

In Their Own Words:
Perceived Experiences and Family
Functioning of Suicide Survivors in the
Aftermath of Suicide Loss

Wendy Shallcross Lam,
PsyD, NCSP, ABSNP

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Perspective

- Approximately 30,000 people take their lives in the United States each year and the number of **suicide survivors** (*relatives and close friends of the suicide victim*) is considerable, numbering into the millions

(Feigelman & Feigelman, 2008)

- It is estimated that there are 6 people who experience grief for each suicide that occurs

(Hawton, Simkin, & Rees, 2008)

The Emotional Toll

“The person who commits suicide puts his psychological skeleton in the survivor’s emotional closet”

- Edwin Shneidman

What Survivors Face

- Complicated grief responses
- Psychiatric and medical hardships
- Risk of additional suicide acts
- Post-traumatic stress symptoms
- Distinctive bereavement issues that include:
 - feelings of guilt
 - blame-worthiness
 - *shame
 - Stigmatization
 - *rejection

(Cvinar, 2005; Jordan, 2001; Jordan & McMenemy, 2004; Mitchell, Kim, Prigerson, Mortimer-Stephens, 2004)

What Surviving Families Face

- Dysfunction
- Changes in communication
- Low cohesion
- Marital dissatisfaction or divorce
- Anger
- Shock
- Face stigma and social isolation/social network destruction
- Shifts in family roles
- Evidence for similar pattern in other tragic death (especially over time)

(Ceref, Jordan, & Duberstein, 2008; Dunn & Morrish-Vidners, 1988; Dyregrov & Dyregrov, 2005; Nelson & Frantz, 1996; Murphy, Johnson, Wu, Fan, & Lohan, 2012)

Key Question

- What are the family characteristics and protective factors that support resiliency in surviving families?

(Feigelman, Gorman, Chastain Beal, & Jordan, 2008; Seguin, Lesage, & Kiely, 1995)

Methodology

Participants- Criteria

- Lost a family member to suicide
- 18 year old +
- Self-selected and expressed a willingness in speaking about their loss
- Minimum of 6 months have passed since loss
- No history of previous suicide attempts
- Resident of the United States

Participants- Recruitment

- Peer support groups
- Clinician survivor email list of the AAS
- Organizations supporting suicide survivors

Qualitative Approach

- *Grounded Theory*
 - The primary outcome of the study was a theory or set of proposals that explain the elements that unified the experiences of the group of suicide survivors as a whole

Qualitative Questions

- “Most families experience multiple stressful times and all families go through stress. Please tell me about a stressful time before your loss.”
- “How did you all deal with this, could you tell me how that was handled in your family?”

Qualitative Questions

- **“I know that you lost your loved one(s) and I want you to tell me about that. Could you describe that?”**
- **“How did you all deal with this, could you tell me how it was handled in your family?”**

Qualitative Questions

- **“How are you feeling today and is that different from immediately after your loss?”**

Results

Demographics- Participant Characteristics

- 21 Participants residing in the USA
 - 5 male; 16 female
 - 28- 73 years old ($M = 53$ years)
 - Largely racially homogeneous group (1 identified as biracial)
 - Some experienced multiple suicide losses/had history of suicide in family ($N = 8$; 38%)
 - 75% of interviewees lost a male family member

Demographics- Helpful Approaches

- Approaches on questionnaire regarded as most helpful:
 - Talking to friends (86%)
 - Sharing memories (81%)

Descriptive Themes- Handling the Suicide Loss

- Stage of Pure Pain
- Isolation
- Blame
- Guilt
- Anger
- Shock
- Missing the Deceased/Experience of Sadness
- Use of Objects/Favorite Things as a Way to Re-acquaint
- Conscious Decision to be Open about Suicide
- Search for Meaning and the "Why"
- Feelings that they Should Have Seen it Coming
- Keeping Busy
- Intellectualization
- Significance of "Firsts"
- Trauma of Experience
- Consistency in Interpersonal Response Style Pre and Post-Loss
- Loss that Occurred Closely After Suicide Loss
- Family is Left to Pick up the Pieces
- Segmenting in Family
- Change in Family Relationships
- Seeking Support Outside of the Family
- Importance of Familial Physical Togetherness
- Newfound Appreciation for Certain Family Members Post-Loss

