

SUICIDE

Parents whose child has died by suicide face additional problems in their grief. The two most significant ones are the feeling that they should have been able to prevent it and the fact that in our society, suicide is an unacceptable way to die.

The issue of preventability plagues most bereaved parents, but parents of a child who took his own life, are even more deeply plagued by this thought. It is an issue that will take much reviewing of the real facts and much forgiveness—forgiveness of both the child and yourself.

Whether you could have prevented your child's suicide must be looked at carefully and worked through, because of the feelings of guilt that naturally follows. You must resolve your guilt or your grief will not be resolved. Ask yourself if you were REALLY responsible for your child's suicide.

Some of the causes of suicide according to Iris Bolton, bereaved parent and suicidologist are: biochemical changes, inability to communicate feelings, inability to handle failure, perfectionistic personalities, the changing family, the mobility of today's families, and confusion over dependent-independent issues which make the child introspective. Bolton termed today's youth's societal problems as "seducing them to suicide" She cited the widespread use of drugs and alcohol which has a depressing effect on young people. She also suggests that the suicidal seduction of many songs in today's music makes the notion of dying young glamorous.

Society produces these problems. Collectively, as members of society, we may be responsible, but the individual parents is rarely responsible. The final responsibility lies with the child who chooses to suicide. You may find some comfort in the fact that most suicidologists believe that the person who takes his own life does not to choose death, but a release from the pain of failure, loneliness and hopelessness.

You may believe that if you had done more for your child to help him face his pain, he would not have suicided, but you can't know that. Could have been with your child 24 hours of every day? Even then, a person bent on suicide would find a way.

Most bereaved parents have a strong need to search for the "Whys" of their child's death. This may be even stronger for the parent whose child has suicided. Knowing why won't change the fact, but I believe it is important for your own peace of mind to ask the questions and search for the answers.

If your child had a therapist or counselor, you can talk to him or her. You can talk to his friends and get their opinions of what your child was thinking and feeling. Search until you come to a reasonable explanation; one that will satisfy you. But, be careful that, in your search, you don't put blame on others. This can create even more problems in your relationships with your spouse, children and others.

Searching is part of the healing process, but sometimes there are no answers. You may need to let go of the questions so that you don't become obsessed with them. Iris Bolton said of her own search: "I found I only had partial answers and nothing really satisfactory. I will never know all the answers as to why my son chose to end his life but I came to the conclusion that I didn't have to know in order to go on with my own living. I finally chose to let go of the question but only after I had asked it over and over and struggled with the WHY. Had I not done that, I could have allowed mourning to become my life-style for the rest of my life."

Suicide is not an acceptable death in our society. The use of the word "committed" implies wrong doing or a crime. In other cultures suicide is seen as an honorable act. Also, our cultural beliefs about suicide carries the implication that it was someone's fault. Parents are especially blamed because of the unrealistic expectation that parents should have seen their child's problems and prevented the suicide. Unconsciously parents believe this. Hence the embarrassment and guilt they experience.

Here again, looking at the facts and sorting out what is real from what is not real is important. The reality that your child took his own life should be dealt with early on. Don't complicate your grief by hiding the circumstances of the death. You need to hold your head high and disregard societal blame. Be honest about what happened both to yourself and to others. Talking about the death and the circumstances surrounding it will lessen any embarrassment you might feel.

An important note here. In talking about your child and the suicide, be careful to look at your child realistically. It is just as important to look at the bad times you may have experienced with

him, as it is to look at his good qualities. Your child may have been difficult to live with, or his antics may have created considerable pain and torment in your family. Allow yourself to feel relieved that you no longer have to tolerate his disturbing behavior. Relief is a valid emotion. Try not to be embarrassed or ashamed of it. Talk with other family members about your feelings. I can almost guarantee they are feeling the same relief you are. To be relieved that the tension is gone does not mean you are relieved that your child is gone. Separate the act from the child.

Because suicide brings societal condemnation of the survivors there is much to be dealt with. The guilt and shame comes not only from within ourselves, but from cultural blame. This makes the grief very difficult to resolve. A support group such as The Bereaved Parents of the USA or Survivors Of Suicide may be helpful. Some parents may feel they need professional help.

The choice to survive this tragedy is yours. You can choose to be chronically embarrassed and guilty, or you can face the reality of what happened knowing that whatever the circumstances of the suicide, you did the best for your child that you knew how.