

The 10 Most Common Destructive Reactions after a Suicide

Adapted from Family Relationships
Healing From Grief-Pain and Suffering
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1. Scapegoating

“Scapegoat” refers to a person who bears the blame for others. In this reaction, pointing is the favourite activity. Sometimes blame is directed outward, toward anyone thought to have a role in the death. Scapegoating takes its most destructive form when it throws a family into blaming each other. Family members can only ease their feelings of guilt by blaming someone else, and so a vicious circle of scapegoating begins. Scapegoating can turn into a real tragedy when all the family members gang up on one or two other relatives. The victims are helpless against the crowd. No one really wins. When family members turn on each other in this way, the whole unit loses.

2. Keeping an Impossible Secret

The stigma that suicide causes is more than some families can bear. They would rather actively attempt to cover up the fact of suicide, or adopt an attitude of “we know but we’re not telling”. This reaction becomes even more destructive when family members go to extremes. They will destroy suicide notes, hide crucial evidence from the police and the coroner, and bribe or pressure officials to list the death officially as an accident. This reaction is, also, destined for failure. People do find out about the suicide, and then in embarrassment the family members pretend that everything is normal. It makes for loneliness and isolation for the family. No one wins!

3. The Survival Myth

This family reaction is similar to “keeping an impossible secret”, except the family members, themselves, refuse to accept the fact of death by suicide. Even in the face of solid evidence, they choose to keep alive the possibility of accidental death or murder.

4. Circle the Wagon

In this family reaction, the family draws together in a defensive pattern. It becomes “us against them”. The family members feel threatened by rejection and stigmatizing by others. They develop a “family resistance system” that acts as a barrier against

communication with those outside the family. Turning inward, they project a great deal of anger onto society. This reaction can be partially valuable—at least the family members aren't blaming and bickering with each other. Their solidarity may make them a closer family, even if it alienates everyone else. This family reaction can be destructive if it is used as a form of denial. Loneliness comes with this reaction, by making everybody else an “enemy”.

5. King (or Queen) of the Mountain

In this reaction, family members jostle for leadership and power. This reaction normally occurs when the suicide victim was the head of the household. Each family member approaches this reaction from his or her own self-interest. The “family” gets lost in the shuffle. The conniving spirit at work results in a win-lose situation for everyone, and only one can win.

6. Silent Treatment

This reaction is a kind of “cold war” where most communication is cut off. Family members don't talk to each other. They don't touch. Each grieves alone, behind closed doors. They avoid each other's gaze, raising their eyes or staring down at the ground in passing. This can be the most devastating reaction of the ten types. Such silence has at least these negative effects on the family. (1) It keeps helpful grief work from happening within the whole group. (2) It stifles the outpouring of emotions in normal grief. (3) It limits the opportunity for each member to check out his or her fears and fantasies with those of the other members. (4) It allows misconceptions and wrong information to flourish, since one's own view of what happened is never tested. (5) It lets guilt and anger rage on quietly, with no hope for resolving the problems that are hurting each person.

7. Who Loved/Was Loved the Most? Who Was Treated the Worst?

Some family members will fight each other for the coveted title of “Most Loved by the Deceased”. They'll argue at length to prove that they are the ones who have suffered the greatest loss, who always went the second mile for the deceased, and who loved the deceased the best. This reaction can be someone's ticket to family leadership and power. It can be someone else's way of overcoming guilt, and self-blame for not really loving the deceased very much. It's a way to get even with those members who “never gave a damn”.

This reaction has a flip side when the deceased was the source of much trouble within the family. This side is called “Who Was Treated the Worst?” It is designed to gain sympathy from other family members.

8. Let's Grieve Forever

This reaction involves a perpetual state of mourning. This extended mourning is primarily an attempt to alleviate guilt, to make up for shortcomings in life and death. Families often get stuck in this kind of eternal grief to the extent that they are never able to bring the death to a close, in a respectable way. Life for them cannot go on without the deceased. Eternal bereavement is their way of “freezing the action”.

9. Halo and Pitchfork

The halo placed over the suicide’s life is the result of what psychiatrists call “idealization”. Only good things are allowed to be remembered about the deceased. All the details of the stormy relationships that existed in the family are hushed up.

The Pitchfork reaction works the same way, but with opposite intentions. The family members come not to praise the deceased, but to bury him or her with insults and recriminations. Anger, hurt feelings, betrayal—all are projected onto the suicide victim without mercy.

Both reactions are examples of defensive reactions used by families when their gut-level emotional responses threaten to overwhelm them. The Halo reaction shuts off anger and resentment. The Pitchfork reaction stifles guilt, hurt feelings, and love. However, neither of these reactions “works” forever. Sooner or later, the emotions will surface, and the catch-up grieving may last far longer than a normal, healthy grief period.

10. Head for the Hills

The reaction of the family is to pack up and move away from the “suicide house”, usually within one year after the death. This is especially prevalent when the suicide actually happened in the house or on the family property. Family members can’t walk past the spot without cringing in horror. They “see” the deceased everywhere, “hear” his footsteps, and have nightmares about the suicide happening again. So, they get out. The family needs to be cautious of what they are fleeing from! A person can’t ever run far or fast enough to escape the memory of the suicide. Somewhere a person will have to take their stand and deal with their grief.