

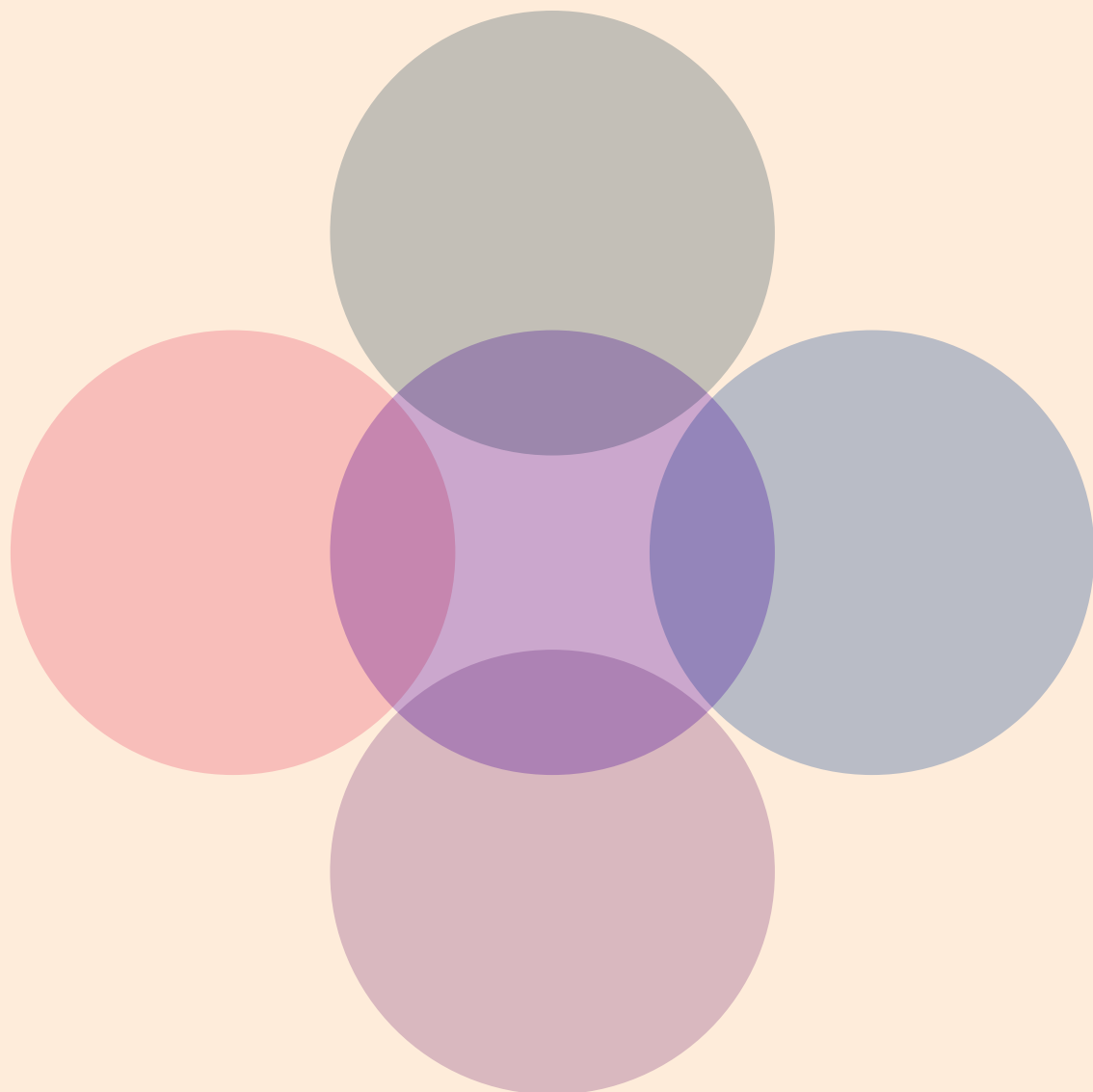


Making Families Count

Improving healthcare through family engagement

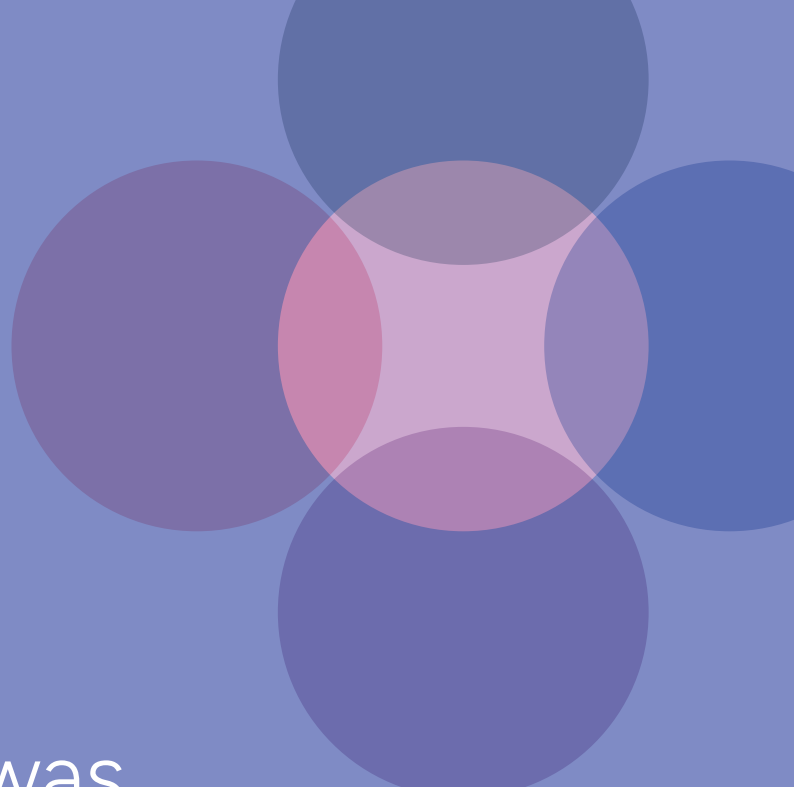
Making sense after
a suicide: living with
blame, uncertainty, and
the need for answers.

