

# Support After Suicide Newsletter

## Welcome....



### Support After Suicide Program

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### Mailing List

The SAS newsletter is available electronically. If you would like to receive the newsletter via email please contact us at the above



The abrupt ending of a life by suicide leaves unique emotional scars on those left behind. This newsletter aims to provide a link with others who have lost a relative, partner or close friend as a result of suicide. What is important to remember is that each person's grief journey is unique. We hope this newsletter provides you with some useful information and some comfort in knowing you are not alone.

This is our last Newsletter for 2020 and a theme of reflecting and remembering seems appropriate. It has been a strange, sometimes sad and sometimes surreal year for many of us. Bushfires and floods. Coronavirus and lockdowns. Many of you have shared with us, the forensic counselling team, your own stories of loss this year but also your stories of hope and resilience. Many have shared the titles and authors of stories that you have found helpful. Thank you. I have started a "Bookshelf" on page 4 listing some of these and welcome others recommendations.

The value of sharing our stories cannot be underestimated. In this edition we have asked Australian author Noel Braun to share his reflections on losing his beloved wife Maris with us. I first heard Noel talk about this on a podcast he recorded for the organisation Beyond Blue which prompted me to search out his other stories. *No Way to Behave at a Funeral* is Noel's story of the death of Maris from suicide and as Noel says, sharing his story through his writing has played a big part in his "regeneration".

Christmas is the focus of the end of the year for many in our community but for some individuals and families Christmas and the holiday season can be a difficult time. David Kessler, a grief and loss specialist who runs the website Grief.com noted that *"It's hard when someone says "It's great we're all together for Christmas" yet the reality is, when a loved one dies, we're never all here."*

When one member of the family is no longer there to share this 'special' time, the feelings of loss and sadness can be overwhelming and replace what is meant to be a time of joy. For some of you this will be your first Christmas without your loved one. For others it won't be your first Christmas but it won't seem any less difficult.

Reflecting how others manage Christmas and the holiday season following the death of their loved one the most consistent advice we hear is that it is usually easier if you are prepared and importantly and overwhelmingly it is to do *what helps you*. At the same time, if you feel you are struggling over the holiday period you may want to talk to your GP or reach out to a counsellor or group.

*In the face of events that threaten to overwhelm our lives, storytelling gives us a way of reclaiming ourselves and reaffirming our connections with other people—those who listen to our stories and, by doing so, bear witness with us."*

Victoria Alexander

*"In the Wake of Suicide: Stories of the People Left Behind"*



### Reflecting and Remembering: Noel and Maris' Story

I'd like to talk about, write about, my wife Maris. She died by suicide on 30<sup>th</sup> October 2004, sixteen years ago. She hid her depression; only a few knew of her constant battle with the demons of despair. Every day was a struggle. To the outside world, she had everything to live for; forty-two years of a happy marriage, four children and, at that time, four grandchildren (four more since), many loving friends. The family was looking forward to the wedding of my son Stephen. She could not hang around and died the week before.

It's still a mystery, trying to make sense of the catastrophe.

One of a couple, I was alone. The role of loving husband was banished, assumptions and expectations overturned. Life was uncertain, unpredictable, plans irrelevant. My world was shaken and in disarray. I lost my identity. Identity isn't something we think about. It's how we regard ourselves, how we describe ourselves to others. I was no longer a husband and partner. What I had lost was so entwined with my identity that I was faced with the question of who was I now. Nothing would ever be the same. I saw a stranger in the mirror.



How was I to cope with the pain and anguish, the immense guilt that I didn't do enough to save Maris from herself? I came to a decision. I had no control over her abrupt departure but I did have some control over how I coped. I could have gone off the rails, succumbed to anger, bitterness, despair, hit the grog, womanised, turned in on myself. This tragedy will not beat me. I will fight back. My mind set needed to be transformed. I saw no way other than to meet my suffering head on. I was not going to be the strong silent type, but admit to my vulnerability. I'd show my emotions and tell the world how an insidious disease like depression could destroy a beautiful compassionate person. As a tribute to my Maris, I would endeavour to internalise her lovely qualities. I would ask myself what would she have done.

I think of her every day. She walks with me. Maris is a part of me. She goes wherever I go, never more than a heartbeat away. I have twelve photos of her around my house and two shrines where I light candles for her. She infuses every breath with her love and her influence in my life. I'm still married to my Maris and continue wear my wedding ring and the cross she wore. She is my partner albeit a silent one.

At first, it was difficult to see any hope in Maris' loss, but once the anguish subsided to a tolerable level, I saw opportunities for personal growth. I saw a different world and tried to evaluate what truly matters. I recognised my own vulnerability and limits more clearly.

