



confronting suicide

Michael Metzger

Every death is confronting. Each individual circumstance is different and raises particular questions about our own mortality, the purpose of life, the relationship with the person who has died. Each death can bring us closer – to the deceased, to awareness of our inner self. So how is suicide different?

In the truest sense of the word, suicide is a tragedy: the loss of a life, the loss of a person overcome by social and psychological circumstances. It is a disaster often brought about by a situation outside one's control, leaving young people, parents, grandparents or friends – and their families behind to grieve.

Suicide catches us unawares. In most cases it is sudden and inexplicable. We are caught off guard, without warning, unable to prepare. There is no time to adjust, to rationalise, to cushion the loss. Often, the discovery of the person who has completed suicide is utterly horrific. The shock, together with the loss, is incomprehensible.

Trying to explain suicide is more difficult. When someone dies in a car accident, after an illness or from old age, we understand what caused their death, even when we ask why it had to be this way. Attempting to unravel the mind and the motives of the person who succeeds in taking his or her own life is far more complex. We can only guess at the struggle and desperate pain that precipitates an action so contrary to the instinct for life.

New evidence in research shows suicide is often linked to mental illness and a lowered level of the brain chemical 'serotonin' – causing the brain to be unable to function properly and possibly altering the perception of reality.

Suicide generates remorse in the minds of those left behind. So often there are questions like, "Why didn't I recognise the signs?" or "How could I have changed the situation?" "Why didn't they talk to me; share their burden?" It's impossible to know whether one could have 'saved' the person or averted a tragedy. Most of us live secure in the knowledge that we don't want to die, no matter how difficult our lives can sometimes be. It's hard therefore to understand what forces work under the surface, or to imagine how we might have influenced them.

The aftermath of suicide is complex for the survivors. Inevitably, the various external authorities of police, ambulance, doctors – and potentially lawyers – need to become involved. Facing these intrusions often scrambles our grieving, denies us the time to be still, to be angry or to cry. We need to take time alone or with trusted friends to manage the additional but necessary intrusions.

Whoever suicide survivors mourn - a son or a daughter, a mother or father, a relative or a friend, their bewilderment and pain will be the same. It takes courage and wisdom for partners to acknowledge they are still alive, though their spouse is dead. In letting go, they do not erase the memory – they become who they are – people changed by trauma, people who must embrace life differently from before.

Touchstones with the past are important. We need to travel through the grief, not step around it. The choice to die was not ours and we will never know exactly why it was made. Photographs, anecdotes or sharing memories with others who knew the person who has died, help keep alive the best of what once was. Portraits that include family, friends and relationships become a collage of yesterdays to carry us into tomorrow.

Michael Metzger is a qualified journalist and author of **Towards the Light – Growing through Grief**. Michael spent thirty years as a teacher, lecturer and mentor. The death of his father and that of his son shortly after, fundamentally altered his life.