

Transcript Season 3 Episode 2: Suicide Grief: Coping with the Loss

In today's podcast, we will be discussing suicide. If you or someone you know is in need of help, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-8255 or text HOME to 741741 or go to www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org.

When someone you love has ended their own life, your life is forever changed. A survivor of suicide experiences, a unique set of feelings beyond the shock and grief comes the questions of Why? Could I have stopped them? And how do I move forward?

Often, friends and family mean well, but do not know how to provide support. Whether you have lost a loved one to suicide and are trying to pick up the pieces of your life or are the friend or loved one of someone who has lost someone to suicide, you are not alone. Keep listening as we hope to share some insight on this subject.

Podcast Opener:

(Music playing.) Tackle your “Adulthood” To Do list with the Grown Up U: Facts for Success podcast. Keep listening as we celebrate Season 3 with podcasts to help steer you in the right direction by providing useful advice for living an independent and satisfying life as a young adult. *(Music ends.)*

Podcast Script:

Alison Crane: Hi. Thank you for joining us today. I am Alison Crane, Family and Consumer Sciences Agent for the Garland County Extension Service in Arkansas.

And I want to welcome our guest to this episode, Julie Fant.

Julie is a licensed certified social worker and has been for 27 years, and she is the owner of Divine Therapy in Bryant, Arkansas.

Julie, thank you for joining us.

Julie Fant: Well, thanks for inviting me. I'm really excited to do this.

Alison Crane: Well, Julie, we really appreciate you and before we continue on our topic in our discussion, let me remind everyone that we will be discussing suicide. So, if you or someone you know is in need of help, please call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-272-8255 or text HOME to 741741.

Now we describe the loved one of someone who has committed suicide as a survivor of suicide, because that description seems to more accurately reflect the difficulties people who have lost a loved one to suicide face. When you're facing a conventional death of a friend or a family member, like someone dying from old age or after being ill, or even from an accident or murder, even, it brings grief. But the grief caused by suicide is different.

Julie, what makes suicide different?

Julie Fant: Suicide is so different from the conventional grief. With conventional grief, like you said, it's something that we expected. Or even if it was unexpected, there's the typical feelings of the loss and the sadness.

But with suicide, it's different because you're encountered with a lot of guilt. And people look and begin to want to take responsibility for what happened. And they invariably feel like they might have or could have prevented it somehow. And there's also stigma. People are afraid that others are blaming them. And there's anger at the person that committed suicide because they had they had choice in it.

And so, with a typical grief situation, you know, that the person would be here if they could. But when it suicide, they decided to end their life. They decided not to be here. And there's a lot of disconnection that happens because of that. It's not easy for the suicide survivor.

Alison Crane: Well, coping with a loved one's suicide is described as an emotional rollercoaster, and the challenge is to confront those feelings that are brought out. The American Psychiatric Association ranks suicide as trauma that is on a catastrophic level.

Julie Fant: It is a trauma. Losing a person to death is a trauma to you if there's someone that's close to you and meaningful to you. But when it's suicide, that just deepens the feelings of trauma. With trauma, there's lots of feelings of helplessness, feeling overwhelmed. So, yeah, it's a trauma.

Alison Crane: So, what are the more the emotions that someone might face?

Julie Fant: They're going to face what people typically face with a loss, the deep feelings of grief and loss and sadness. But with suicide, it's different because people question, "Could I have stopped it? Why would they do this? What was happening in their mind and in their life that

would cause them to do this?" And, "am I the one to blame or is maybe someone else the one to blame?"

And there's a lot of fear here that people are going to judge here, that people are going to think you should have something.

And there's a lot of aloneness. People often don't know how to respond to grief, and they certainly don't know how to respond to suicide.

Alison Crane: I've noticed that it does make someone feel isolated.

Julie Fant: It does. It's a huge isolator. Support groups are really good if you can find people who have gone through the same thing.