Theme: Stage of Pure Pain

“She had this cry for that week that was like a scream and a cry in one. Where she would just grip the island in the kitchen and just bend over it and just cry and, you know, just this loud, blood curdling cry that would just, you know, totally, um, and it was debilitating to me, just to hear her cry in that manner. That anything- I mean, I was a wreck that whole week but watching her in that way was, you know, it was- I can hear it, like if I think about it, I can see her. I can hear her. It was just that scarring and, you know, you never want to see someone that you love like that just... I mean, it was just pure pain coming out of her. “

“When she would cry, I would cry; when I would cry, she would cry. It was just kind of this ping-pong effect where, you know, she started then, I mean, and it felt like it never stopped.”

- Ashley, lost brother to suicide

Theme: Isolation

“Everything was kind of like muted and like, it was just weird, watching people. I just felt like the world is so different, but nobody- it’s just that weird kind of like, there was just like a disconnect. It’s like everybody else’s life is obviously the same. Like you’re walking down the street, people are laughing, and you know, but for me it was like, my world is over. And it was like hard to, kind of like...relate to people. I was just like, very kind of like quiet and reserved and probably very negative.”

- Jolanta, lost father to suicide

Theme: Guilt

“Um, that’s an incredibly difficult piece of a suicide. Because you’re dealing particularly with suicide and the amount of family guilt is, that’s the thing that is the hardest for all of us. And where we need the most support. Because we all think we didn’t do enough.”

- Ingrid, lost son to suicide

Theme: Anger

“You know, it’s like holy crap, that’s their son! You know, that they had, you know, and my dad, my dad had to frickin’ see that! You know, like, and, and, --Wow! And, and the anger of it all, you know, toward my brother. Like oh my God, once again...like cause he was always um, selfish in a way.”

- Lisette, lost brother to suicide

Theme: Missing the Deceased/Experience of Sadness

“Now so, now I think about my dad every day. We were really close, and being a parent, I think it's always, oh, my dad would have loved this. Or, I think about my mom being useless with her parenting advice... so yeah, I think about him all the time, not because of the suicide, but because I miss my dad and here I am a parent... you know, so it's mostly positive stuff. And just cause he's not around to share in this stuff.”

- Carla, lost father to suicide

“Once they pass away, you know, you never say their name the same way again unless you're telling, you know, a happy story that you still end up crying at the end of anyway.”

- Ashley, lost brother to suicide

Theme: Use of possessions

“I have his pocketknife. And every day I used to touch it- it’s like 3 days a week, but, I just hold it, and put it back. Um, about a year and a half after he died, I was driving home from the shore. 70 miles an hour, playing Christopher’s music, I was crying...my heart out. I thought, this is not good, and so I pulled over and I just cried and cried and cried. At that minute, I decided that I was going to live the best life that I could. And do all the stuff that I knew Christopher wanted to do, liked to do, but couldn’t do anymore because he’s not here. He couldn’t stay.”

- Giovanna, lost her brother-in-law to suicide

Theme: Shock

“There’s usually not a pretty story behind it (in reference to her husband’s suicide). No matter who, you know, who can, even if they, you know, had a long history of suicide attempts and all that, it’s still not a pretty story. There’s not, you know, like to me it’s the ugliest death there is. And I know that murder is horrific and I’m not taking anything away from it. They’re all senseless, but this one though as it was explained to me- I read it somewhere- I think the reason that makes it so ugly is that you hate the murderer but you love the victim. And they are the same person.”

- Yvonne, lost husband to suicide

Theme: Search for Meaning and the “why”

“It changes you- you’re different. I very much resent terms like ‘heal,’ ‘process,’ and ‘move on.’ None of those things happen. You have a big hole where your loved one was and you, you build-rebuild your life around it, but the hole is still there. It never fills in. I mean, healing is what happens to a cut finger. I mean, a suicide is rather like a bilateral amputation. You may learn to hobble around on prostheses, but don’t tell me you’re ever gonna be the same that you were before.”

