

- **Parents** face the potential for unique forms of guilt, although it is just as unfounded as the guilt typically experienced by survivors. While parents might forgive themselves for being unable to intervene in the suicidal act, they may blame themselves for some perceived mistake made in raising their child. Parents need to understand that children — even young children — are not entirely of their parents' making. Outside influences from friends, school, the media, and the world at large also shape each child's psyche. Our children are individuals who, by virtue of having the power to commit a violent act, are responsible for that act.
- **Significant others** often suffer additional guilt over a perceived sense of responsibility for their partner's suicide. Families of suicide victims have also been known to direct blame at the surviving partner. Significant others may also feel a greater sense of abandonment and may come to judge their entire relationship in the light of the partner's final act. Guilt continues to resurface if surviving partners move on to new relationships. We must remind ourselves of the root cause of the tragedy—depression, emotional illness, and other factors beyond our control—not our shortcomings as a partner.
- **Siblings** often identify closely with one another, making the suicide of one especially painful for those left behind. It can be a reminder of our own mortality. (Older generations are supposed to die, but not your own.) Siblings may not receive the same level of sympathy or support as parents, children or partners. Parents may overcompensate after the loss of a child by focusing uncomfortably on the surviving sibling (s) — or withdraw from them, seemingly having nothing left to give. It's essential that families pull together with mutual support and by sharing their feelings openly.
- **Suicide “witnesses”** face the additional pain and shock of seeing the incident or discovering the body. Often, that horrible vision of their final physical injury is haunting. Try your best to supplant that image. A photo, a memory, or even funeral viewing may help to replace it with one that more truly reflects your loved one.
- **The public suicide** leaves loved ones with added complications. There may be unwelcome media attention and a greater level of involvement by the authorities.
- **Accused...**sometimes, survivors face more than the judgment of others — they face formal accusations of responsibility, either from fellow survivors or from the authorities. Bear in mind that police are compelled to treat any apparent suicide as a homicide until the facts are ascertained.

Sources: “A Handbook for Survivors of Suicide” by Jeffrey Jackson, 2003; Adina Wroblewski, Suicide: Why? (1995)

Remember, grieving can produce upsetting responses such as disturbed sleep, diminished appetite, difficulty concentrating, and intrusive thoughts of the deceased. These responses will likely subside with time. However, if reactions are especially long lasting or troubling, you may need to turn to a professional for assistance.

### Benefits of Counseling

Some of the benefits of seeking counseling are:

- Reviewing the incident and processing the event can help clarify what actually occurred and that the term suicide does apply.
- Legal and judicial decisions can be discussed and utilized as part of the promotion of healing and resolution.
- The disruption due to trauma can make daily functioning difficult. Counseling can help develop coping skills and strategies, allowing for the continuance of school, work or relationships.
- Establishment of a support network helps to decrease the negative physical, psychological and emotional effects that often result from the traumatic experience.

Survivors can utilize the experience as an opportunity to build and practice assertiveness, confidence, and protective instinct skills.

### Who can help?

The Mesa Police Department Victim Services Unit can assist with information and referrals to appropriate helping professionals or organizations according to your specific needs.

### Resources

**Impact Suicide Prevention Center**  
1232 E. Broadway Rd., Ste. 120, Tempe, AZ 85282  
**Phone:** (480) 784-1514

**Maricopa County Crisis Hotline:** (480) 784-1500

**State Crisis Hotline:** (866) 205-5229

**Hotlines de suicido en Espanol:** (866) 205-5229

# Victim Services Unit

## Survivors of Suicide



Mesa Police Department  
Victim Services Unit  
130 N Robson  
Mesa, AZ 85201  
(480) 644-4075

## This brochure provides information on dealing with the death of your loved one.

What you are enduring is one of the most horrific ordeals a person may experience. In the weeks and months ahead you may feel as though you are riding an emotional roller coaster.

A desire to know how long the event will affect you is very common. The truth is that you will never “get over” it, but you can get through it. Accepting that life as you have known it, is forever changed and finding a way to put your loss in its proper perspective will be key in finding your peace.

