



The Association of
Catholic Mental
Health Ministers



WHEN A _____

Loved One Dies

_____ BY SUICIDE

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INTRODUCTION

After a suicide we begin a long and tiring journey. Many others have been on this journey before us, and sadly, many more will be on this journey after us. It is best to go with others, such as family, and on occasion to be open to strangers while we are on the journey. Don't be ashamed that you are on this journey. Do not be ashamed of your loved one who died by suicide. Talk about your grief, and talk about your loved one who died as you are on the way of healing.

~ Deacon Ed Shoener
When A Loved One Dies By Suicide



WHO IS THIS RESOURCE FOR?

When A Loved One Dies By Suicide is a resource lovingly created by and for those who are grieving a suicide loss. In this series of eight films, you will hear from fellow Catholics—both clergy/religious and laity—as they share stories of their loved ones, their journey with grief, and the comfort and hope they have found in the Church. If you have experienced suicide loss, this resource will encourage you to reflect on how our Catholic faith can facilitate spiritual healing, offer comfort in the midst of ongoing grief, and inspire both hope and service.

While this resource is intended primarily for those who have lost loved ones to suicide, a broader audience may find it beneficial. Suicide is one of the leading causes of death in the world, and there are many people in our communities who have been impacted by suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and suicide loss. Listening to stories of lived experience and learning about Church teaching on suicide can help us cultivate greater depths of compassion and prepare us to encounter those who are suffering with Christ's love and mercy. In the spirit of Christ's call to accompaniment, we can all seek to offer prayerful support to our brothers and sisters who have experienced the trauma of suicide loss, walking with them through grief and interceding for their loved ones.



HOW IS THIS RESOURCE MEANT TO BE USED?

When A Loved One Dies By Suicide was first published by Ave Maria Press in 2020. The chapters include firsthand stories of suicide loss, perspectives from a clinical psychologist at the Catholic University of America, and an introduction to Church teaching on suicide. Now, the content of this book is captured in eight short films, ideal for use in a grief support group or as a resource for individuals impacted by suicide loss. Each film is accompanied by a brief reflection guide that outlines key teaching points, offers reflection and discussion questions, and includes four prayers—one directed to each person of the Blessed Trinity, and one directed to the Blessed Mother.

The following are suggested guidelines for incorporating the films and reflection guides into a grief support group for suicide survivors. (For more detailed information on facilitation, as well as information, support, and resources regarding grief support groups, please contact [The Association of Catholic Mental Health Ministers](#).)

- The book chapters can be read individually, prior to group meetings.
- The films can be viewed during group meetings.
- The reflection guides can be read and discussed after the films have been viewed.
- The prayers can be prayed at the conclusion of each meeting.



PRAYERS FOR THE JOURNEY

When your loved one dies by suicide, you begin a journey. The road is long and tiring, and you are weighed down by grief. But you are not alone. The Church understands your grief. The Church weeps with you and prays with you. And Christ draws close to you, reminding you that he is present with you and with your loved one, in life and in death. May the stories of those who have walked this road before you bring consolation, and may the prayers of the Church be a source of comfort on the way.

God the Father, who created your loved one who died by suicide, understands all things, even suicide, and holds you in his tender mercy.

Our Lord Jesus Christ, who during his earthly life experienced suffering and profound pain, understands all that you and your loved one have experienced. Christ remains with you always.

The Holy Spirit works in and through the Church to guide and console you.

Mother Mary understands family life, experienced the death of her Son, and will lead you to his everlasting love.



CONTENT AND SAFETY NOTES

The stigma that surrounds suicide loss can take many different forms, and may include the belief that people who have lost a loved one to suicide are uniquely vulnerable to mental health challenges or experiences of acute distress. The truth is that everyone experiences suicide loss and grief differently, and we can only offer helpful support by setting our assumptions aside and listening well. The following content and safety notes are meant to address a wide audience with diverse lived experience, and not every note will apply to every person.

If you are experiencing suicidal ideation, or if you are concerned for the safety of someone you know, it is important to seek help immediately:

- 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline is a national network of local crisis centers located in the US, providing free and confidential support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. To access their mental health crisis services, simply dial 988. You can also find them online at [988lifeline.org](https://www.988lifeline.org).
- If you are looking for local mental health services or information in another location or language, we encourage you to search online or reach out to your local churches and health care providers.