- Vince, lost son to suicide

Theme: Consistency in Interpersonal Response Style

“My wife and I, um, really, our relationship has really pretty much disintegrated. Um, there were some cracks in our relationship prior to the suicide and that just pretty much finished it off. Um, we’re basically cohabitating.”

- Matthias, lost son to suicide

Theme: I Should Have Seen it Coming

“Because, you know, you always think, um being in the medical field, that you should recognize things. But you don’t, especially when it’s close to you. You never think they would do something like that.”

- Ruth, lost niece and son-in-law to suicide

Theme: Segmenting in Families

“I think one thing that surprised me as a therapist, um, a little bit, and maybe it shouldn't have, is the fact how different we all grieve and, um, that although we're close as a family, at the same time, it's really hard to support each other in their grief because, especially when the grief is very fresh and raw. But I still see a little bit of elements of that were my older son becomes very emotional and starts talking about it and, you know, sometimes he gets angry. He's angry at his father. And my younger son really can't tolerate it. He would leave immediately. Um, and then sometimes I feel like I am reaching, um, my limits listening to my older son and sometimes I have to tell him 'You know, you really have to talk with your therapist about this because I feel like it's pulling me down.' So, I think that is very interesting that, you know, I guess before this happened, all of us thought in a family, you can help each other. And in a way you are helping each other but, you know, everybody has their limitations of how much of each other's grief you can take on.

- Giesela, lost husband to suicide

Theme: Seeking Support Outside of the Family

“And I have gone out to create. I’ve been in impossible families, so which are difficult, and I have gone out to create alternative families and communities.”

- Phillip, lost father to suicide

Theme: Importance of Physical Togetherness

“Um, he didn’t, I mean, he really didn’t talk about it though that I know of. But he did have good friends up there (in the Poconos). Um, that even if they weren’t necessarily talking about it, they were still there for him. You know, and they would still do things with him. And keep him occupied, and keep him busy and have laughs and jokes and have good times.”

- Ashley, lost brother to suicide

Theme: Newfound Appreciation for Family Post- Loss

“My husband is the one who just did everything. Um, and if anything, it became, we became extremely, so much closer. It was like, who ever? You know- it’s, I looked at it like, this could totally rip a marriage apart or this could totally bring it so much closer than anybody could imagine. And that’s exactly what happened.”

- Lisette, lost brother to suicide

Theme: Conscious Decision to be Open About Suicide

“And I understand somewhat why she did it. And I can talk about suicide to people and I can and that’s one of my biggest things, because I don’t want people to go through this, I don’t want kids to go through this...like its so heavy, its such a subject that nobody wants to talk about...I mean, it’s a fact of life that its happening and its happening more and more and because people don’t know about it and don’t know that there’s...that’s one thing I’ve done and that’s one thing I’ll do is talk about it.”

- Rebekah, lost mother to suicide

Descriptive Themes- Healing/Coping Post-Loss

- Seeking out Support of Friends
- Importance of Support Groups and Empathetic Others
- Desire to Spark Change
- Use of Humor
- Family's Focus on Young Children and the Next Generation
- Importance of Caregiving
- Keeping Rituals/Honoring the Victim
- Use of Social Media and the Internet
- Shift in Life Mission/Advocacy

Life After the Loss

“It just keeps going and at some point, though, it doesn’t get any better, it just stops getting worse...and then you sort of get caught up with it and, you know, life doesn’t leave you alone. You still have other children, you still have a job, you still have to provide for yourself. And um, you know, then you realize, well, you gotta do something to help yourself.”

- Vince, lost son to suicide

Theme: Importance of Support Groups and Empathetic Others

“It was like an epiphany for me...but after that woman said that, um, it was like...it was like it was lifted from my shoulders. It was really strange, like that day, like that instant, like I just felt so much better. Knowing that in my mind I couldn't have done anything...um, I found, I find a lot of solace in going to the SOS group meeting. And being around other people who are experiencing the same thing because, um, their other family and friends and regular people have no idea because they've never experienced this.”

- Matthias, lost son to suicide

Theme: Empathetic Others

“Cause people don’t say his name (referring to her deceased son) out loud! I just want to mention it. So, um, it’s really, so that’s a critical, important part of that group, is giving parents a place to talk about their kid.”

