In their Own Words: The Familial Experiences of Suicide Survivors

Wendy Shallcross Lam1, Terri Erbacher-Duff1, Rosemary Mennuti1, & Scott Poland2

1Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine, 2Nova Southeastern University

BACKGROUND

• Much evidence suggests that suicide survivors (individuals who have lost a loved one to suicide) may be at risk for developing complicated grief responses and experience other psychiatric and medical hardships post-loss that include engagement in self-destructive behaviors (Jerath, Apple, Ekern, & Korsgaard, 2015). Jordan, Jordan, & Ackerman, 2001; McWhirter, Koh, Prigerson, & Matthews-Stanley, 2004).

• Suicide survivors are also prone to post-traumatic stress symptoms and confront distinct feelings of anger, shock, guilt, blame-worthiness, and shame (Circo, 2009; Jordan, 2001).

• Surviving families are profoundly affected and typically experience dysfunction, changes in communication and interaction patterns, low cohesion, marital dissatisfaction, and face social isolation/social network disintegration post-loss (Circo, Jordan, & Dubukshoff, 2002; Glodich, Doldan, & Niesman, 2002; Dorn & Hamilton-Wardens, 1989; Nolan & Frazier, 1996).

• Some experience a strengthening of the family post-loss and it is unclear how this occurs (Circo & Galanay, 1995; Nolan & Frazier, 1996).

• However, the general level of family functioning prior to the suicide is not commonly addressed.

• Scant evidence suggests families were disengaged and low in cohesiveness or psychological availability (Circo, et al., 2004).

• The comparative nature that experiencing suicide has on the family structure and dynamics pre and post-loss is very unclear.

• Qualitative research methods could effectively and authentically probe the intricacies of loss and family problem solving/interaction style.

METHOD

• Purpose: Examination of the experiences of suicide survivors by focusing on their individual and familial experiences of coping both pre and post-loss

• Interview questions:

  • Pre-loss context:
    • 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 deal with this, could you tell me how this was handled in your family?

  • Post-loss context:
    • I know that you lost your loved one and I want you to tell me about that. Could you describe that?
    • How did you deal with this, could you tell me how this was handled in your family?
    • Examination of what has been helping in healing/coping process
    • How are you feeling today and is that different from immediately after your loss?

RESULTS

Questions 1 & 2 elicited the following themes in regard to the presence of risk factors/management of general stress prior to suicide loss:

• Mental Health Concerns
  • Abuse
  • Divorce
  • Family Separation
  • Exposure to Violence
  • Family Patterns of General Dysfunction
  • Substance Abuse
  • Physical Illness

• Familial Problematic Communication Patterns
  • Emotional Pain

• Emotional/Psychological/Psychosocial Functioning
  • Emotional Pain
  • Family of Origin Functioning
  • Emotional/Psychological/Psychosocial Functioning

• Experience of Loss/Disappointment
  • External Stressors
  • High Expectations/Self-criticism/Unfulfillment

Questions 3 & 4 elicited the following themes in terms of handling the suicide loss:

• Stage of Pure Pain

• Isolation
  • Blame
  • Guilt
  • Anger
  • Shock
  • Missing the Decedent/Experience of Sadness

• Use of Objects as a Way to Re-associate

• Conscious Decision to Be Open about Suicide

• Search for Meaning and the "Why"

• Feelings that they Should Have Seen It Coming

• Keeping Busy

• Mental and Emotional Intelligence

• Significance of "Firsts"

• Trauma of Experience

• Consistency in Interpersonal Response Style Pre and Post-Loss

• Loss that Occurred Closely After Suicide

• Family is Left to Pick Up the Pieces

• Segregating to Family

• Seeking Support Outside of the Family

• Importance of Familial Physical Togetherness

• Newfound Appreciation for Certain Family Members Post-Loss

Questions 5 elicited the following factors involved in healing post-loss:

• Seaking out Support of Friends

• Importance of Support Groups and Empathic Others

• Desire to Speak Change

• Use of Humor

• Family’s Focus on Young Children and the Next Generation

• Importance of Caringness

• Keeping Rituals/Honoring the Victim

• Use of Social Media and the Internet

• Shifts in Life Mission/Advocacy

CONCLUSIONS

• There was overall consistency in family patterns of interaction both prior to and post the experience of suicide loss

• Although mostly maladaptive supportive patterns were noted, there were also participants who endorsed consistency in family interaction patterns that were largely positive and supportive (e.g., family togetherness and expressiveness).

• A collection of dominant factors were identified as present in the decedent’s families history and the accompanying family interaction patterns (e.g., perceived distance, overt anger, poor communication) are proposed to contribute toward the experienced burdensomeness, and the capacity that may weaken an individual's threshold for suicide ("The Perfect Storm Model", see Figure 1). Participants highly endorsed speaking with others who have lost loved ones to suicide.

• Address for correspondence: wendylam@pcom.edu

REFERENCES


