

My Top Support Strategies

For the newly bereaved by a traumatic loss by suicide



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Journal Writing

When I lost my beloved 16 year old son by suicide, I had no idea where to begin to learn to live again. To be honest, I thought I would always be in the same degree of crippling agony. Why shouldn't I be? I was his mother, and I had failed to save him. I held the belief that it was correct I should always suffer. For weeks and months, I barely allowed myself anything that would sustain my life. I couldn't eat, and quickly began to decline physically. After I suffered my first cardiac episode (which was at home, and in front of my two surviving children), the look on their faces at the thought of losing another family member only months after losing their cherished brother, helped myself to realize I needed to find a way to live again. I couldn't fade away; this wasn't the deal I made when I became a mother. To quit when the going got tough. I began to make a plan, and step one was to begin to write.



If journal writing is something that you've never before, then it can be intimidating. I always encourage my fellow survivors to try new things. Keep things simple:

- * Get a notebook (exerciser)
- * Keep a pen or pencil close to your notebook
- * Get an easy to read guide on journal writing - I highly recommend: “ *Writing to Heal The Soul* ” by Susan Zimmermann

This book is very readable (which is to say there is no heavy content, which I appreciated being so raw in my grief journey....I found I had a very short attention span, and not much capacity to retain information in those early days). At the end of each chapter, there are guided journalling questions, which will help you begin, if journalling is completely new to yourself.

There is no limit to how you can participate in journalling during your grief journey. I also kept an online journal, so that my friends and family who lived far away from us could check in, and read about how we were doing. My private journal was more an expression of my complex emotions. I kept something called an *Art Journal*. I have always been creative, and have enjoyed drawing and painting throughout my life, so this was something I decided would be helpful to add to my bag of strategies. Creating art, in any form, is valuable when bereaved, for many reasons. One is, that it engages a different area of our

brain, and when we've suffered a traumatic loss, it changes the way our brain functions. It is important to begin to build neuropaths that will help us begin to help support ourselves during our time of great need. My biggest hot tip, is just write anything. Don't worry about your spelling, or grammar....this is not important, and no one has to ever see this ! Give yourself permission to write anything, and everything...this is a judgement-free zone, so let it out, and express whatever you need to in those moments. Much of the art journal I kept in the early days, where completely painted in black....I have never used black in my art, until my son died. I bought a lot of black paint in that first year.

Make journaling a regular part of your weekly routine, and you will see why this is number one on my list of helpful support strategies ! Writing, or creating art will give your thoughts a place to live. You will honour what is ruminating in your mind, but it will free up space for every day life things to begin to happen. Having a safe place to express all the complex emotions will help you to identify a pattern...what is coming up again and again ? What do I need to spend more time learning about ? What emotion is holding the most power at this moment, and which ones can I begin to release the power of, now that I have acknowledged them ?

When journalling, I always encourage my fellow survivors to have a challenging statement after expressing a complex aspect they are struggling with. Such as:

“ Which of these thoughts are based on facts, and which ones are my mind filling in the answers to” ?

Further, I ask people to follow up with a compassionate statement, such as:

“ This is really hard. I am doing the best I can” .

Just like you would say to your best friend, if they were the ones whom lost their loved one in this tragic way. Turn your inner voice to that of your best friends’.

Journal writing can be a wonderful tool to add to your individual journeys of healing after loss.

CONNECTING WITH FELLOW SURVIVORS

If you’re anything like myself and my husband, you will be skeptical about meeting other people whom have also suffered a traumatic loss by suicide. When it was first suggested to ourselves by a counsellor, that meeting other bereaved parents would be a helpful thing to do, we flat out said, “NO WAY”. How could it possibly be helpful to meet with other parents, and listen to their experience of loosing their precious child ? We had more than our limit on our plate, and couldn’t imagine this would ever be a positive thing to do. We actually left the session laughing at the absurdity of this suggestion. How could this trained professional be so off the mark ? I am happy to have been the one whom was proven wrong.

I remember every moment of walking into my first support group meeting. I remember feeling incredibly heavy...I could barely lift my legs and walk down that corridor of the address the counsellor had given myself. I found the room, and stood outside of the door for a full ten minutes. I looked at the sign which announced the support group for “suicide loss”.....

How could this be my life? Is this where I belong now? If I walk away, maybe he’s not really gone, and I’ll come out of this nightmare.

I don’t remember what thought happened to get me to finally push open the door, quickly scan the room to notice other people, and walk over to the table with tea and coffee. I made a cup of tea, and made myself as small as possible in my chair around the table.