“...the best part of this interview was getting to talk about Bob and tell you how bright he was and what he accomplished.”

- Erin, lost son to suicide

Use of Humor

“Like, you know, even on the way to the funeral, um, we were talking about William and, you know, my brother was saying ‘You know, he would hate this, He would think this is so stupid that we’re all going here and doing this.’ And we were saying in the car that, you know, he would have much rather, you know, everybody just went out to a bar and, you know, got hammered. You know, and said- it as like, just little things like that, um, were therapeutic in a sense, to just kind of, you know, talk about silly things he did and laugh about. You know, the things that he would say and the things that he would do. And tell stories and it kind of gave us a sense that he was still, he was still there and he was still a part of all of us in all of our memories I think. So, humor was definitely a big part of it.”

- Ashley, lost brother to suicide

Theme: Focus on the Next Generation

“Um, it was interesting to and it was interesting how healing that was for people seeing me. So, um, but how healing- like, you know, one life goes, and everyone here comes another life and blah, blah, blah. Now, to take care of the baby. And so, that’s how I coped I guess.”

- Carla, lost father to suicide during her pregnancy

Theme: Importance of Caregiving

"I got a dog. That was my daughter's thing, and I have to say, she's been, I never in a million years thought that, um yeah, she definitely has helped me so much!...owning the dog, I mean, I know it sounds crazy...but I- she just, um, has really helped me more than- I mean, I've done medication, I've done therapy...she's been great."

"And then my other daughter, Cassidy, she's, um she dealt with it, but she's dealt with it more, I think being a caretaker for me. Which, is not the way it's supposed to be, I know it's messed up. But...she's a nurse, and I guess that's her nature."

- Sonja, lost son to suicide

Theme: Honoring the Victim

“The other thing that I did too, like every year, um, that helps as well is um, at her grave, um each summer, um, I plant sunflowers there- it was her favorite, uh, flower. At her gravesite there is like, we have like a little garden set up right above her grave. Uh, and the sunflowers, it's nice during the summertime, how they rise up and uh, they are honestly a little bit taller than the gravestone so it's just, it's nice to have like that life, like something, you know even though Susan passed away, to have something living like right where she is, like something growing and thriving.”

- Wesley, lost sister to suicide

Theme: Honoring the Victim

“...I made a conscious decision to go to every baseball game I could- we loved baseball. And I thought- Christopher would like this. Christopher is watching me do this and I will think of Christopher while I'm doing it.”

- Giovanna, lost brother-in-law to suicide

Theme: Shift in Life Mission/Advocacy

“Certainly its all because my son died, because there’s a part of me that’s driven, but I don’t know whether its, uh, I’d like to think that, you know, that I’ve confronted it. That I’m not running away from it, I’m not hiding from it. But at the same time, I’m at a loss to say- I still think it comes back to though why it was never answered, never worried about, never trying to answer the “why” for him. I’m still obsessed with that “why” as far as all the other people dying.”

- Vince, lost son to suicide

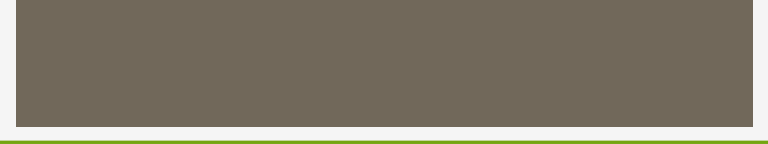
Implications

Results- Factors that Promote Healing

- Expressiveness was valued (Nelson & Frantz, 1996)
- Physical togetherness & continuation of family celebrations
- Seeking out support of others
 - Friends
 - Support groups
 - *Empathy*

Take Away Message

- Support groups were regarded as helpful
 - Encourage families to attend together
 - Educate first responders
 - Learn about specific support groups
 - combat veteran suicide survivor support groups
- Respect the individual grieving process



“Each person discovers how to live with their particular loss...the pain had not always gone away, but they had become true survivors. In Seligman’s words, they had become ‘the prospective carriers of life and hope.’”

(Wertheimer, 2001, pp.178)

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