So began my search for meaning. I did my 'grief work' and am grateful for the support from wise counsellors. I attended a suicide bereavement support group. I cannot stress enough the importance of my writing in my regeneration. In the month after Maris died, my first novel was published. It filled the vacuum, allowed the storm to pass and gave me purpose. I 'flogged' the book with passion and intensity. The first print sold out and a second as well. A second novel followed, and then I diverted my attention into writing about my grief journey. I wrote, too, about my walks along ancient pilgrimage routes through Europe, 'searching for meaning along the Camino de Santiago'. In all, I have written four books describing the various stages of my grief journey. Some are now audio books and have been translated into other languages. Writing them was therapy for me, but I like to think that I have reached out to many people and offered them comfort that they are not alone on their journey of grief. **Noel Braun**



### **Preparing for Christmas and the New Year**

The expectations of how we 'should' feel at Christmas, are often far from reality especially for those grieving the loss of a someone they normally share the occasion with. Sadness, loneliness, depression and fear of what lies ahead in the New Year are a reality for many people. So how to help ourselves survive the pressures and expectations associated with Christmas and the New Year?

Its important to recognise that you may be particularly vulnerable and to remember not to take on additional stress in your life. Think about the expectations of others and of yourself . Maybe make a plan around what you can cope with this year. It may not be the same as last year or next year but it's what you can do this year. Is your support system aware that you may need help this year? Have an open discussion with your friends and family so they know how you're feeling and understand why you may not be able to meet certain expectations this year. Are you going to attend parties in the lead up? Christmas carols with the kids? How many people can you manage on the day? Do you need a lot of people around or just a few. How will you give yourself a break if it is getting too much? Maybe having a "safe retreat" somewhere you can be alone for a while if the celebration gets overwhelming, or choose a close friend or relative to give you the support you need.

This is Chandel B's advice:

*"I found that sometimes the anticipation of the holidays are worse than the actual day. I was so concerned about what to expect, what to do to remember my dad, that when Christmas and other holidays came, it was just another day. I got to choose how to spend it. I could decide to start new traditions, or stop old ones. I was gentle with myself and allowed myself to grieve in whatever way felt right at that moment. It was a simple and quiet first Christmas without him (the 'year of firsts' often is), but it gave me time to figure out how I could manage the holidays and discover what really matters. Does the holiday card really matter? No. But calling loved ones became more important. My family and I completely changed the way we give presents, and I also started my own tradition of writing to him and pondering how he might react or enjoy how I am spending my holidays now. It is also imperative to remind myself that there is no right or wrong way to grieve, and that everyone grieves in their own way — and that's OK. We initially have to take it minute by minute, not day by day. The loss shapes us and grows us — we never move on, we just make room."*  
(From: [themighty.com/2016/12/surviving-the-holidays-after-suicide-loss](http://themighty.com/2016/12/surviving-the-holidays-after-suicide-loss))



### **Grief Surges**

You've probably all noticed the trappings of the Christmas season are with us. Carols and Christmas songs, cards and gingerbread. Mangoes everywhere. For me these evoke memories of people and Christmases and summers past and can trigger surges of longing and sadness when least expected. Grief surges are exactly that- triggered out of the blue by anything that reminds you of your loved one. They overwhelm you with sadness and tears. Christmas and holidays are the perfect time for them to strike. Many who experience grief surges may feel this is not "normal" especially if the death occurred years before.

Acute grief following suicide is a mixture of trauma reactions and separation responses. For most this acute grief can be present everyday and continues for months or longer. After this period of acute grief it is not uncommon to feel surges of grief from time to time, grief as sharp as it was new. These surges may occur on special occasions but can also be triggered by a song, a place, a smell; something that connects you to your loved one. Suddenly you feel overwhelmed by despair and sadness. The surge of grief may last for moments or hours or even a day and may feel like it is taking you back to that time when your grief was at its most raw.

It is really important to understand that surges are a very common part of grieving and can continue for a long time. Shutting these surges down might be helpful in the short term but to give you a greater sense of control it's important to think of more active strategies to manage these. Acknowledge that you are experiencing a sudden, unexpected surge of grief and name it, "I notice I am feeling some painful feelings right now". If you are in a public place find somewhere to sit or wait for a moment until the intensity passes, giving yourself time to regroup. Some deep breathing may help. If you are with someone you trust, you could let them know you are feeling vulnerable and ask for support. Talk about the trigger and the memories it brings. People bereaved by suicide have told us their grief does get more integrated into their life. Rather than being in the foreground, it becomes part of the background and changes in intensity over time. Anticipating and planning for difficult times; allowing yourself to be sad when you need to; focusing on self care and finding your own ways to honour these memories of the person who died are all things that may help.