You are not alone



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This resource was created, in the hope that it might offer some comfort, recognition, and companionship in the aftermath of bereavement by suicide, whether it seems the person intended to take their own life, or their intention was unclear.



Grief after suicide often brings up some of the hardest questions we can face:

Could it have been prevented?

Was someone to blame – including me?

Did they really mean to die?

How do I go on, not knowing why?

These questions don't have easy answers, and sometimes no answers at all.

But we hope that just naming them, and offering a space to think them through, can bring some relief. You may find parts of it help you feel seen, or prompt reflections that support healing. Other parts may be painful or challenging to read. That's okay – there's no right or wrong way to engage with it. Take what is helpful, leave what isn't, and come back to it in your own time.

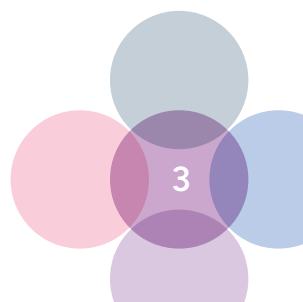
Each year, more than 700,000 people die by suicide worldwide. In the UK, it's around 7,000 – making it the biggest cause of death for people aged 20–34 and for men under 50.

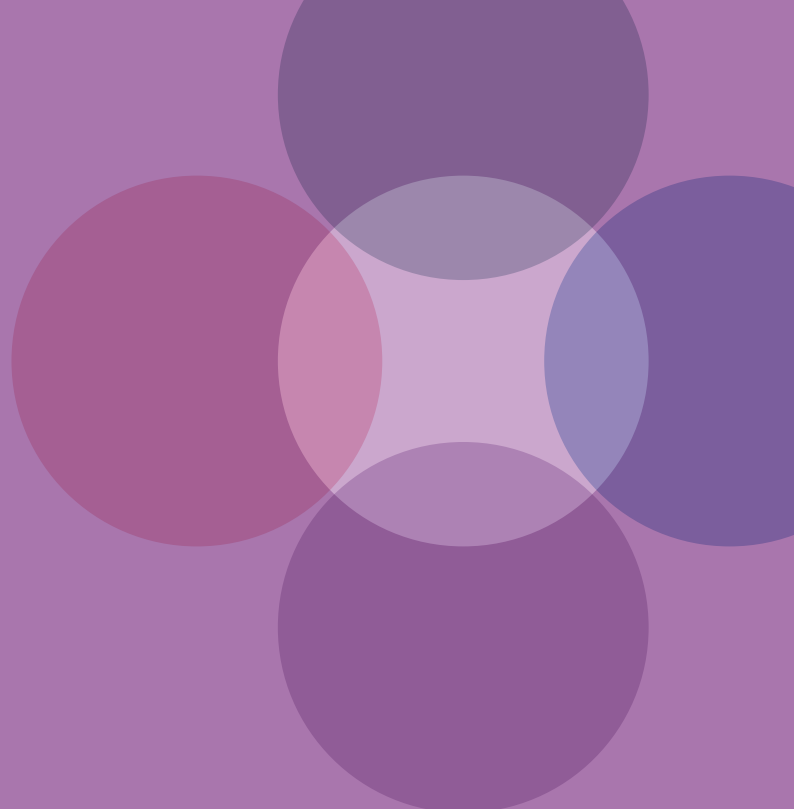
Suicide touches far more lives than most of us realise.

It's estimated that up to 500 million people around the world experience suicide loss each year. That means around two-thirds of us may be affected by it at some point in our lives.

And yet, it's often hidden.

Because suicide is still so heavily surrounded by silence, blame, shame, and stigma, people don't talk about it – even to those closest to them.





“

“I found it really staggering – the number of people who came to me afterwards and told me about suicides in their lives that I’d never known about.”

“Even close friends didn’t say anything until I became bereaved – then they suddenly told me about their own experiences.”

”

The truth is no one fully understands what causes someone to take their own life

We often want a clear explanation – something that would make sense of such a painful and irreversible decision. But suicide is never caused by one thing.

It's shaped by many layers:

- some personal, like pain, despair, or hopelessness
- some social, like loneliness, poverty, or trauma
- and some just part of being human – our vulnerability, our minds, our limits

Even when someone has been struggling with suicidal thoughts for a long time, their death can still feel sudden and inexplicable. And, quite often, there are no signs at all. That uncertainty for the bereaved can feel unbearable.

Grief after suicide can be especially complicated

Often it includes shock, deep confusion, guilt, anger, and a feeling of being cut off from others. When we don't know what happened or why, it can feel impossible to find peace.



"Understanding why the person you loved took such a devastating action is not going to be possible... I think part of my finding a narrative is one that allows eventually for what is not knowable."