### Common Responses

Unlike “conventional” death, along with grief, many survivors experience:

- **Guilt**...invariably a suicide survivor may feel that they might have, could have or should have done something to prevent the suicide.
- **Stigma**...while mourners usually receive sympathy and compassion, the suicide survivor may encounter blame, judgment or exclusion.
- **Anger**...feelings of anger toward the lost loved one, sometimes with surprising intensity.
- **Disconnection**...losing a loved one to disease or an accident allows for happy memories to be retained. In instances of suicide, survivors may emotionally disconnect due to a state of conflict with the loved one.

### Why?

Although the answer to this question will never be known with certainty, it may help to remember that in most cases, the primary goal of a suicide is not to end life, but to end pain.

- **“Why did they do this?”**...This question will occupy much of your thoughts for some time. And if you think you know the answer, you should think again. Because chances are, you’re only seeing part of the picture.
- **“Is suicide really a choice?”**...Choice implies that a suicidal person can reasonably look at alternatives and

select among them. If they could rationally choose, it would not be suicide. Suicide happens when no other choices are seen.

Most suicides are occasioned by a “catalyst” event: the breakup of a relationship, losing a job, or learning of bad news. Misconceptions arise when we mistake one of these isolated events for the cause of the suicide. Instead, it is more likely just the “straw that broke the camel’s back.” Scratch the surface and you will likely find years of emotional distress that comprise the suicide victim’s “condition.”

Suicide is rarely a sudden occurrence. It is far more often the result of a debilitating breakdown of an individual’s emotional health.

### What’s Ahead?

Some of the more difficult circumstances you might experience include...

- Having a few consecutive days where you feel better and then a sudden return of sadness is natural. Ups and downs in coping with your loss will get easier with time.
- An expected reminder (a song, photo, scent, etc.) could bring on sudden sadness or a sensation of reliving the experience of the suicide. If this happens, stay calm and try to remove yourself from the reminder and focus on positive thoughts.
- Try to prepare for the honest truth that some friends and relatives may not offer the support you need. Try to lean on the people who are ready, willing, able and available to help you. Try to forgive those who cannot.
- People may make insensitive remarks. Suicide is generally misunderstood and people will feel inept at offering you comfort. Others may seem determined to share their own self-important opinions, thoughts or imply that you should feel guilt. You have every right to excuse yourself, simply say, “I’d rather not talk about it right now.”
- It’s common to project our own feelings of guilt onto others by assuming that they are judging us harshly in their minds. Try to give them the benefit of the doubt, you aren’t a mind reader.
- Unfortunately, while your closest supporters may be willing to listen and share with you for a few weeks or

months, there’s likely to come a time when their thoughts move on from the suicide while yours are still racing. This is one of the greatest reasons why support groups are so valuable. Fellow survivors understand where you are at and empathize with your feelings.

- Feeling bad about feeling good is also common. It is okay to enjoy positive emotions and pleasures. You are entitled to them, just as anyone else is.
- Holiday, birthday, and the anniversary of the suicide are often difficult. Generally, the first year, with all its “first” will be the toughest, but these events may always be difficult times for you. The anticipation of these days is usually far worse than the day itself.
- New milestones—weddings, a birth, accomplishments—may bring feelings of guilt. These events remind us that our lives are moving forward, without our lost loved one. Feelings of betrayal, as if we are leaving them behind, may rise and here it is especially important to remember that we have chosen to live.
- Entertaining thoughts of our own suicide is a high risk for those who come from a family in which suicide has been attempted. This may be due to the fact that our loved one’s death has made the very idea of suicide far more real in our lives. You must balance your fear of this with the knowledge that suicide is most often preceded by a history of clinical depression. If you share this trait with our loved one, then you may have a reason to seek professional help. You now know the pain and destruction that suicide causes in the lives of others.

Time, support, and help from others will help. It might take years to restore your emotional well-being, but be assured, it will get easier.

### Special Circumstances

- **Explaining suicide to children** should, above all, be truthful. Depending on their age, children can be taught that the person you’ve lost had an “illness inside their brain, and it made them so sad that they didn’t want to live anymore.” A careful balance must be struck between not portraying the suicide victim as a bad person by making it clear that their choice was bad, so as to clearly teach the child that suicide is not an acceptable course of action.