blackness filling my mind. It is the darkest shadow I have ever seen or felt.
- How can I go on? Where do I find the strength?
- ‘Normal’ is just a cycle on the dishwasher now.
- My son/daughter was mentally ill.
- My son/daughter is a murderer. That’s the brutal truth. They killed a person who had done nothing wrong.
- I’m his/her father. First and foremost, fathers protect their family. They keep them out of danger. If a family member is in danger, they rescue them at all costs. This is what fathers do. It takes precedence over everything else in a father’s obligations. My son/daughter was in mortal danger, and I failed to save them. I am a total failure as a father.

- What did I miss in raising my child that left them vulnerable to suicide?
- Did I pass on a genetic predisposition to them that left them vulnerable to suicide? Did I give them a genetic time bomb?
- I want to lie down and die.
- I would gladly take their place right now so they can have a full life.
- I want to be with my child.
- I would give anything to be able to hug them just one more time.
- I never got to say good-bye.
- I need to cry some more, but the tears are all used up.
- Why can’t anybody else stand to listen to me? I need to talk about this. One conversation doesn’t do it. This takes a long time to stabilize. I say anything about it, and they stop seeing me. Thanks a lot, ‘friend.’ You have abandoned me in my hour of need.

All of this goes ‘round and ‘round in the parent’s mind for a very long time. They can push it somewhat into the background during the day by keeping busy. But that takes energy and conscious effort, and it is SO hard. Then, when they go to bed at night, they must relax that effort to go to sleep, and that lets the demon out to wreak havoc in the mind. The godawful pain and the feelings of guilt torture them until they become sufficiently exhausted to fall asleep.

In the morning, they wake up knowing that today and tonight will be more of the same. Compare your discomfort to their pain and ask yourself, “Why am I so unwilling to tolerate a little more discomfort on my part to help my friend bear such an extraordinary amount of pain?”

Be brutally honest with yourself and look the answer to that question right in the eye. I implore you to decide to care more, to reach out, to keep in touch for an extended time. So, what can you do to be more compassionate toward someone who has lost a child under any circumstances, but especially to suicide? And what should you avoid doing? There is no one-size-fits-all approach to something so personal, so profound, and so devastating.

The social norms of our geographic area, religion, and culture vary extensively from group to group. But the following list works as a reasonably safe way to reach out.

- You cannot bear the bereaved parent’s pain for them. No words can reduce their loss or their sense of guilt. The guilt is irrational. Even when they know absolutely that there was nothing they could do to save their child, they feel this guilt. It is a reflex response. So, don’t try to talk them out of it. They know it is irrational.
- Don’t tell them they need to forgive themselves to get past their feelings of guilt. Everybody tells them that. The problem is that NOBODY can say to them HOW TO DO IT.
- DON’T say you understand their suffering. Unless you have lost a child, you have absolutely NO idea what they are going through.
- Don’t try to comfort them by noting that they still have other children (if that is the case). That has NOTHING to do with how much they hurt for this one.
- Don’t ask them to tell you how the child did it. They don’t need to relive that.
- The best thing you can do is sit quietly with them, listen patiently, put up with their tears, and be there. The best way to open the conversation is to say, “I cannot begin to imagine what you are thinking and feeling right now, but I want you to know that I care and I am here for you.” Great start. Now shut up.
- Let them initiate additional conversation. If they choose not to talk, then sit quietly. If the silence makes you uncomfortable, put up with it. Knowing you care enough to listen and be, there is the most powerful support you can lend. If you are geographically separated, be there for them by text messages and/or phone calls. Snail mail works, too.
- EVERYTHING you do after the initial opening depends on how they react. It is a custom construction each step of the way. Just feel your way along gently. You can do it. You already know how to be kind.
- Caveat: Be prepared for rejection. Sometimes the person just isn’t ready for your contact. If so, at this point it is an intrusion to them. It’s different for every person. If they don’t want you there, gracefully honor their wishes... AND DON’T TAKE IT PERSONALLY. Check back in a month to see if the wind has shifted.

All of this takes time. It takes your time, and it goes on for some calendar time.

The first full year is the hardest for the grieving parent. It is full of special days that have this massive hole in them. Subsequent years are difficult, too, but the first year is just brutal. (In fact, it often takes about two years to get through the worst of it, and a full five years to truly come to terms with the death of your child. By ‘come to terms’ I mean to strike a truce with their pain. They will NEVER GET OVER IT.)

Special days include:

- The child’s birthday
- The child’s death day
- Mothers’ Day
- Fathers’ Day
- Thanksgiving
- Christmas
- New Year’s Day

If you know the person well and believe it will be well-received, take a minute to contact your grieving friend on each of those days to let, they know you are thinking of them.

I suggest you include a conditional apology for possibly intruding as part of your first special-day contact. Let their response guide you regarding future special days.

It is also a very powerful thing to contact them routinely for that first year.

Put a note in your planner to remind you to send them a brief message on the same day each month, a little more often at first if you are so inclined. In most cases, they will look forward to that day each month.

The first time you reach out to a grieving friend, you will feel awkward and uncomfortable. Just make up your mind to ‘pick up your courage in both hands and do it scared.’ Follow the guidelines listed above, and you won’t have to worry about messing up. If they rebuff your outreach, respect their wishes but don’t take it personally. They aren’t ready, yet, for you to see them wrestling with their demons. Working through the grief of losing a child is a lot of hard work for the parent. And it just goes on and on.

It is exhausting for them. If you reach out to them and stay the course, it will be a bit of work for you, too. Emotional work.

Would you take on doing some hard, physical work to help your friend build a fence, or add a room on their house?

Or help plow and plant their fields while they are laid up from a tractor accident?

Or clear debris from your neighbors’ fields after a storm so they can plant them? We do those kinds of things all the time.

Don’t make grief support the excluded exception. Ultimately, it all comes down to caring more about your friend than your comfort zone. Will you decide to risk being more effectively compassionate and contact someone you know who has recently lost a son or daughter?

In other words, will you be a friend? Or just an acquaintance?

Anonymous ...(and still grieving)