Understanding complex grief after suicide

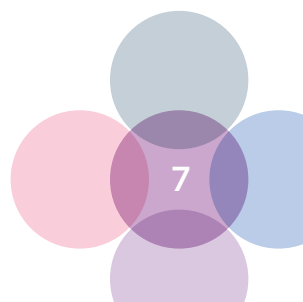
This kind of grief is sometimes called complex grief – not because it's abnormal or wrong, but because it's often prolonged, very intense, and/or deeply disruptive. Suicide, more than almost any other kind of death, can leave behind unanswered questions and painful emotions that are hard to carry or even talk about.

But even when the circumstances feel clear or understood, the grief can still be complex. It's the impact – not just the uncertainty – that makes it so.

Grief itself is often misunderstood in our society. People – including those who are grieving – may expect it to follow a timetable or a set of steps. But grief doesn't really work like that. It takes time, care, and space to begin living with what has happened – and that's especially true after a suicide.



"Initially, every time I woke up I confronted the fact of her death all over again – the shock, the horror, the pain. And then one day I woke up knowing she was dead, and I realised after some time of just knowing, that the initial trauma had passed."



Themes that often arise in suicide bereavement

In this resource you'll find reflections on some of the themes that many people struggle with after suicide loss:

- the unbearable uncertainty
- the search for someone to hold responsible
- the pain of blame – whether turned outward to others or inward to yourself

You'll also hear from others who have been through suicide loss, and what helped them. You are not alone in your grief – even if it feels like it.



"Hearing something that feels real about suicide brings such a sense of relief. It allows you, at some point, to let go – and that release is profoundly freeing."

People sometimes describe suicide as being like a "cluster bomb." It doesn't just affect one person – it sends shockwaves through families, friendships, and entire communities.

If you've lost someone in this way, you may find yourself feeling not just sadness, but also confusion, guilt, anger, shame, or even fear. These reactions can come all at once, or in waves, or unexpectedly, even a very long time after the death.

In this section, we'll explore some of the reasons why grief after suicide can feel so intense and difficult:

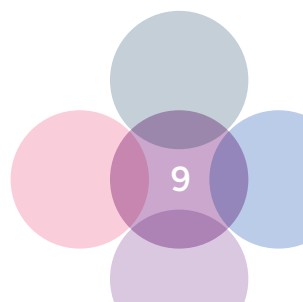
- the shock
- the not-knowing
- the search for someone to blame
- the silence and shame
- the emotional confusion that often follows

Each of these can make it harder to begin mourning – and even harder to feel supported by others.



"My son was holding her and she broke free... He accused himself of having murdered her because he was there and couldn't stop her."

"When you're trying to deal with your own responsibility... finding other people to blame is a kind of relief. And then everyone in the system is trying to put themselves beyond reproach... There's this terrible accusation looking for a home."



The shock of suicide

One of the most painful things about suicide is how sudden and unexpected it can feel – no matter what came before.

Even when someone has struggled with their mental health for a long time, and even when they have made and survived previous attempts the moment of death often still comes as a shock. It's rarely expected right then. And for those around them, it can feel incomprehensible.

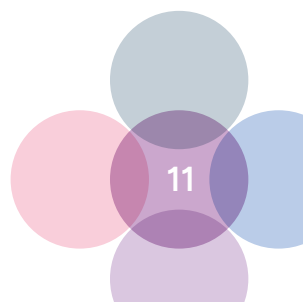
Some people may seem to be improving shortly before they die. That too can be confusing. One possible reason is that they may have already made a decision to end their life—and the relief of that decision can bring them a temporary sense of calm or clarity.



“When it happened, it was like a rupture – none of us saw it coming, and even now, we can’t say we understand it.”

“I was actually at their flat when she died. It was a major police incident... utter chaos and complete shock... I don’t think I would ever have believed it if I hadn’t seen and touched her.”

These contradictions can be heartbreaking.



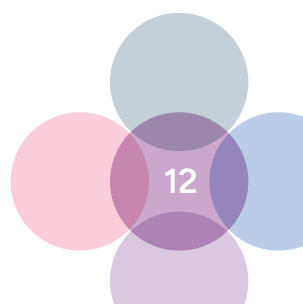
Research, and the voices of people who have survived suicide attempts, suggest that suicide is often not something that can be precisely predicted – even by professionals. In fact, some individuals who survive serious attempts say they were surprised by their own actions.