The films included in this resource are not graphic. We have chosen not to include any details around the means of death in order to adhere to best practices when it comes to reporting on suicide in the [media](#). However, some people may find it helpful to share how their loved ones died in the context of a grief support group as a means of breaking the silence and shame that can surround the experience of suicide loss.

Given the sensitive nature of the content, we recommend observing the following viewing guidelines:

- If at all possible, do not watch the films alone. They are best viewed with family members, friends, or in the context of a grief support group meeting. If you do choose to watch on your own, we recommend that you have a plan in place to care for yourself, and that you check in with another person after viewing.
- We do not recommend watching more than one film at a time. The films may bring up sensitive or distressing memories and emotions, and it is important to give yourself time to process and rest. It might be helpful to watch the first film and then determine the pace at which you want to proceed.



- Think about how you want to care for your mental, emotional, and physical health during and after viewing. (If you want to learn more about self-care and self-care practices, we recommend reading Session 7 in *The Sanctuary Course for Catholics*.)
- If difficult or painful emotions arise, you may want to place yourself in the presence of Christ by engaging in a familiar form of prayer or other spiritual practice. The following prayer may be helpful if you are processing a suicide loss:

Crucified Savior,
you know all things, and I do not.
Help me accept the reality that I may never fully understand why
my loved one died by suicide.

You suffered on the cross, and cried out,
“My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?”
My loved one must have experienced such intense psychological pain.
Remove his/her suffering and bring him/her eternal peace.

I know that all things work for the good of those who love you,
and that we are called according to your purpose.

Help me to remember what my loved one loved
and bring that love into the world.
Help me take his/her suffering
and transform it into loving service offered to those who suffer.

Guide me to find ways to honor my loved one’s memory and to
live gratefully, as he/she would have hoped.

Give me hope and confidence in your loving mercy.
Help me to survive the trauma of this suicide
and be healed.¹

1. Used by permission of the author, Deacon Ed Shoener.



- If you are experiencing acute emotional distress or anxiety, container and grounding exercises can help regulate your emotions and place boundaries around difficult stories or memories. The following text can be used or adapted as a container exercise:

Imagine a container that is strong and sturdy enough to hold any heaviness or burden you are feeling in this moment. (Pause.) What size is your container? What shape is it? What color is it? You might imagine a mason jar, a gift box, a suitcase, a vault, or any other container that comes to mind. (Pause.) Imagine that you are placing any distressing thoughts or feelings or burdens into the container. Take your time. (Pause.) When you are ready, imagine closing the container tightly. Lock it if you would like. Imagine placing your container into God's hands and leaving it there for now.

Deep breathing is a helpful grounding practice: slowly inhale for four seconds, pause for four seconds, and then exhale for four seconds.

Another grounding exercise invites you to notice your environment, helping you to focus on the present and creating a sense of distance from distressing thoughts. Simply identify five things you can see, four things you can hear, three things you can touch, two things you can smell, and one thing you can taste.

- Neither Sanctuary Mental Health Ministries nor The Association of Catholic Mental Health Ministers provides medical or therapeutic advice. If you are noticing panic attacks, the inability to sleep or eat, a sense of uncontrollable or overwhelming emotions, or behaviors which are problematic or self-harming, please consult a doctor or qualified health care professional.

If you are looking for additional Catholic resources on suicide, we recommend the following:

- The Association of Catholic Mental Health Ministers: catholicmhm.org
- *Responding to Suicide: A Pastoral Handbook for Catholic Leaders*, edited by Ed Shoener and John P. Dolan



The websites and books listed below also contain helpful information on suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention²:

- The American Association of Suicidology: suicidology.org
- The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention: afsp.org
- The Suicide Prevention Resource Center: sprc.org
- CAMS is a suicide-focused treatment framework developed at The Catholic University of America. To learn more, visit their website: cams-care.com
- LivingWorks Faith offers suicide prevention training for religious leaders. To learn more, visit their website: livingworks.net/faith
- *Preventing Suicide: A Handbook for Pastors, Chaplains and Pastoral Counselors*, Karen Mason
- *The Suicide Funeral (or Memorial Service): Honoring their Memory, Comforting their Survivors*, edited by Melinda Moore and Daniel A. Roberts
- *After the Suicide: Wisdom on the Path to Posttraumatic Growth*, Melinda Moore (in press)

Additional Content Note: The second film references substance use and paranoid schizophrenia. Schizophrenia is a highly stigmatized, often misunderstood diagnosis. Although popular media tends to portray the experience of hearing voices in an overwhelmingly negative light, research reveals that there is actually great diversity in voice-hearing. Not all voices are “terrible” or harmful, and hearing voices is not always a sign of mental illness. It is important that we take the time to listen to an individual’s story in order to understand their lived experience.

