

God's love embraces those confronted with suicide

By Father Joseph Breighner

Few pains in life are greater than the pain of coping with suicide. I've had to cope with it in my personal life. I've been with therapists who grieve the loss of clients. I've been with parishioners and counselees. It's a form of hell.

When someone commits suicide, the first stage friends and loved ones usually pass through is pure shock. We can't get our minds around the experience. We can't comprehend that it's happened.

Next, of course, is profound grief and sadness. We grieve for the person whose life has ended. We grieve our loss – the loss of hopes and plans. This is especially true when the victim is a young person.

Naturally, there is also a stage of profound guilt. "Could I have done something different?" "Why didn't I do this?" On and on, our minds churn out guilt.

Then we get angry at ourselves. We get angry at spouses and family members. We get angry at doctors and therapists. We get angry at God.

We don't go through these stages in any predictable order. They get all mixed together, and even when we think we've worked through some stage, we soon discover that there is still more to deal with.

What helps? Be accepting of your feelings and of yourself. Feelings aren't right or wrong. Feelings just are. They're part of being human. We don't want to act out our feelings. That can be destructive.

What do we do? Just allow the feelings to flow. Every feeling wants to leave. When we fight our feelings, or make ourselves wrong for having feelings, they stay longer. Just be gentle with yourself. Feel the sadness and keep letting it go. Feel the guilt

and keep letting it go. Feel the anger and keep letting it go.

Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem. Problems, feelings and worries are like clouds floating across the sky. Every experience will pass. We will feel better. Young people often don't know that. Part of the reason why a young person commits suicide is that he or she thinks it will always feel this way. It will not. There will be better days.

How do I help someone else? Just be with that person or family. People rarely recall what you said at tragic moments but they are always grateful that you were there. In John's Gospel, the Beloved Disciple and the Mother of Jesus were at the foot of the cross. They couldn't do anything. They could be with Jesus. That was enough. It's enough for us.

What happens to people who commit suicide? Allow me to tell a story. There's a favorite picture that I've carried for about 30 years. It's a picture of Jesus in the clouds hugging someone. It's simply called "Welcome Home". In the background, in the clouds, you can see the outline of God the Father's hands. You can see the Spirit descending as a dove. You can see a rainbow, a sign of victory. I believe it's a picture of what happens when we die. When we die, we don't fall into a black hole. When we die, we fall into the arms of God.

One night, after my first talk at a parish retreat, a gentleman stopped me in the back of the church.

"Father Joe," he said, "my son committed suicide. I found his body hanging in the hall closet."

I replied in shock: "How did you handle that?"

He answered: "I can honestly say that I didn't see him hanging. I saw him in God's arms. When you held up that picture tonight, it was the first time I ever saw that picture, but that was what I saw. I saw my God holding my son."

That's what happens to people who commit suicide. They don't automatically go to hell. They are already in hell in their minds. That's why they commit suicide. Fortunately for us, God's love is greater than our worst pains and our worst fears.

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