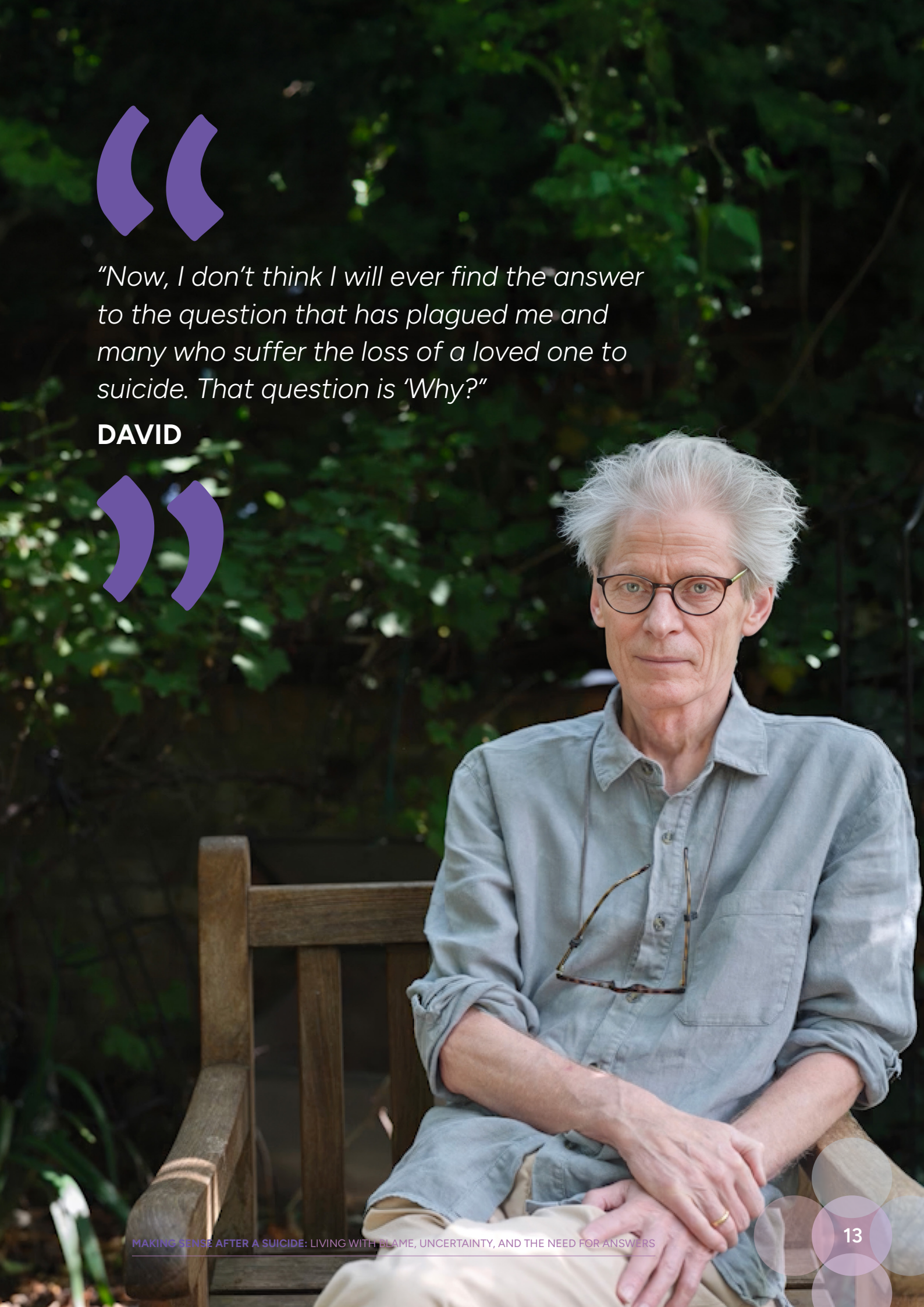
This is not to say that suicide can't be prevented – or that nothing can be done. Suicide prevention is vital. But prevention must be broad and compassionate, not based only on trying to identify who is “high risk.”

Suicide is shaped by many factors – some visible, some hidden. That's why support systems, open conversations, and caring communities matter for everyone.



“I suffered terrible intrusive thoughts... my mind was just a mess. It was like something was really awry, and I didn't have control over my thought processes. It wasn't like there was an ordinary process of thinking and reflecting.”





"Now, I don't think I will ever find the answer to the question that has plagued me and many who suffer the loss of a loved one to suicide. That question is 'Why?'"

DAVID



Living with uncertainty

After a suicide, the question that often haunts us is:
Why?

Why did this happen?

Why didn't I know?

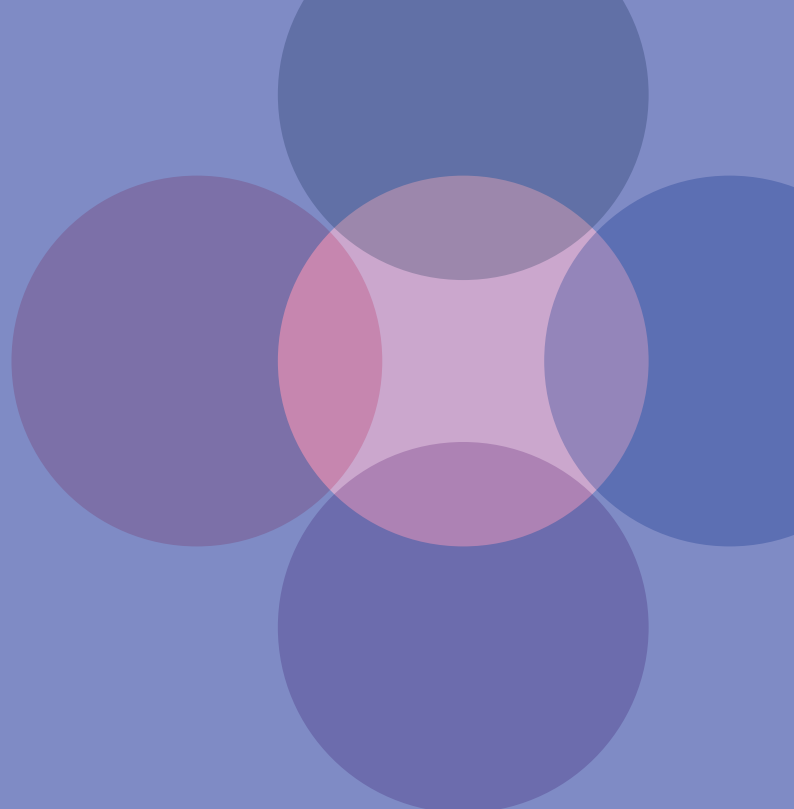
Why didn't they say something?