And a lot of times people feel bad about feeling good because when they do see something or they do see something they enjoy, and they have a good time some evening or they laugh. You know, their sense of humor comes out and then they think, I shouldn't. I shouldn't be happy. Is it okay that I'm happy because it feels like it's minimizing your loved one that you lost.

And a lot of people struggle with that in grief, whether there is a suicide grief or a conventional grief, as we're calling it, the unsureness about whether or not it's okay to feel happy.

And it is. But we often stop ourselves because we don't want to. We don't want to dishonor our loved one that we've lost.

Alison Crane: I can see how that would definitely play a part.

So, grief under more conventional circumstances really has many of those same emotions, like you said. But when suicide is involved, it is like a roller coaster that's out of control. Maybe the ups and downs will seem steeper.

Or I know that often when you just start to have a more normal day, something can trigger a whole new wave of emotions. And sometimes then that can cause you to feel like you're starting all over again with your grieving.

Well, some of those feelings could be triggered by uncomfortable or even well-intentioned questions from outsiders. So, what is a tool that can help someone who is maybe dreading having to talk about it?

Julie Fant: One of the easiest things you can do when you're planning for encountering a situation like that, a social situation, is to write yourself a script of what you would say when

people say certain things. You might simply say, "I don't really want to talk about this right now," or "I'm sure we can find something else to discuss."

And people are going to ask how they died, and you don't have to have reservations. It's okay to say they took their own life. They felt like hurting themselves or they committed suicide, whichever way you want to respond to it.

But if you plan ahead for answering some of the things that people may ask you, things people may say to you may be uncomfortable. They may be sticking their foot in their mouth or saying the wrong thing, or they might even be saying the right thing. People don't know what to say to grief and they don't know how to respond, and they often try to fix it. But if you have something in your back pocket, that's a script that you can use to respond to them when they're speaking with you, then it makes it easier for you when you're in those social situations.

Alison Crane: You're right. I know that giving people permission either to ask the question or giving yourself permission not to answer the questions really can kinda be freeing and it cuts down some of the pressure.

I know I tend to use dialog in my head to kind of think through what I would say to certain questions on sensitive topics. So, it helps me even to avoid putting my foot in my mouth sometimes, at least sometimes.

Julie Fant: Right!

Alison Crane: Again, I know that sometimes people's first initial response when they hear about someone committing suicide is to say, "What? No!" And then there's that initial shock before the sadness actually hits you and you begin to process what happens.

The big question that most everyone asks when they hear about someone killing themselves is why? Everyone wants to know why. Especially for those closest to the person.

But every situation is different. What are some of the reasons why a person might commit suicide?

Julie Fant: Suicide isn't based on one thing. We can look at this as the condition versus the catalyst. The condition is what's going on with the person all over many different areas of their life. But the catalyst might be one event, and that might be an event that the public knows about maybe a breakup or a loss of a job or something serious happening.

It's usually the straw that broke the camel's back. But underneath the real thing about suicide is the condition that they were in. And it's depression that's so severe that the person wants to

get out of this emotional pain and they're wishing that they weren't here, and they have a lot of thoughts rolling through their mind of others will be better off without me, and I can't make it through this, and I can't stand to feel this pain anymore.

And so, there's a lot of depression, a lot of wishing they weren't here, feelings of hopelessness, that it won't get better.

There's emotional pain, there's physical pain. And the whole thing about suicide is that they are trying to end the pain. That's the goal, to end the pain. The agony is so severe that it makes it look like dying is a relief.

And so, they have a different view of the world than the average person does, because they're viewing things in the depression they're experiencing. And so, problems that might seem solvable to us don't seem solvable to them.

The pain is amplified. So, suicide offers the only relief

Alison Crane: Then, based on what you were saying, so many times, people who have attempted suicide, their primary goal wasn't to end life, but to end pain.

But unfortunately, in reality, because that loved one is not actually here to ask anymore, the person may never fully know the why. Therefore, letting go of the whys and accepting what has happened really is a key to healing a wounded heart.