2. *Postvention* refers to a broad range of activities designed to reduce risk and facilitate healing after a suicide death.



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**A MESSAGE FOR SIBLING
SURVIVORS OF SUICIDE
LOSS: LEARN TO SHARE
YOUR STORY**

**BISHOP JOHN DOLAN
DIOCESE OF SAN DIEGO, CA**

In this film, Bishop Dolan shares his story of losing two siblings and a brother-in-law to suicide. The devastation of these losses, compounded by the stigma and shame that so often surround suicide, led him to bury his pain for many years. But when he accepted help and began to talk about his lived experience, he rediscovered his identity in Christ and the possibility of joy.

When a loved one dies by suicide, the impulse to ignore or run from our emotions can be strong. Some of us may also feel pressure to step into the role of savior for the sake of our families or communities. Although it may take time to face the pain and find the words, Bishop Dolan encourages us to tell our stories. As we do so, we can be assured that Christ will meet us, journeying with us in our grief and calling us back to our true selves.

Bishop Dolan addresses:

- Personal feelings of devastation
- Burying the pain
- Turning away from help and compounding the pain
- Finding help for his wounds
- Finding peace in Christ

If it is helpful and healthy for you, think about your own experience of loss and the ways it has impacted your emotions, your relationships, and your sense of identity. It may serve you to reflect on the following:

- Bishop Dolan avoided his grief at first, before eventually allowing himself to feel and articulate it. How have you responded to your grief?
- Grief affects everyone differently. In what ways has grief affected you?
- Everyone has a unique story of suicide loss. Sharing these stories can lead to healing and hope. If you have shared your story, what has that experience been like? What might prevent you from sharing your story?
- Help can come in many forms. It may come in the form of a professional counselor, a bereavement group, a spiritual director or support group, or caring and attentive family and friends. How do you feel about accepting help as you journey through the grief of suicide loss?



LET US PRAY:

Heavenly Father, a psalmist said, “You know all my thoughts” (Psalm 139:2, paraphrased). Should I reach out to a counselor or other mental health professional for support? Amen.

Lord Jesus, you helped people understand God by telling stories. Give me courage to share my story with those who can help me in this journey of grief and with those whom I can help by sharing it. Amen.

Holy Spirit, grant the leaders of our Church the wisdom, compassion, and courage to befriend and walk alongside those of us who are grieving the suicide of a loved one. Amen.

Mother Mary, you know how important family is during times of stress. Guide our family to support each other during this time of deep sorrow and pain. Amen.



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**A GRIEF REVEALED
AND REDEEMED: THE
SUICIDE OF MY SISTER,
MARY ANNE POPE**

**MONSIGNOR CHARLES POPE
DIOCESE OF WASHINGTON, DC**

In this film, Monsignor Pope shares the story of losing his sister to suicide. He recalls the profound revelation of her hidden pain, and reflects on the way that her death shaped him as a young priest. In the midst of suffering and loss, we can receive the immense grace of being held by Christ. Jesus knows our sorrows and struggles, and our pain is never hidden from him.

Monsignor Pope shares this beautiful text from Revelation:

“He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.”
(Revelation 21:4-5, NRSVCE)

As we remember our loved ones who died in the Lord while carrying great grief, our hope lies in the fulfillment of this text. Monsignor Pope invites us to enter into hope as we pray for our loved ones, trusting that their tears will be wiped away, their grief will be redeemed, and that they will experience the joy of all things being made new.