Why couldn't I stop it?

And the hardest truth of all is this: we may never know.

The only person who could truly explain is no longer here. That absence – of answers, of explanation, of closure – can be one of the most painful parts of suicide loss.

As human beings, we're wired to make sense of things. So we often build stories to try and explain what happened. But these stories – while they can help us cope – are never the full truth. Sometimes they comfort us. Sometimes they make things worse.



“

“There’s always a great uncertainty. What is intent? What’s the agent? It’s all so unclear.”

“What does it mean when even the person themselves may not have known they were going to do it?”

”

When someone seems both alive and in pain

One of the most bewildering things about suicide is that sometimes, the person seemed to be doing better.

They may have smiled again. Made plans. Seemed lighter. Even professionals, friends, and family might have felt reassured. That's why the death can come as such a terrible shock.

Other times it may come out of the blue with no previous indication at all that the person was desperate, or even unwell.

One way that some people understand this is by thinking about a kind of inner split that can happen inside the mind.

It's like there were two parts of the person:

- **one part that wanted to live, and truly hoped life would get better**
- **and another part that felt unbearable pain, or shame, or hopelessness – so much so that death felt like the only escape**

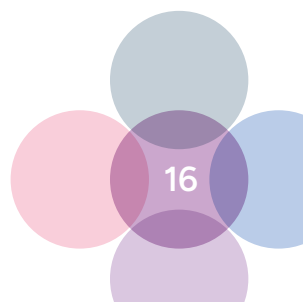
These two parts can exist side by side, often without the person even fully realising it. They might show one part to the world while hiding the other.

For those left behind, this can lead to deep confusion:

Did they really want to die?

Were they pretending to be okay?

Did I miss something? Was I misled?



But it's possible that even they were confused by what was going on inside. That doesn't make the pain less—but it can help make sense of how someone can seem to want to live and also take their own life.

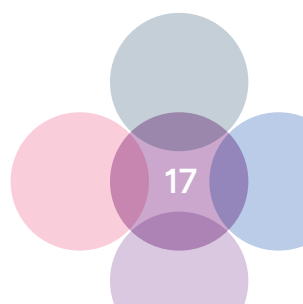


"She rang me at that moment and said, 'Can you help me?' and sounded in a very different voice. She was childlike and desperate... I read about the split in the person... and I really experienced that."

"There was one part clearly wanting to live... and another wanting to kill, a part that was the source of immense pain and shame and humiliation."

"She seemed to be doing better. Even the professionals said she was improving. But something else must have been going on."

"It felt like we were misled – but then I think, was she also misled by herself? Could both things be true?"



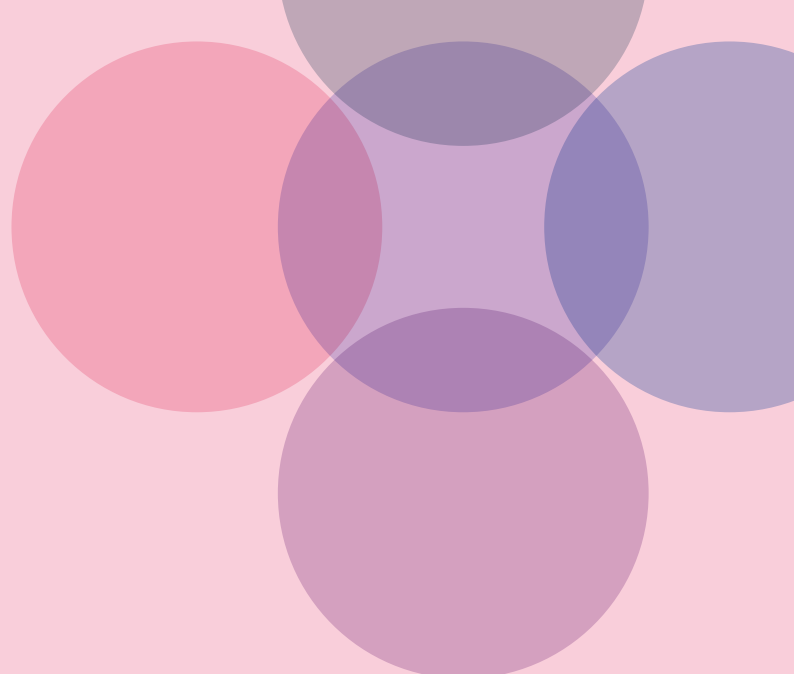
When grief turns into anger

Feeling angry after someone dies by suicide is completely natural.

You might feel angry at the person who died, at yourself, at people around you, or even at the system. But this anger is often hidden, especially if it feels like it clashes with your love for the person who died, or if you're afraid of being judged for feeling it.

Sometimes, this anger is so intense it can't find a place to go – and instead, it gets turned inward or pushed aside. But when that happens, it doesn't go away. It just gets quieter... and heavier.