Julie Fant: It is so hard because the why is one of the biggest things and you almost have to come to terms with, I'm never going to have all the answers. I'm never going to know truly what was happening with them and you can try to figure it out.

You can pick all the pieces. You can find all the puzzle pieces, put them together that you are right, but because they're not here, you're not going to truly know what happened.

Examine, reexamine it, look at it as much as you need to, but you may never know.

Alison Crane: Well, looking at that then, and because again, you don't know those whys, let's talk about guilt that survivors may feel.

Julie Fant: Sure. It's like the guilt lives next door to trying to figure it out. We try to figure it out. We go back and we look in time. What is it that I could have done different? How could I have stopped this? How could I have prevented this? And we search and we rack our brains, and we try to figure it out.

And then we think of some things that maybe this would have made a difference. Maybe I could have done this, I could have said this thing, or I could have shown up at this time, or I could have stopped him, or I could have called him then.

And we think of these things that we could have done because we're looking at it in hindsight. We've got a hindsight bias. And when we see those things, we could have done, then we feel guilty that we didn't do them.

And it's like our brain looks back and forth, like two neighborhood kids that are going back and forth between two houses playing all day long on a summer afternoon and our brain goes back and forth between what could I have done different? And I'm feeling guilty because I didn't do that.

And so, guilt sets in. And then we start ruminating on the guilt and feeling like we could have stopped it. And that's huge!

Alison Crane: That is huge.

Julie Fant: That ruminating on the guilt, because we can't stop it and we can't go back in time.

And back then, we were operating on what we knew to be true, on the information we had at that time. The information maybe that they were all right. We thought they were all right, or maybe even if we knew that they were suicidal and we'd seen it coming for a long time, we've been worried about it. We didn't know it was going to happen that day. We didn't know we were going to get that phone call. We didn't know we needed to be there 10 minutes before.

And so, because we didn't know, we operate on what we knew at that time. But when we look at it in hindsight, look at it from today's perspective. We're thinking, I should have shown up 10 minutes early before that happened, before they killed themselves and so, we feel guilty.

Give ourselves permission to not feel guilt, guilt's a false accusation, and it will pound us, to be honest with you. Those thoughts will roll around in your head over and over and over.

And we're not responsible for the death, even though instinctively we feel responsible for it. We feel like we are because we feel like we could have stopped it, but we couldn't.

And so, it's really easy to feel like the fault is us that we should have been able to prevent. We don't like admitting to ourselves that we couldn't. That we're only human, that we didn't know that it was coming, that we didn't know to be there 10 minutes earlier.

So, we tend to blame ourselves. All of us do. Anybody that's close to that person does.

The chances are you'll find that each person, no matter how close they were to the suicidal person or how far they were, that they feel like they had a lion's share of blame on themselves.

If they were the one closest then they feel like I should have known exactly what was going on in their mind and if they're distant, they feel like I should have been closer to them.

Well, everybody can't be all to blame, can they? It's more logical that none of these people were responsible. The simple truth is the only one responsible is the one who did it.

And that's a tough pill to swallow because we feel like it's us. We can change us. We can control us, but we can't control them.

And they were the one who made the choice. They were the one who was responsible. And we feel so much love and empathy towards them that we don't want to put blame on them.

There's a difference between blame and responsibility. Blame is accusatory and judgmental but assigning responsibility is just simply acknowledging the fact that they chose this. That depression was the wound, that this is a disease, and that they, in their depressive state, made a conscious choice, even though their mind was clouded, that they made a conscious choice.

So, the responsibility does lie with them, and so when we acknowledge this fact, that doesn't mean we don't love them. It doesn't mean we're holding them in contempt, it just means that we're looking at it more clearly and accepting it for what it is.

Alison Crane: So, you're talking about blame and responsibility and how coming to grips with that is so vital for the survivor of the suicide.

Another part of the grieving process is dealing with anger, and we can find ourselves angry for so many different reasons.

Julie Fant: Well, anger is actually a normal response to this because we're angry with them for taking their life. We didn't want them to do this. We want to go back and fuss at them and say, "Change it, fix it!" You know, just in...