Monsignor Pope addresses:

- The reality that mental illness affects the whole family
- Understanding Mary Anne’s pain at last
- The rippling effects of death by suicide
- The comforting knowledge that Jesus understands suicide, and Mary Anne can see the glory of God

If it is helpful and healthy for you, think about your loved one’s experience of grief, as well as your own experience of grief. It may serve you to reflect on the following:

- There are very few easy answers when it comes to questions about mental health challenges and suicide. Are there places where you feel you have grown in your understanding of your loved one? Are there places where you still have unanswered questions?
- Take a moment to meditate on the truth that Christ loves and understands people living with mental health challenges who die by suicide. Might this truth be a source of consolation?
- The death of a loved one by suicide is not something you “get over,” but it can be integrated into your life over time. What do you think integration might look like in your life?
- Christ is present to bear our burdens. Do you find comfort or consolation in giving your grief to Christ? Are there particular spiritual practices that help you to do so?



LET US PRAY:

God our Father, I know the pain that led my loved one to suicide will pass away because you make all things new. Wipe every tear from my eyes and from the eyes of all who love her/him. Amen.

Lord Jesus, like those who live with mental illnesses, you were a man of suffering, familiar with pain and held in low esteem (Isaiah 53:3, paraphrased). Help me to see the dignity of those close to me who suffer. Amen.

Holy Spirit, help all members of our Church better understand psychological disorder, mental illnesses, and suicide. Fill our hearts with compassion and courage to act. Amen.

Mother Mary, you said, “God lifts up the lowly,” when the angel came to you, announcing the coming of Jesus. I am suffering deeply and am as low as I have ever been. Carry me to your Son who will lift me up. Amen.



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THE SUICIDE DEATH OF MY DAUGHTER, KATIE

DEACON ED SHOENER
DIOCESE OF SCRANTON, PA

Deacon Shoener shares the story of losing his daughter to suicide. In the aftermath of Katie's tragic death, the obituary written by Deacon Shoener became a source of hope and comfort to many. It reminded readers that people cannot be defined by mental health challenges, and affirmed the truth that God is with us in the midst of our struggles. Christ's love and compassion know no bounds, and he extends mercy to those who die by suicide.

Although the grief of suicide loss remains, it is possible to move towards healing and redemption. We can bring love into the world by sharing the hopes, dreams, passions, and joys of our loved ones with others. We can honor the memory of our loved ones by extending compassion and empathy to individuals facing similar challenges. And we can allow pain and grief to open our eyes to new opportunities for loving service.

Deacon Shoener addresses:

- Understanding mental health challenges
- Experiencing God's grace
- Clinging to Christ, who was broken for us
- Being changed forever
- Finding our loved ones among the living

If it is helpful and healthy for you, think about your loved one's life. What did they love? How would they want to be remembered? It may serve you to reflect on the following:

- Deacon Shoener reminds us that mental health challenges are not the result of character flaws or moral failings. How can you reflect this important truth as you share the story of your loved one?
- Deacon Shoener also exhorts us to not define individuals by their challenges or illnesses. Pause and contemplate our holy calling to see all people as God sees them—beautiful and beloved creations who bear his image.
- The stigma that surrounds mental health challenges can be as great a source of suffering as the symptoms themselves. Are there ways that you can help to dismantle stigma within your community?
- The love between spouses and within families can be a source of comfort, courage, and grace when a child dies by suicide. You may want to pause and meditate on the ways in which the Holy Spirit is present within your marriage or your broader family circle.
- The pain and grief that accompany suicide loss cannot be eliminated. But by the grace of God, pain and grief can lead to new expressions of ministry and loving service. (Deacon Shoener describe this progression as a transformation.) If you feel so led, ask God to open your heart to the possibility of transformation.



LET US PRAY:

God our Father, I know that all things work for the good of those who love you, and that we are called according to your purpose. Help me to transform my suffering to good and to your holy purpose. Amen.

Lord Jesus, during your earthly life illnesses such as leprosy and blindness were thought to be signs of moral failure. Help people today understand that mental illness is an illness, not a moral failure or character flaw. Amen.

Holy Spirit, help me to remember what my loved one loved and to bring that love into the Church and the world. Help me take her/his suffering and transform it into loving service for those who still suffer. Amen.

Mother Mary, be with couples who are struggling because of the tremendous strain and sorrow that suicide has placed on their marriages. Help them to bear each other's burdens and keep holy their covenant of love. Amen.