It's okay to be angry. Anger is part of grief. Giving it a voice – gently, safely – can be part of healing. You might try writing it down – maybe on a piece of paper you tuck away. Or you could post anonymously on an online forum). If you have a bereavement counsellor, talk to them. And if you don't, consider finding one. Speaking your anger doesn't make you unkind or disloyal – it means you're grieving.



“

“I developed an absolute fury about those words ‘it was preventable’... beyond any kind of reasonable measure... like some animal trying to protect her young.”

“People were saying the most insensitive things – and I didn’t shout at them. I just went quiet.”

“That anger didn’t go away – it found other places to go, sometimes at completely the wrong people.”

”

“

“When people told me it was a suicide and that’s what we should call it, I was terribly upset, because not even the Coroner said it was. Now, nine years later, I realise it doesn’t matter. She took her own life. We will never know why. That’s what we have to live with.”

DORIT

”



When their pain becomes ours

After a suicide, it's common to feel like you've been left carrying something that wasn't yours.

Some people describe it as a weight inside them, something wordless and overwhelming. It may feel like the person who died left behind part of their own pain – and now you're the one who has to carry it.

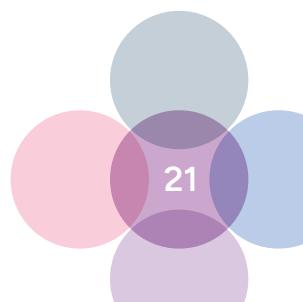
Psychologists sometimes call this a projection – when someone unconsciously passes their unbearable feelings onto someone else. It's not something they did on purpose. But it can leave those left behind feeling confused, distressed, or even haunted.



"I felt like she had left something inside me – something heavy I couldn't name."

"It's like they passed on a part of their pain, and I didn't know what to do with it."

If you've felt this, you are not alone. Holding someone else's pain is exhausting – but naming it can begin to lighten the load.



The silence around suicide

Even today, suicide carries a huge amount of shame and stigma.

People may not know what to say – or say nothing at all. You might sense people avoiding the subject, or even avoiding you. This can leave you feeling isolated in your grief, as though your loss somehow doesn't "count" the same way. That silence can be deeply hurtful.

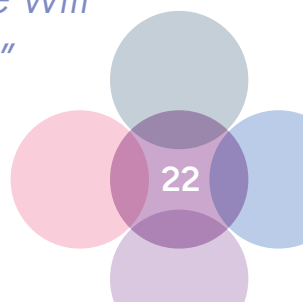
Sometimes, families or communities can't even bring themselves to name the death as suicide. And when that happens, the grieving process can become even more tangled.

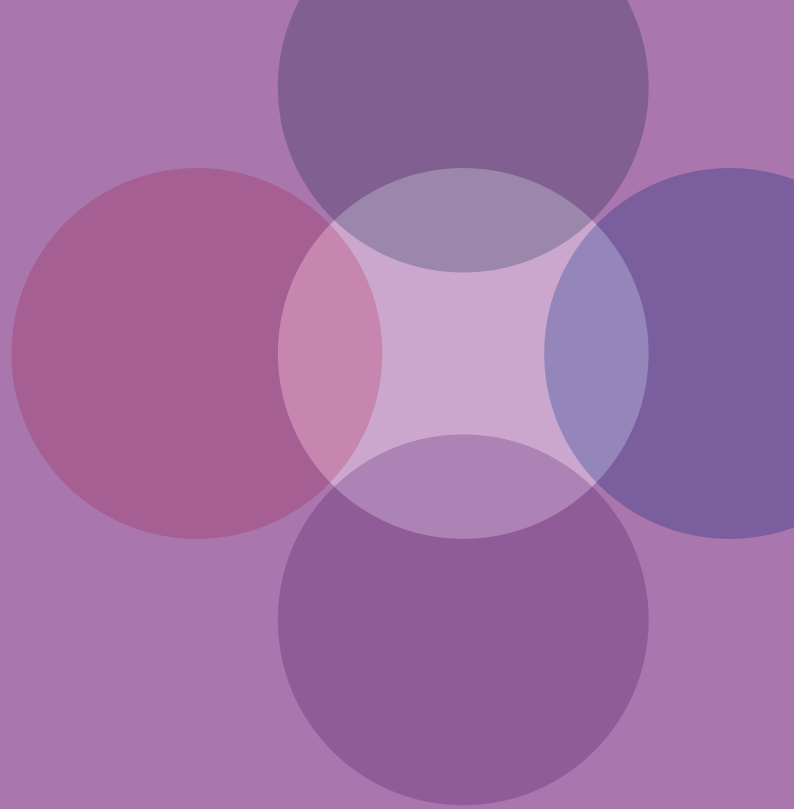
This silence is not your fault. It's a reflection of how society avoids pain and death. But your grief matters. And your story deserves to be told and heard.



"We still will not describe my daughter-in-law's death as suicide... The Coroner said she couldn't call it a suicide as she was so unwell when she did it... but then all the support available for people bereaved by suicide felt like it wasn't for us."

"When people told me it was a suicide and that's what we should call it, I was terribly upset, because not even the Coroner said it was. Now, nine years later, I realise it doesn't matter. She took her own life. We will never know why. That's what we have to live with."





“

*“It’s amazing how silent people are.
There’s this kind of shame that keeps
everyone quiet.”*

*“We don’t talk about it—and that’s
why nobody knows how to respond.”*

”

Facing the fragility of life

Suicide doesn't just take someone away. It also shakes something inside us – about what life is, and how fragile it can be.