I am so glad I took that first step towards connecting with other survivors ! The momentary pain of having to walk through that door was quickly replaced by my first glimmer of comfort since the moment my son died. I met a sister-survivor, and I was able to ask her some questions on how best to support my surviving children. I met a mother-survivor, who was 17 years into her journey of healing. I can't remember what exactly was said, but I do remember feeling relieved at the thought I was not alone. One other thing that is a clear memory for me was thinking about that other mother, and how she looked neat and tidy. She had worn a pretty blouse, and her hair and make-up were done. She didn't look like she was gasping for air, and her voice didn't quiver from being choked with a jumble of complex emotions that are so overwhelming, she can't even name...

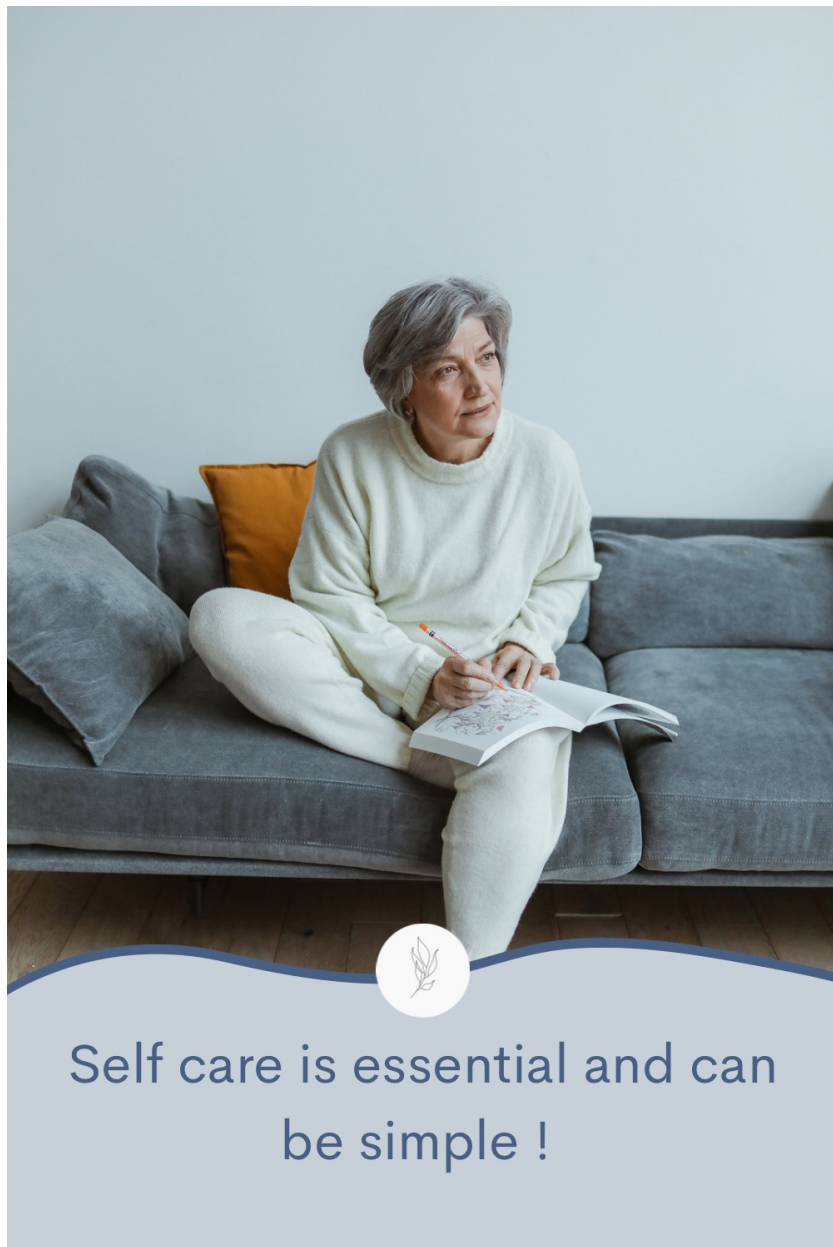
She had **somehow** survived this horrible loss, and not only that, she looked peaceful ! This was my first glimmer of hope. I left that first meeting, with the knowledge that if she could do it, then so could, maybe I, too !

I went back, and eight years later, I am still friends with the people I met in that group.

Never underestimate the power of connecting with those that have gone before you. You will expand your own personal network of support, and some of your fellow survivors will become some of the people you feel the most comfortable around. It is relieving to be in the company of others that you don't have to explain anything to.

Finding a compassionate and empathetic community of support is a brave and huge step in the right direction to learning to live with your grief and joy, hand in hand !

PRACTICING SELF-CARE



Self care is essential and can
be simple !