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PRAYING AFTER SUICIDE LOSS

**LETICIA ADAMS
CATHOLIC WRITER AND SPEAKER
AUSTIN, TX**

In this film, Leticia Adams shares the story of losing her son to suicide. When Anthony died, her relationship with God and with her Catholic faith changed forever. She cursed God, she cried to God, she questioned God—and God met her in that place, revealing the truth that he has walked beside her the whole time, and that he loves Anthony even more than she does.

But this revelation didn't occur overnight. More than two years passed before she began to experience hope and peace. While the journey towards healing is long and not always perfect, Leticia draws comfort and strength from God's love for her and her son. Through prayer she was able to find light in the midst of darkness. Her faith has carried her to this point, and it continues to carry her.

Leticia Adams addresses:

- What she thought it meant to be a “good” Catholic
- The Church praying for her son's soul
- Cussing out and questioning God
- Slowly healing and returning to hope
- Letting God into her suffering

If it is helpful and healthy for you, think about your experience of faith in the midst of suicide loss and grief. It may serve you to reflect on the following:

- “Why did this happen? Is it my fault?” These are common questions we can face when we lose a loved one to suicide. Leticia's story reminds us that there are no simple answers, and that we should extend compassion to ourselves. If it is encouraging, you might want to reflect on the truth that no family or faith community is immune to suicide.
- The prayers of her Church community were a significant source of consolation for Leticia. Where have you found consolation?
- Ongoing prayers and rituals can play an important role in helping families grieve.
- Suicide and the death of a child can change our relationship with God. Are there ways in which your relationship with God has changed?
- Leticia shares that she was able to find healing and live in hope after her son's suicide. How might her story encourage you on your journey?



LET US PRAY:

God our Father, I am often angry and I cry with the psalmist, “Why do you forget me? Why must I go about mourning?” (Psalm 42:9, paraphrased). I give my anger to you as the only prayer I can offer. Amen.

Lord Jesus, you minister to us through your priests. Help them be a healing presence in my life and in the lives of all who are grieving the suicide of a loved one. Amen.

Holy Spirit, help me see your presence in the Church, in my parish community, and in all those who have sought to console me. Amen.

Mother Mary, you accepted the death of your Son. Show me how to accept this suicide and be healed. Amen.



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**WHAT LEADS A
PERSON TO SUICIDE?**

**DAVID A. JOBES, PHD
THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF AMERICA
WASHINGTON, DC**

In this film, clinical psychologist and suicidologist David Jobes shares what he has learned after nearly forty years spent researching suicide. Suicide is a global public health challenge. People of every nationality, culture, and faith tradition experience the tragedy and devastation of suicide loss. In the United States, suicide rates have varied over the decades. Although there was a decline in the nineties, the number of deaths by suicide has risen to historically high averages in recent years. While many people speculate about the reasons behind this increase, the evidence remains inconclusive and no one really knows why suicide rates have risen.

When it comes to understanding why people contemplate suicide or decide to take their own lives, it is important to recognize the unique psychological pain they are experiencing. This pain—known as *psychache*—is often so persistent and intense that it becomes unbearable, leading individuals to determine that death is the only way to end their suffering. Suicidologists seek to better understand psychache so that we can improve the treatments and resources that are available to people in distress.

David Jobes addresses:

- The nature of psychological pain
- The limits of current assessment and treatment methods
- Accepting our own limitations and living in a way that honors our loved ones
- Finding God’s grace and healing

Feelings of regret and the impulse to blame ourselves for our loved one’s death can be strong. If it is helpful and healthy for you, contemplate the following statements and consider whether these truths might be a source of comfort to you:

- No one really knows why suicide rates have risen, and anyone who claims to know is merely speculating. Much about suicide remains a mystery.
- We all have different thresholds for enduring psychological pain, and these thresholds play an important role in determining suicide risk.
- Despite hard-earned progress, far too many lives are still touched by the tragedy of suicide. We can do a lot, but that does not guarantee suicides will not occur.
- No family, faith community, or demographic is immune to the impact of suicide.



LET US PRAY:

God our Father, you know all things, and I do not. Help me to accept the reality that I may never fully understand why my loved one died by suicide. Amen.