It forces us to confront things we don't usually think about:

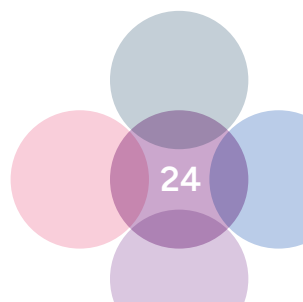
- how vulnerable we are
- how much we can't control
- how close suffering and despair can be to the surface

This can be frightening. It can also change how you see the world – sometimes for the worse, but sometimes with a deeper awareness of how precious, and precarious, life really is.



"The moment I realised it could happen to anyone – it shook my whole worldview."

"There's something about suicide that brings you right up against the fragility of life. It breaks the illusion that we're safe."



Who is responsible?

One of the most painful and confusing questions after a suicide is: **Who was responsible?**

Was it the person who died?

Was it the mental health system?

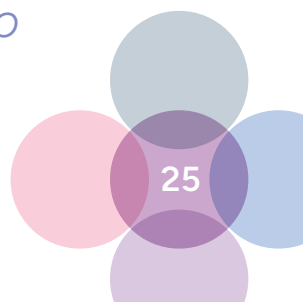
Was it something I said – or didn't say?

Sometimes, the idea that the person had any role in their own death feels unbearable. How can we keep loving them if we think they made this choice?

In that pain, the mind starts searching for other explanations. Maybe it was a brain illness. Maybe a chemical imbalance. Maybe the hospital failed them. Maybe something else. Something that lets us hold onto our love for them – something that makes the pain make sense.



"Now, I don't think I will ever find the answer to the question that has plagued me and many who suffer the loss of a loved one to suicide. That question is 'Why? We even have the question of who, because when my son died, he became somewhat unrecognisable. Who was he? Who was the agent that had caused this death? I couldn't contemplate the idea that it was really him. So, I was obviously looking for other causes... some external agency, or maybe the failure of a health care system. Something else, because to actually attribute it to him was an almost intolerable thing."

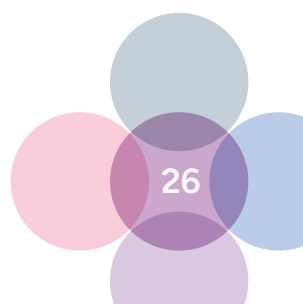


These thoughts are normal. They are how we try to survive what feels unthinkable. And the truth is, suicide is never one person's fault. It's never one moment, one failure, one decision.

It usually reflects deep and lasting pain – emotional, psychological, social, or biological – that built up over time, sometimes beyond anyone's ability to reach or relieve.

Over time, it may become possible to acknowledge that the person who died had some agency in their own death – not as blame, but as recognition of their suffering and their humanity.

Accepting that they were in pain and made a choice – without turning it into guilt or judgment – can sometimes help ease the crushing self-blame that grieving people carry. It can open the door to grieving the person, rather than getting stuck in endlessly analysing the act.



“

“People were saying the most insensitive things – and I didn’t shout at them. I just went quiet.”

ANDREW

”



Blame and uncertainty: the stories we tell ourselves

After a suicide, the mind often searches desperately for meaning.

You replay moments. Rewrite conversations. Imagine other outcomes.

And then comes the hardest question:

Was it my fault?

Many people who are grieving take on more blame than they could possibly deserve. You might believe you missed something. Or feel there was one word, one silence, one choice that could have changed everything.

This is a deeply human response. When something makes no sense, we try to make a story – because even painful certainty can feel easier than unbearable uncertainty.

Sometimes, grief creates stories that feel completely true – even when they aren't the whole picture. Psychiatrists sometimes refer to these as “*delusional narratives*” – not because you have a mental illness, but because grief, especially after a sudden or traumatic loss, can temporarily distort your sense of what is real.

The word *delusional* here isn't meant as a diagnosis. It simply acknowledges that the mind, under immense emotional pressure, may try to protect itself by creating a version of events that offers relief from the unbearable pain of not knowing.

Grief – especially the kind that comes with shock – can make you feel like you’re going mad or losing your mind. That doesn’t mean you’re mentally ill. It means you’re human, and you’re in pain.



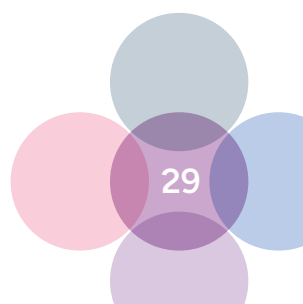
“We start telling ourselves those stories – all the things I could have done and should have done. That searing guilt surrounds us.”

“It seems to me that everybody has their own version of their story that they’re trying to assert over others, and that’s really unhelpful. Instead of talking and supporting one another, it becomes another way in which everyone gets stuck.”

Sometimes, instead of turning the blame inward, we direct it outward – at others, at professionals, at the system, at those we believe could have done more. This, too, is understandable.

In some cases, people raise concerns about difficult or damaging circumstances – such as bullying, domestic violence, or failures in care – that seem connected to the person’s despair. These concerns matter. They deserve to be heard.

But even when external factors are identified – by families, friends, inquests, or reports – they remain **interpretations**, not certainties. We must remember that suicide is never caused by one thing alone. The inner experience of the person who died—their thoughts, their pain, their choices – is no longer accessible to us. Part of the truth – their truth – will always remain unknown.



