

A photograph of a dark-stained wooden rocking chair with a woven seat, positioned in a room. The chair is in the foreground, slightly to the right. In the background, there is a window with white curtains and a light-colored wall. The lighting is soft, creating a somber atmosphere.

The Empty Chair

the journey of grief after suicide

Beryl S. Glover

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InSight Books
Oklahoma City

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InSight Books, Inc
PO Box 42467
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma 73123
800.658.9262 or 405.810.9501
www.insightbooks.com
ordersandinfo@insightbooks.com

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*Eternal thanks to my fellow journeymen for trusting
in me and sharing their stories.*

*Recognizing the anguish associated with reliving their
experiences, I appreciate the time they have
given on behalf of those who will
travel this road in the future.*

—Beryl

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The Kitchen table is a family focal point—a center for school projects, cookie decorating, sharing the day's events over an evening meal. A place for watching TV, doing homework, making plans.

When our loved one dies, there is all too suddenly an empty chair at the table.

We may rearrange the furniture, purchase a new table, or even move to another location.

The fact is that life at the table has been forever altered and the hole in our hearts cannot be mended by removing or replacing the empty chair.

a suicide in the family...

Time stands still. For a little while or a long while. Whereas the world whispers its regrets and then continues on, our body shuts down. At first, we measure time in breaths. We can't move, we can't eat, we can't think, we can't hear, we can't sleep. We feel desperate and disconnected. Disconnected from our loved one in the middle of a sentence. Disconnected from ourselves and our lives. We are in shock, and it may last for two days, two weeks, two months...sometimes even longer.

This book describes the grief process as it is experienced by a variety of people. In it we address the emotions and expressions of grief common to most people after the death of a loved one, list them in alphabetical order, and offer stories and insights of fellow travelers. We call it the “glossary of oh-my-gods.”

The people who share their stories are making progress and healing a little more each day. Their experiences are a testimonial that beyond the suffocating pain and terrible sadness, there is life and there is hope. This book is about what happens after the initial days of the funeral. It is about what to do when we get up the next morning and everyone has gone home. Home to resume life, leaving us with the staggering task of forging a way to go from where we are—drowning—to returning to some semblance of life as we knew it.

Acceptance—

Accepting the reality of our loved one's suicide is the centerpiece of our recovery. It is a zigzag course that begins somewhere in the early weeks of our journey. There are moments when we can see beyond the tangle of our shrieking emotions and begin to acknowledge our loss. There are other times when it's just too horrible to countenance, and we deny it hopelessly.

This zigzag course is just that. It eventually takes us in the right direction—forward rather than backward. However, our progress is routinely interrupted by setbacks. After months, sometimes even longer, of what may seem a never-ending struggle along this difficult continuum, we eventually learn to acquiesce to the suicide as part of our new reality.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth is a physician. She is married to a physician and the mother of four young adults. Her mother completed suicide over thirteen years ago at age 70.

Elizabeth remembers the moment:

She hanged herself. I mean, time stands still. I remember I was in the kitchen. Our kids were involved in skating lessons, and I had just come from a lesson when the police called. They had gone to my mother's house and found her. I'm not sure whether they said she had killed herself, but I understood that was what they thought had happened. I was absolutely dumb-struck.

My mother really hadn't a clue as to what the impact on her family would be, nor how important she was to us. I think she thought that Ben and I had the children and that she was not as essential to me as she had once been. She would probably be amazed that thirteen years later, I would spend hours in someone's den discussing her death.

Elizabeth expects to feel a part of the grief for the rest of her life, but she acknowledges a shift in its intensity with the passing of time.

You wake up and you have this great deep sadness, and you're swimming around in it like a noodle in soup. The turning point is when you wake up in the morning and feel sort of happy. You don't think, 'Oh my God,' You wake up and say, 'Gee, it's a lovely day.' Maybe the grieving process begins to end when corn-on-the-cob tastes good again!

Acceptance is an all-important threshold in our grief work. Take heart when you sense that it is within reach, for it is a most encouraging signpost.

Anger—

Feeling anger toward a person who has chosen death is a normal reaction to what, in many but not all circumstances, was a poor decision and it merits our full attention.

One woman describes her anger:

For years I've been dealing with anger toward my mother for leaving my sisters and me and not sharing in our accomplishments. One way I've struggled through that is in my job. I'm constantly trying to be the best. My dad remarried and we had a reasonably well-adjusted family life. But I still ache for this biological mother who gave birth to me and who was with me for most of my younger years.

There are many manifestations of anger:

- We may feel anger toward our family members whose grief is expressed differently from our own.
- We may feel angry with our loved one's medical caregivers.
- We may be angry at a friend who said something inappropriate.
- We may feel anger toward a survivor who falls short of our expectations and who heightens our sense of deprivation.
- We may feel anger toward someone to whom the victim confided suicidal thoughts and who honored that trust.
- We may be angry with God.

My own anger was multifaceted, and it took years to differentiate it. I was angry with my brother for making what I believed was a poor decision—for ending his interesting and

talented life. I was angry that he left behind a wife and two young children. I was angry at the heartache he imposed on all of us. I was angry that his decision evidently legitimized suicide for Cathy. And, of course, I was angry with Cathy for giving in to her despair and ending her young life.

During the first year or two, as I struggled to understand the enormity of it all, I had some healthy temper tantrums. Alone in the house, I would crawl into bed and wail my heart out. I discovered that it was a harmless and surprisingly effective way to release the anger that accumulated within. Those episodes occurred quite regularly at first, and I would feel better for some time afterward. Then, the cycle would begin again.

People find some interesting physical outlets for their anger. One woman buys all the dishes she can find at garage sales. Then, when she is consumed by anger, she will take the dishes and break them into the dumpster.

Several families in a small Texas town who lost teenagers in tragic car accidents have an unusual tradition. They bring hard boiled Easter eggs to the driving range and blast them with their golf clubs.

In searching for a pressure valve for anger, whatever works, without creating harm to yourself or others, is okay.

What eventually relieved my anger was an evolving understanding of both of the suicides. It was a hard-fought accomplishment. What I understood I could learn to accept, even though I could not condone their decisions.

Anger knows no boundaries. It is often disabling, and it doesn't normally disperse voluntarily. It is advisable to take heed of it and give your best effort to its resolution.



Beryl Glover

Beryl Glover, from Wilmington, North Carolina, lost her daughter and brother to suicide in 1983 and her husband to viral infection in 1993. She has participated in survivor support groups, facilitated meetings and presented at conferences and workshops. In addition to writing, she nourishes her soul in the company of family and friends, and by skippering her boat in search of dolphins along the Intra-coastal Waterway.

Selected Resources from InSight Books

By Doug Manning

A Journal for the Journey (Hospice Journey)

Building Memories: Planning a Meaningful Funeral

*Don't Take My Grief Away From Me**

*Grief's Second Mile: Beyond the First Year**

Journey of Grief DVD (also available streaming)

*Lean On Me Gently: Helping the Grieving Child**

The Power of Presence: Helping People Help People Book
or DVD

Sacred Moments: A Minister Speaks About Funerals

*Share My Lonesome Valley: The Slow Grief of Long-Term
Care**

The Special Care Series

Thoughts for the Lonely Nights journal and CD

*Thoughts for the Holidays**

Other Resources from InSight Books

I Know Someone Who Died coloring book

by Connie Manning

Memories Too Few: A Letter to Parents About Pregnancy

Loss by Kathy Manning Burns*

Comfort Cards bereavement card collection

**Also available as e-Books*

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