Lord Jesus, you suffered intensely on the cross and cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46, NRSVCE). My loved one must have had such intense, persistent psychological pain. Remove his/her suffering and bring him/her eternal peace. Amen.

Holy Spirit, you are the source of all wisdom. Give wisdom and strength to medical professionals who treat those with a mental illness or who are suicidal. Amen.

Mother Mary, you always honor the memory of your Son. Guide me to find ways to honor my loved one’s memory and to live gratefully and as he/she would have hoped. Amen.



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**WHAT THE CATHOLIC
CHURCH TEACHES
ABOUT SUICIDE**

BISHOP JOHN DOLAN AND DEACON ED SHOENER

In this film, Bishop John Dolan and Deacon Ed Shoener share about the Catholic Church's teaching concerning suicide. Although the Church provides sanctuary for those experiencing loss, it cannot make pain, grief, and suffering go away. Bishop Dolan and Deacon Shoener offer reassurance that, even in the midst of deep sorrow, the Holy Spirit can pour the healing balm of Christ's love upon our wounds. Their assurance is rooted in Church teaching and personal experience.

When we are faced with the suicide of a loved one, compassion and support are needed most. Bishop Dolan and Deacon Shoener remind us that there is no shame in speaking honestly about our profound suffering and loss. While each journey towards healing is unique, many find that the slow and painful path is made more bearable by those who walk alongside in accompaniment. Within the Church family, we can both console and be consoled through the gifts of unconditional friendship and sensitive pastoral care. There is space in the Church to remember, grieve, and hold in prayer a loved one who has died by suicide.

Bishop Dolan and Deacon Shoener address:

- A review of the four last things
- Praying for all souls
- Compassionate and pastoral responses to suicide
- Christ's mercy and judgment
- Church teaching on suicide

If it is helpful and healthy for you, think about your own experience and the ways in which Church teaching offers comfort to you. It may serve you to reflect on the following:

- Consider how Christ's mercy is central to the Church's teachings. How is the promise of the resurrection consolation?
- Contemplate Christ's love and mercy as an act of purification, both before and after death. Remember your loved one and others who have died in prayer. The Catholic Church's teaching on purgatory, when rightly understood through the lens of grace, can provide great hope. In his love and mercy, God seeks to unite all souls to himself, including your loved one who has died by suicide.
- Pope Francis reminds the Church that for those who have died by suicide, "To the very end, to the very end, there is the mercy of God." Envision the mercy of God enveloping your loved one.
- Bishop Dolan and Deacon Shoener address concerns regarding the eternal salvation of those souls who have died by suicide. Do you, or can you, find solace in praying for those who have taken their own lives?



LET US PRAY:

God our Father, you did not create my loved one to die by suicide. You created her/him to live with you for all eternity. Help me not despair of eternal salvation for [name]. Give me hope and confidence in your loving mercy. Amen.

Lord Jesus, you sit at the right hand of the Father to judge the living and the dead. Grant mercy to [name], purify him/her, and give him/her entrance into the joy of heaven. Amen.

Holy Spirit, be with your Church and its leaders as they guide your people with teaching about mental illness and suicide and the pastoral care both require. Amen.

Mother Mary, our advocate and helper, intercede for [name] and carry her/him toward the gifts of eternal salvation. Amen.



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**POSTTRAUMATIC
GROWTH AFTER SUICIDE**

**MELINDA MOORE, PHD
EASTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY
RICHMOND, KY**

In this film, clinical psychologist Melinda Moore shares the story of losing her husband to suicide. After Conor died, Melinda sought consolation in the Eucharist and prayer. She describes her experience of contemplating the fallen Christ and marrying her pain with his. Through this practice she experienced grace, a transcendence of pain, and the healing, transformative presence of God. She later came across the concept of posttraumatic growth in her studies, and this helped her name and understand her experience.

Posttraumatic growth can manifest itself in several ways, including an increased appreciation for life, better interpersonal relationships, changed priorities, an increased sense of personal strength, and spiritual growth. Posttraumatic growth does not occur in the absence of grief and loss, but rather within the context of it.