So don't be surprised a lot of anger wells up inside of you.

Who wouldn't feel angry at a person that ended their life? We want them to stay around us. We want them to be here.

So, if you do feel angry, you don't have to repress it. It's a natural part of your healing process and you won't stay angry at them forever. But this is part of going through it is allowing yourself to feel the anger and it's a very normal thing.

Alison Crane: So, acknowledging that anger rather than hanging on to it even. I know that when you do acknowledge your feelings so many times, that's freeing.

Survivors of suicide, they're dealing with something that is unwanted, maybe unexpected. And it's certainly one of the hardest things to bear. So, acceptance is the key to healing a heart broken by suicide.

But it is more than just acknowledging that it happened. How does that affect someone?

Julie Fant: Well, I've gone through a close family member passing away recently, and I had to deal with the acceptance myself, so I can lend some from a personal view.

There is an adjustment that happens when you lose someone you love that you're close to, that your life has been intertwined with. And so, you have to almost have to step back and look at what am I going to adjust to here? What am I going to do with this big empty hole that they left? What am I going to do with all this time that I have left? What am I going to do with family events? And when the all the firsts come up and in the first year and with all the first anniversaries, how am I going to adjust to these?

How am I going to accept that? And you really have to allow yourself to grieve, have to allow yourself to have time for the sadness and the loss.

It's important to talk to people that are supportive. It's important to rely on your faith, if that's something that you do.

It's important to understand you may not get closure, and it's also important to understand that part of the reality of suicide is, is that this is from a disease, a disease of depression and trying to wrap your mind around that this is what has happened, and it takes a while. It's not an easy thing.

Suicide and murders are the hardest to get over, and they could take three or four years, to be honest with you. And it's okay if it does take that long because there's no timeline. Just give yourself the time. Time to heal. It's not that time that does heal. Things change, but you need that time under your belt to go through that process.

Alison Crane: There's a lot of firsts and experiences that you would normally experience with that person, and now you have to adjust to those holidays or whatever without them.

What are some of the ways that someone could help a survivor not to just survive it but to move forward? What can a friend or family member do for that person?

Julie Fant: Well, one the best things that they can do is just sit there and what us therapists call holding space. Allow their friend, that's the survivor, to feel any and all emotions that they have and to question and to cry and to grieve and allow them to just be really messy. Because grief is so messy and we as humans are messy and grief triggers things from all areas of our life.

And so, when someone can be there and not judge, not blame, not try to fix, not try to tell you how it could be better or thank goodness you've got this going on... that's good or you are really capable of handling this.

But really, if people just hold that space open for the griever to say what they need to say and sit there and listen, it's one of the most important things because there's such a gamut of feelings that people have in grief and so many things are in normal grief that we don't all realize that these are normal grief experiences and encourage the griever to be themselves. It's one of the most powerful things that we can do.

Alison Crane: Well, that's really good advice, and I know that from my experience, whether I'm the griever or have the friend who is grieving, I kind of have experienced it from both ends there.

Julie, thank you so much for joining us today.

Julie Fant: It's been fun. This is fun. Helping people's fun.

Alison Crane: Yes, you're right. It is. That's one of the reasons why we do this podcast in the first place. We want to help people.

Suicide is a very serious subject. And so we wanted to make sure that we addressed it right. But like you said, helping people and making a difference in people's lives really does help. Is there anything else you'd like to share before we close and wrap up?

Julie Fant: So, when someone is moving forward, one of the healthiest things you can do is to allow yourself to experience the emotions of the grief. And they can be overwhelming sometimes. I know in my grief, it got so painful, I wanted to climb out my skin and it can be that way for anybody because it is traumatic when you lose someone you love and it's even more traumatic when it's a suicide.

But allowing yourself to experience the emotions is really how you feel. Because if we don't start to experience the emotions, we tend to sweep them under the rug or shove them in the closet.

