

Unfinished Conversation: Healing from Suicide and Loss
A Guided Journey

By Robert E. Lesoine and Marilynne Chöphel MFT

Creating Support

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I can feel very alone in this journey, but I don't have to take this journey in isolation. We are conditioned by our society and culture not to talk about our pain. But if we don't talk, if we don't create a language to express our feelings, healing will not take place. We will continue to store up and re-create the cycles of suffering.

What is helpful and necessary in this process is a safe container such as a therapeutic environment or a community of like-minded people who can assist, help, support, and encourage each other in this process of waking up.

—Claude Anshin Thomas

At Hell's Gate: A Soldier's Journey from War to Peace
Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 2004

When you lose a loved one to suicide, there is a natural need to share your experience with others who truly understand and to have a place where you can talk openly with those who will listen without judgment. Having your grief and loss met with compassion and held in the safety and comfort of those you trust is an important part of resolution and healing. Throughout your grieving and healing process, look for ways to create support with others:

- **Support with a Journey Buddy:** Your Buddy might be a friend or relative of your lost loved one, or someone you trust and feel is caring. It can be most helpful to join in support with someone who is also a survivor and can fully comprehend the depth and uniqueness of grief from suicide loss.
- **Support Group:** Meeting in a group with other survivors can help you feel less isolated and alone, offer comfort and validation for your grieving process, and create the opportunity to learn from each other. Support groups may be facilitated by peer survivors or by a professional. Because a group is a forum for equal sharing, it is important to consider if you are ready to witness and support others who are also grieving. (For information on support groups in your area, see Resources for Creating Support at the end of this appendix.)
- **Support with a Therapist:** Working with a licensed therapist or grief counselor can help you move through your grieving process in a safe and supportive way, and help to bring healing to depression, anxiety, and bereavement complicated with prior losses or past trauma. (For information on therapists in your area, see Resources for Creating Support at the end of this appendix.)
- **Support with *Unfinished Conversation*:** Consider reading *Unfinished Conversation* with your Journey Buddy or gather together other survivors, using the exercises at the end of each chapter as a way to explore, learn, and support each other.

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www.unfinishedconversation.com

Supportive Guidelines: Using *Unfinished Conversation* with Others

Consider the following to help make your time with each other supportive and healing:

- **Safe Environment:** Create a safe and comfortable place to talk, cry, remember, question, and explore. Protect each other's privacy and confidentiality by not disclosing to others anything that is shared unless you have permission. "No alcohol or drugs" is a good policy to support clear and honest sharing. Have group members refrain from talking among themselves about what others in the group have said.
- **Schedule:** Regular meetings, either weekly or at least once every two weeks, are most helpful for continuity in the healing process. Allow some time before and after the meeting for informal connection to get to know and support each other. For groups, one and a half to two hours is a good length of time, depending upon the number of people participating.
- **Time Agreements:** Make clear agreements about the time, place, and length of each meeting. Having a formal beginning and ending, on time, focuses attention and helps create a container of safety and mutual support. To ensure that each person has equal time to share, you might want to use a timer or in some other way keep track of time, such as a "time-keeper" quietly ringing a bell.
- **Opening:** Sitting comfortably facing each other, with groups sitting in a circle so everyone can see each other, is very helpful in creating a sense of equality and support. Begin with a few minutes of silence to let go of the day, relax, and connect inward in the present moment. It can be helpful in the silence to remember the intention to heal and to support others in healing. Consider having each light a candle in honor of his or her loved one.
- **Brief Check-In:** Allow 3–5 minutes for each person to talk about their grieving and healing process, and/or any special needs or concerns.
- **Your Journey to Healing Exercises:** For each meeting, decide which chapters and exercises each will have read and worked with. During the meeting, be sure each person has a chance to either talk about their experience with the process or read from their journal if they wish. If anyone wants to remain silent, it is also important to honor that.
- **Stay Mindful and Present:** Remember that the intention is to heal, not to re-traumatize. Pause occasionally during the meeting to invite each person to become aware of their inner experience in the present moment. Consider using some of the "*Returning to the present moment . . .*" practices at the end of the exercise pages. Bringing awareness to your physical sensations in the here-and-now is helpful for staying grounded in the present and connected with each other. Remember that as the suffering of the past is met with compassionate connection in the present, the pain can transform and heal.
- **Closing:** At the end of each meeting, allow a few minutes for each person to express gratitude, final thoughts, and to reflect on the time together. What was the hardest part? What was most valuable? What did that person learn that will support their grieving and healing process? If the group has lit candles, each person might one at a time blow out their flame with a wish or intention for their loved one and themselves. You might end with holding hands, hugs if this is comfortable, or bowing to each other to honor your time together.

Guidelines for Speaking and Listening

- **When you are speaking:** Take your time. Remember to relax your body, soften your belly, and breathe. When painful emotions arise, if you begin to feel overwhelmed or shut down, talk about what you need. Take time to pause in silence, allowing for deeper reflection and self-care. If you need to take a break from speaking, start again when you feel ready.

The Four-Fold Way: Show up and choose to be present. Pay attention to what has heart and meaning. Speak your truth without blame or judgment. Be open to outcome, not attached to outcome.

—Angeles Arrien, PhD, anthropologist, author, and corporate consultant

- **When you are listening:** Be present and listen deeply. Respect each person’s opinions and unique way of grieving without analyzing, interpreting, judging, agreeing, or disagreeing, and avoid offering suggestions or focusing on solutions. Simply witness and honor each person’s experience with gratitude for their honesty and courage. When silence arises, give the person the space to reflect, feel, and explore more deeply. Remember to relax your body, soften your belly, and breathe, especially if you begin to feel overwhelmed. Thank the speaker when he or she is done sharing.

Listening is all about giving. It heals through the power of generosity. It’s an openhanded gift that asks nothing in return. Listening asks that we become empty. Willing to receive without agendas or judgment. Good listening requires both attention directed toward the other person, and also toward our own inner life. We need to pay careful attention to our own sensations, feelings, and intuitions. This is what allows us to resonate with another person.

—Frank Osteskeski, Founding Director The Metta Institute and Zen Hospice

Resources for Creating Support

Support Groups: See Appendix 2, “Resources for Survivors of Suicide” for websites of organizations with survivor’s support groups in your area, and its subsection Resources for Creating Survivor Support Groups that offers guidance for creating and facilitating suicide bereavement support groups.

Therapists: See Appendix 1, “Tool Kit for Your Journey to Healing” for its subsection Fellow Travelers and Guides that lists respected organizations that can help you find a therapist in your area who is licensed and trained in working with traumatic loss.