We can honour what we do know, while also accepting what we never will.

So how do we live with this?

One gentle shift is to move from blame to reflection – not to assign responsibility, but to make space for the complexity of what happened, and for what didn't happen too.

Some people find it helpful to explore the idea of “responsibility” – not as fault or blame, but as a way of holding multiple truths at once:

- **that the person suffered deeply**
- **that others may have struggled, tried, or failed**
- **that society fails many people**
- **and that some things – especially suicide – can't always be prevented, even with love**

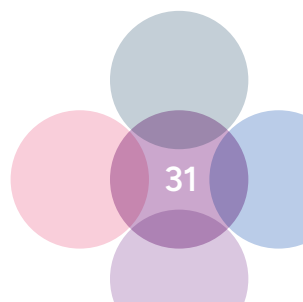
At the same time, it's important to acknowledge that when someone is in the grip of serious mental illness – such as depression, psychosis, or trauma – their sense of choice may be distorted or lost. In these situations, talking about “responsibility” can feel painful or even inappropriate. There is no single right way to understand what happened. Some families want to work with agencies who want to learn from the death to consider aspects of their service that could be improved. For instance, could the phone be answered more sympathetically? Could a leaflet with accurate information on what to expect be given to families? Could family and friends be seen separately so as to give information freely, without trying to protect their unwell family member? Giving opportunities to family and friends bereaved by suicide can provide healing to the service, the staff and the families.

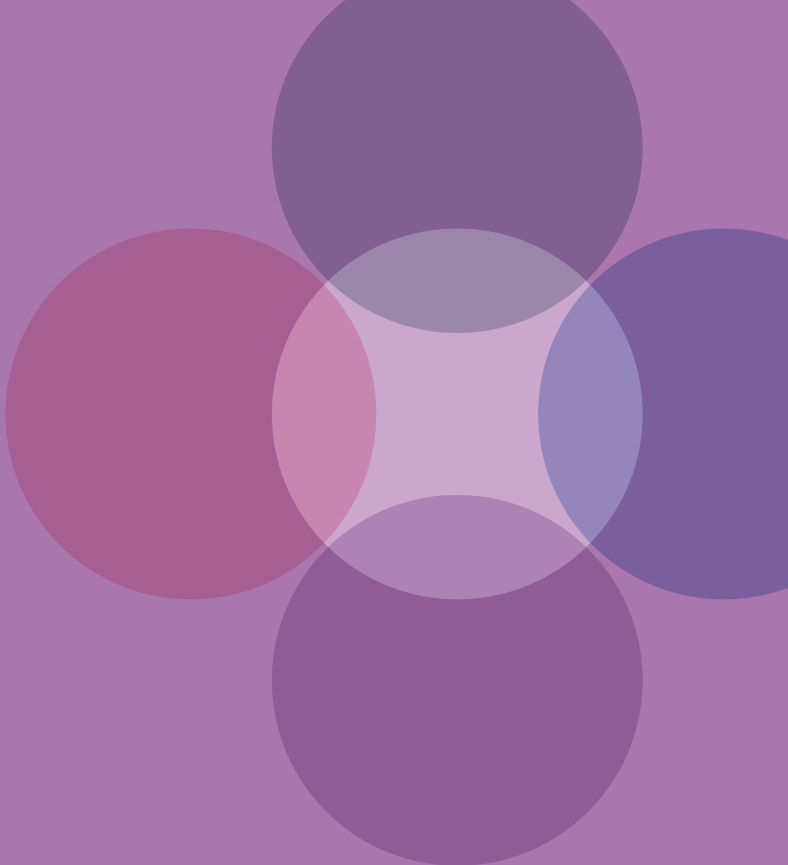
Grief, too, cannot be fixed. It is not a problem to be solved, but a process to be lived, over the course of your life it will change and it will always be a part of who you are. We are all changed by grief.

What helps is often not finding answers, but having the freedom to tell your story – your way, in your time – and to carry forward your connection with the person who died. This is sometimes called a **continuing bond**. It may take the form of memories, rituals, objects, places, or simply talking to them in your heart. These bonds do not need to be broken in order to heal.



“Believing you caused your loved one’s death may momentarily give shape to the chaos. But it replaces uncertainty with guilt – and both are too heavy to carry alone.”





You are not to blame. And
neither are you required to
explain the inexplicable.

A final thought

If you've made it this far, thank you. It's not easy to sit with the kind of grief that suicide brings.

You may still feel lost, angry, uncertain, or deeply sad. Nothing in this resource is meant to take that away – grief doesn't have a fix. But we hope it has helped you feel a little less alone with the questions.

You don't have to have all the answers.

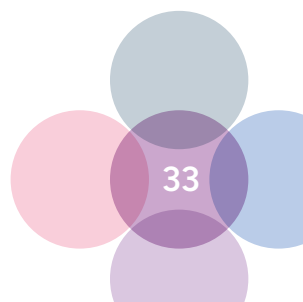
You don't have to get everything "right."

**You just have to keep going in your own way,
at your own pace.**

There is no correct way to grieve a suicide. But there are gentler ways to live with what's happened – and to begin to carry it differently, over time.



"Hearing something that feels real about suicide brings such a sense of relief. It allows you, at some point, to let go – and that release is profoundly freeing."



Trying to make sense of bereavement after suicide

Click here or scan the QR code
to watch David's, Dorit's and
Andrew's stories

David



Andrew



Dorit



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