I will share with you that this was the absolute number one, largest block to my own healing. I spoke earlier on how I held the belief that I didn't deserve to heal, and this was something I had to face, only months after losing my son, and my physical body began to fail. I will never write an article, or guide without the inclusion of a section on the essentials of practicing self-care when bereaved. If you've read along this far, you are beginning to gather resources to help you structure a plan of attack for healing after loss. I am so proud of you; this is not easy, and you're going to need all the help you can get to begin to find ways to live again. I use the terminology, "live again", because the life we had died along with our loved one. We will never be that person we were when they were alive, and everything feels frightening, strange, and unfamiliar. If you're like me, you feel like living is a betrayal to you loved one. I felt like doing anything (and I mean anything.....) to sustain your own life, will be a sign to others that you've decided to stay, and thus, will be abandoning your lost loved one. I couldn't even get a bite of food down my throat, that felt like it was closed over with sand. I know I have written about my first cardiac episode, and that

was only the beginning of the physical toll not practicing self-care took on my body. Eight years later, I am still struggling to heal the damage I've done. So, please take to heart my advise, and do this:

Forgive yourself for not being able to save your loved one. Do it everyday, over and over, until you believe you deserve to live again. Living does not mean you are leaving your beloved one behind ! In time, you will begin to live again - it will be a life that you recognize, and is one filled with great intention ! Once you can envision this, even in the abstract, you can begin to make a plan for self-care. Here are some things I highly recommend doing when newly bereaved:

- * Make regular visits to your family doctor. Don't ignore physical symptoms you may be experiencing. They could be a sign of something that needs medical intervention or treatment.
- * Ask your main health care provider about options to support mood and sleep. (I took prescription medication that was monitored by my doctor for mood and sleep for a little over two years). There is no shame in taking medications to help support you during your time of great need. This is why these medications were made ! Keep in touch with your doctor; if they are not helping, your doctor may adjust the dosage, or prescribe an alternative medication.

* What did you enjoy before your loved one made their physical transition ? You may still want to partake in these activities, or you may never want to do them again. There is no right or wrong way to heal from complex, traumatic loss. Choose an activity that feels like the right fit for you, and give it a try.

- Walking outside for ten minutes.
- Walking with a pet outdoors
- Hiking
- Swimming
- Skiing
- Running
- Go to somewhere near water. Research shows that even looking at water for ten minutes has healing qualities for people.

The list of possibilities are endless when it comes to engaging in physical activity. I use this rule: if an emotion is coming on, and I can't think my way out of feeling stuck in five minutes, it's time to get a change of scenery. Sometimes I will just walk out to my back garden, and feel the leaves of one my trees between my fingers.

We all know that sleep is vital to healing, but this can be one of the most common blocks to healing after a traumatic loss.

Here is a strategy I use eight years later, and though it will take some practice, and dedication to this, it will be a sleep game changer. When we were a newly bereaved family, everyone was having trouble settling at night. Why are our thoughts so damn loud in the still of the night ?!!

To help my surviving children settle at night I did this:

I created a sleep routine. Though they were both far too old for this, I chose a book they were currently reading, and I read out-loud to them. The comfort of being all together, and just shutting out the outside world by immersing ourselves in the lines of a novel helped to set the stage for unwinding to begin. Next I choose a time (Weekdays and Weekends - we stuck to a time) in which it is time for a “grief break”. I made our beds a “grief-free zone”. Once our bodies touched the bed, it was time to send love to our son, and brother, and allow our bodies to accept the sleep we would desperately need to carry our grief when morning returned, and we faced another day without our top guy. This technique is something I use to this very day, and I will until the end of my own days, of my new life.

The ways to incorporate some self-care into your daily routine can be very simple, and the benefits will help support your grief-ravaged body, which will help you not only to heal,

but help you to be a better support for your surviving loved ones.

- Take a long soak in your bath
- Take a few additional moments to allow the warm water to flow over you in your shower
- Buy yourself fresh flowers, or a new plant for your home or garden to care for.
- Enjoy a latte, or long lunch with a compassionate friend.
- Watch a movie or a comedy show on TV
- Go for a massage
- Try a reiki therapy session
- Float in a sensory deprivation chamber
- Find a new recipe online, buy the ingredients and enjoy your meal - food is meant to be enjoyed, and you deserve to not only get your nutrients, but to really enjoy them !
- Take your vitamins
- Take the time off your work that you need, and wear comfy clothes and fuzzy slippers
- Read a novel, just for pleasure
- Plan a trip, and travel if you can

I hope that this small article will go some way to helping you begin to find ways you can help to support yourself during your time of bereavement. I am easy to contact, and am always grateful when a fellow survivor reaches out to chat further !

With Much Care and Love,

Jill