We don't feel them and grief is going to come out one way or another. It will come out unhealthy or it's going to come out healthy, we've got to go ahead and deal with it. It'll come out now, will come back to haunt us later.

And if we go ahead and do it now, I think it's healthier because the emotions are all at the surface right now and people are more available now because they know you're going through something. Whereas if you put it off a few years, they may not be as available or as understanding, but go ahead and allow yourself to grieve because if you ignore it, it's going to pop back up and it's not going to be good. So, we allow the emotions.

Another thing to do is to find out, do some research what is normal for grief?

There are several Facebook pages out there for survivors. There's Facebook pages out there for griever. There're some really good ones. There's one about what is normal in grief. Find the support that you need.

Find a good therapist. If you don't have very many people around you to support, you find a good therapist even if you do have people that are around to support you. The therapist has different skills than the average person they've been trained in helping in such a different way.

And you may find that the people you thought were going to be supportive of you were not as able to as you had hoped. But you also find that other people come into your life that surprise you and are able to be there for you. So be open to support from new people that come into your life or from people that you didn't expect of them.

And then be compassionate with yourself. It's so easy to be critical of ourselves. We all do it. But you wouldn't say those critical things to you that you say to yourself, to your friend if they were grieving, make sure you're using the same words that you would say to your closest friend if they were going through this.

Use the same words on yourself and give yourself the same latitude that you would give a friend. Self-compassion- and it's really a game changer in our lives because when we're kind to ourselves, just like we would be someone else, then we're not harming ourselves more.

And it's really tempting to harm ourselves more because there's a lot of self-criticisms that goes around in our head. It's just normal. Even the healthiest of us have self-criticism.

So, understanding, making sure you're using compassion towards yourself.

And then allowing happiness when we lose someone, whether it's suicide or not, when we lose someone, it's really tempting to try to not allow happiness to come in.

And if we're open to that, if we know, okay, it's alright to feel happy, it's alright to laugh about this, it's alright to feel some joy because one of the hard things about grief is you feel like you're not honoring them, you feel like you're not loving them well enough, you're feeling like you're not mourning the way you should. That often happens when you're happy, but you can allow yourself to be happy and same time, and both are okay.

And there'll be times where you've got both going on and allow them to coexist there. Those are some of my favorite techniques.

Alison Crane: Again, that's really good advice and it's practical things that we can do.

You can apply that whether you are the survivor or you are the friend or family member supporting and even knowing what to watch for when you have someone that you love that you're trying to support.

So, I will say that the first time I became aware of suicide, I was about eight or nine years old. And it happened that my honorary grandpa took his life because he had a very serious diagnosis of cancer. My parents at that age helped me to understand what had happened. And they really took time to answer my questions to the best that they could for my age.

And that was a long time ago, but I have not forgotten that even after all these years. Then more recently, my family has had to deal with the suicide death of someone closely associated to our family, and has been a very traumatic experience, especially for the ones who found the victim.

Grief is real and so is the damage that happens when a loved one dies this way. I really want to stress, you know, like you were saying it, there is hope.

Julie Fant: Yes.

Alison Crane: And for any of our listeners, again, if you or someone you know is a survivor of suicide, please do not try to handle it all on your own. Like Julie said, get advice. Talk to a professional, read books or like the Facebook or there's so much information out there.

And joining a support group is, I think, something that has brought a lot of help to so many people, because then you've got someone who gets it.

Julie Fant: Right.

Alison Crane: They're coming from that perspective of they've been there, and they know what's going on. And how. They understand you maybe in a way that someone on the outside as well-meaning and intentioned as they are, they just can't do it

Again, if you or a loved one, feel like you might be experiencing a mental health condition, do consider Mental Health America has a free online screening tool that can help you assess. It's at www.mhanational.org. Or you can just google take a mental health test by MHA.

And also, if you or someone you know is in need of help, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-272-8255.

Also, for more information on related extension programs, be sure to contact your local extension office in your county. (*Music begins.*)

Podcast Closer:

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