You are not alone—shared experiences connect us

**Sydney Support Groups**

**Lidcombe**

1st Tuesday of the month at Forensic Medicine Sydney, 1A Main Ave, Lidcombe. 6:30pm start. Please call Malynda Flarey on 9563 9000

**City: The Compassionate Friends**

Supporting parents who have lost a child. Every second Wednesday of the month starting at 10:30am at Pitt St office. Contact Linda Campbell on 0413 750 571.

**Eastern Suburbs**

*Suicide Impacting Me Support group.* The first Tuesday of the month at 6pm at JewishCare at Woollahra. To RSVP email: familyandfriends@jewishcare.com.au Group is non-denominational and open to all impacted by suicide.

**Northern Beaches**

Lifeline Northern Beaches run a monthly Suicide Bereavement Support Group on the 3rd Tuesday of each month. This group is currently meeting face to face. For further information please call Barbara Rabbitts at *Lifeline* (02) 9949 5522 during office hours or email: counselling@lifelinenb.org.au

**Gordon**

Contact *Lifeline* for information about their 8 week closed group or a monthly open group. Ph: (02) 9498 8805 or 0402 053 692

**Macarthur**

Monthly evening group and 8 week closed groups in areas around the south west. Contact Jackie Moore: Ph: (02) 4645 7208 or 0413286496

**The Network**

**(formerly Western Sydney Suicide Prevention and Support)**

The Network helps people bereaved by suicide through facilitated support groups in the Hawkesbury, Penrith and Blue Mountains local government areas. For more information Contact: Michelle Hookham: Ph: 02 4577 4435 or email: [groups@suicidebereavement.org.au](mailto:groups@suicidebereavement.org.au) or see [www.suicidebereavement.org.au](http://www.suicidebereavement.org.au)

**Restoring the Heartbeat of Hope**

Closed group program and counselling in the Lower North Shore. Wings of Hope Association Project. Contact Dr Diana Sands, Ph: 0414 721 653 Website: [www.bereavedbysuicide.com.au](http://www.bereavedbysuicide.com.au)

**Regional New South Wales:**

**Wollongong Salvation Army Support Group "ETC"**

First Floor Program support group "etc .." 1st Tuesday each month, 6-8pm. Contact: Marilyn Dunn 4229 1079 (business hours) or 0411 143 586

**Nowra**

The 3rd Monday of each month at 5.30-7.30pm, at The Salvation Army, corner Salisbury Drive & St Anns Street, Nowra Ph: 4423 2102 for more details.

**Ulladulla**

1st & 3rd Thursday each month 6-8pm, at Mission Australia, 80 St Vincent St, Ulladulla. Contact Stephen on 0419 625 372.

**Merimbula**

1st Thursday of the month. Call for details 0428 430 368 or [begaspan@gmail.com](mailto:begaspan@gmail.com)

**Central Coast**

An 8 week structured closed group, running 4 times a year in the evenings. Contact *Lifeline* during office hours. Ph: (02) 4323 6105

**Newcastle**

1st Wednesday of the month at 7pm-9pm at Lifeline, 12 Maitland Road, Islington. Contact *Lifeline* Newcastle & Hunter: (02) 4940 2000 or 0411 775 555 (Virginia Pethebridge) or 0407 002 463 (Faye Hawley)

**Port Stephens**

Last Monday of every month, 7pm-9pm at Tomaree Library, Salamander Bay. Contact 0431 670 579 (Dave Sams) or 0402 472 815 (Belinda Fenwick).

**Port Macquarie**

4th Wednesday of every month, 6pm-8pm at 5 Sherwood Rd. Contact Kelly Saidey at *Lifeline* for further information. Ph: (02) 6581 2800

For other groups in rural and regional NSW please refer to: <https://postventionaustralia.org/>  
The support groups advertised in the newsletter are not connected with FM and their advertisement in the newsletter is in no way an endorsement of the services.

The SAS Program has gratefully received a generous donation in remembrance of Darren , Joshua and Randal

**The Bookshelf**

*I'll Write Your Name on Every Beach: A Mother's Quest for Comfort, Courage and Clarity After Suicide Loss*  
Susan Auerbach  
Jessica Kingsley Publishers; UK

*No Way to Behave at a Funeral*  
*A tale of Personal Loss through Suicide*  
Noel Braun  
Sid Harta Publishers  
Australia

*It's Ok That You're Not Ok: Meeting Grief and Loss in a Culture That Doesn't Understand*  
Megan Divine  
St Martins Press;  
Australia



The SAS Program has gratefully received a generous donation in loving memory of Sheenagh McDonnell

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The information in this newsletter can only assist you in the most general way. If you need specific advice, please seek appropriate professionals who is knowledgeable in this area. Your local GP is often a good place to start. The contents of this newsletter should not be reproduced without permission.