

CHOOSING LIFE AFTER SUICIDE

Article by: Cheryl Sol

It's hard to know where or how to start this article. I suppose that reflects the difficulty in knowing how to start up again when someone you love has killed themselves.

We all know that life is not forever but the idea that someone chooses to die is a very different thing to grapple with. We then want to understand, to have an explanation and to take responsibility. Somehow it always seems like a failure on someone's part, even yours.

The life instinct or force is very strong. It's what makes us fight for survival when being attacked, exhaust every possibility for treatment when terminally ill and protect those who we feel to be under threat.

So for the person who chooses when and how they will die it seems to go against every instinct for self preservation. Failed suicides carry a stigma and most religions have very strong beliefs about suicide.

As a therapist and human being I have an ethical and moral responsibility to try every means possible to help anyone who might want to end their life. And that is something I believe very strongly. If someone is desperate – they feel they have lost everything, they are so depressed that they can't see their way out of their hopelessness it can be that the right kind of help can bring them into a place within themselves where they do not feel so helpless and the present and the future do not seem to be pointless and hopeless.

But then there are other ways to look at this. And that is that we are born with choice. For many people life has been a struggle and they do not wish to continue with this. It may be that they envisage some relief in leaving the struggle behind. Then it is the people who are left behind who have the struggle.

Maybe things could have been better if someone had known, maybe someone could have helped. It is really hard that this is what they chose. But for many successful suicides, the person has thought long and hard about it and planned and fantasized and wished that they had the means, courage or could disconnect from their obligation to stay alive for others, when they really want to go.

There are those suicides that are impulsive – often acted out in rage or anger without a plan and often under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Sometimes these are meant to punish someone by making them guilty for the rest of their lives.

But most people who kill themselves do not mean for the surviving loved ones to feel guilt and responsibility. In fact many people keep themselves alive unwillingly because of just that and at some point rationalize that others can live without them. They just have to go.

But it is hard. Suicide is always more complicated than a natural or accidental death. That is why many people try and disguise their suicide as an accident – to save the family from the realization that they chose to leave them and to relieve the family of guilt.

Then there are the things that make it worse. If there is no note or letter to explain, you are left to wonder for the rest of your life why, was it my fault, why didn't I notice this or that? Afterwards the signs might stand out like neon warnings – they were talking about death, maybe giving away possessions, had a previous attempt, threatened – but at the time they did not seem to add up to give you a clear picture.

It is difficult to take this, swallow, absorb and digest it but I am asking you to allow for one possibility and that is that this person did not want you to interfere with their life plan – even if that plan was to die.

Cheryl Sol
Clinical Psychologist
M.A. (Clin. Psych.)

Many people attempt suicide. Many who do not succeed are relieved later that they didn't die if things turn out better for them. However, those people who do want to die will try again.

If someone you love has killed themselves it is very hard to work through and recover from. There may be times when you want to join them. You may become depressed and suicidal yourself. Or you may find yourself with shifting and chaotic emotions – filled with sadness, grief and loneliness one moment and rage and anger at this person the next. That is ok – healing is possible, but it takes a lot of time.

Connect with others who have been through this, work with it and watch out for the children.

However healing becomes blocked if you need to punish yourself for the rest of your life. Often it feels bad to eventually do things that bring you peace or happiness. But you are in the world of the living. This was YOUR choice. Respect that your loved chose differently. Have a place of remembrance, photos or some way of honouring their life. Keep them in your heart and memories. But also let them rest in peace by living the life you have been given.