

## A Reason to Live

by Leslie A. Gray, LCMHC, RYT

For many years now, September has been dedicated as National Suicide Awareness and Prevention month. As I sit here this morning, I write in honor of this observance, and out of respect for those whose lives have been affected by suicide.

It's a sensitive topic and one that can be very difficult to discuss. Opinions can run strong and with intense emotions behind them. Thoughts, attempts, or a completed suicide impact the individual experiencing it, as well as those around them. For the loved ones left behind, it's natural to experience a range of emotions including shock, anger, guilt, regret, frustration, sadness, depression, helplessness, and more. This is grief.

They may wonder, "What did I miss," or "What should I have done differently?" They may feel guilty for what they did try to do, or what they didn't do that maybe they now believe could have helped... if only they had tried.

Sometimes, the loss of their loved one can bring out a darker side where they remain stuck in the anger, accusing their loved one of being selfish and inconsiderate of those they left behind. Anger is a much safer emotion than the more vulnerable ones such as sadness or guilt. It's also a valid emotion, as are all the others. The sad truth is that when folks reach this point, they often truly believe that their loved ones would be better off without them because they have grown to feel like a burden to everyone around them.

One surprising truth about suicidality is that many folks who reach this point don't really want to die. They just don't want to go on living the way they are. They often feel so hopeless and helpless in their ability to change things that suicide seems like their only option. Add any sort of mind- or mood-altering substance such as alcohol, drugs, or medication, and their executive functioning can be greatly impaired. Even extreme sleep deprivation, chronic pain, and prolonged illness can cause this which gets in the way of good sound reasoning, decision making, emotion regulation, future planning, impulse control, and judgment. In these altered states, they may take an action that they never would have taken when sober and/or able to think clearly.

We don't always know ahead of time that a loved one is feeling this way which can create complex grief for those left behind. In part, this absence of information is due to fear of disclosure. Fear about how others will respond. Maybe fear of being judged or shamed, possibly because they are already judging and shaming themselves for feeling this way. Humans often believe others navigate from the same moral compass and mindset that they do. They may fear being hospitalized or losing their freedom in some way. Of course, it is crucially important to make sure they are safe in the immediacy of the moment. Remove anything they could use to hurt themselves. Stay with them. If they aren't physically in your presence, find out where they are. If they are alone, it may be necessary to call someone in to help support them to ensure their safety. There are hotlines available around the clock. The police can conduct wellness checks by going to them to offer support. A skilled and compassionate healthcare professional, first responder, or others who encounter someone in this state will take the time to determine the level of threat they pose to themselves and can support them in various ways. Hospitalization may be helpful for some folks in some cases, but it's not the only option.

When there is a disclosure, it can be difficult to know how to respond. The tendency might be to try to talk them out of feeling that way, maybe start listing reasons to live, telling them how much they matter to their loved ones, or even how much they would be missed. And while all of this may be true, it may not be helpful in the moments or days following a disclosure... not yet anyway.

Sometimes, just being present with them is enough. Share your genuine feelings such as, "I am so sorry you're feeling this way. I'm here for you." Make physical contact when possible. A hand on the shoulder or taking their hand in yours. Physical contact has powerful effects and can help to release feel-good chemicals upon contact. This can have a calming effect on their nervous system. As they allow the support through your physical presence in the absence of judgment, 'fixing', or guilt-tripping, you may find that they feel calmer, allowing some space for them to consider their own reasons to live.

You might ask them, "I hear that there is a strong part of you that believes death is the only way out. Fair enough. I'm also curious to know if there are any other parts of you that really want to live, or that at least don't want to die." By inviting them to consider that it isn't a unanimous feeling inside of themselves, it may help them to consider the possibility of something other than death. By becoming solution-focused rather than problem-focused, the creative portion of the brain is activated. Because often, that is how suicide is seen through their eyes: the only solution to what ever problem (or problems) they are facing in life. In the brokenness of the moment, by shining a light on an internal desire to live, they may be able to find their way out.

From Leonard Cohen's 'Anthem': "There's a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in." Even if you don't have the answers and can't fix their problems, supporting someone who is struggling to find a reason to live may very well be reason enough for them.

Suicide and Crisis Lifeline: 988

Leslie A. Gray is a Licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselor and operates Gray Matters Counseling & Wellness, PLLC in Laconia NH. Feel free to submit responses or requests for subject content to: [askgraymatters@gmail.com](mailto:askgraymatters@gmail.com).