Melinda Moore addresses:

- Talking about grief
- Wondering what people would say
- Searching to understand suicide
- Suffering and the spiritual life
- Learning how to be a suicide survivor
- Posttraumatic growth

If it is helpful and healthy for you, think about the ways that you have sought consolation or looked for meaning in your grief. Have your relationships or spiritual practices changed? Have you changed? It may serve you to reflect on the following:

- Talking about your grief with people who understand and listen with compassion can play a significant role in healing and recovery. Whom have you talked to about your experience of suicide loss?
- Sadly, many people do not know what to say to individuals who are grieving a suicide. Have you thought about how to respond in difficult social situations?
- Melinda encourages us to turn to the saints and to spiritual practices to find meaning in our suffering and to experience transformation and healing. Are there particular saints or spiritual practices that have supported you?
- There are many resources available to help you understand suicide loss and learn to live as a suicide survivor. What are some resources that you have found helpful?
- Although suicide is traumatic, our stories do not end with suicide loss. The concept of posttraumatic growth can be a source of hope, reminding us that we can still grow intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally.



LET US PRAY:

God our Father, like Job, I don't understand your ways—especially why this suicide happened—but help me to accept your love and your healing. Amen.

Lord Jesus, you suffered when people said things about you that were harsh and untrue, yet you forgave them and loved them. Help me forgive and love those who do not know how to talk to me about my loved one's suicide. Amen.

Holy Spirit, the Church has canonized many saints who knew terrible circumstances and great pain. Guide me to those who can help me understand suffering and find peace and healing. Amen.

Mother Mary, you survived the agonizing horror of watching your Son tortured and crucified. Help me to survive the trauma of this suicide and experience growth toward healing. Amen.



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**THE JOURNEY FROM
SUICIDE LOSS TO
ASSIMILATION**

**TOM AND FRAN SMITH
KARLA SMITH BEHAVIORAL HEALTH
BELLEVILLE, IL**

In this film, Tom Smith shares the story of losing his daughter to suicide. The grief that Tom and his wife, Fran, experienced following Karla's death was unique and intense—Tom describes it as a pack of snarling wolves. Tom and Fran soon discovered that they responded very differently to grief. Fran needed to talk about her emotions, but Tom needed time alone to think, write, and process. Learning to make space for each other's needs ultimately helped them grieve together.

Although they are occasionally haunted by what they might have done to intervene and prevent Karla's suicide, Tom and Fran now know and accept that they were powerless to change their daughter's mind. Recognizing our own powerlessness can lead us into greater spiritual maturity by helping us judge less, empathize more, and establish better priorities in life.

Tom Smith addresses:

- Grieving differently—together
- How the funeral started their healing
- The call to help others
- How parishes can support faith in the midst of grief
- Accepting powerlessness and assimilating death into our lives
- How parishes and communities embody our Catholic faith

If it is helpful and healthy for you, think about the role that parishes can play in sharing the burden of grief, ministering comfort, and offering ongoing resources and support. It may serve you to reflect on the following:

- Tom shares that he and Fran have learned to understand and respect one another's different ways of grieving. They have also grown to accept their own powerlessness as they assimilate Karla's death into their lives. Do these experiences of learning and growth resonate with you?
- Tom also shares that Karla's funeral liturgy pulled him out of his individual, private misery and gently engulfed him in the care and understanding of his community and the tangible presence of God. Where have you experienced care or the presence of God? If you feel led, share some of your memories from your loved one's funeral.
- In their liturgy, Tom's parish regularly incorporates prayers for individuals living with mental illnesses and individuals who have died by suicide. Is this something you have experienced in your parish?
- Our parishes can support us in our grief and in our efforts to help others by offering programs and other tangible supports that embody our Catholic faith. Might this truth be a source of comfort or inspiration to you?



LET US PRAY:

God our Father, lead me into the depths of the liturgy to feel your healing presence at Mass. Amen.

Lord Jesus Christ, you humbled yourself and “became obedient to the point of death” (Philippians 2:8, NRSVCE). Give me the humility to accept my powerlessness so that I learn to live with my loved one’s suicide. Amen.

Holy Spirit, instruct and guide the Church, especially my parish, to find ways to pray for and support those who live with a mental illness and those who grieve a suicide. Amen.

Mother Mary, you understand the dynamics of family life. Give me the grace to understand that we all grieve differently so that I can comfort my spouse, my children, my siblings, and all members of my family as they grieve. And help me to understand and accept my own way of grieving. Amen.





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