

Caregiver's Corner Column (February 2012)

Healing for Families after a Suicide Attempt

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Care Resources

In the wake of a suicide attempt, families are often left reeling with the shock of what's happened. It's nearly as tragic as a suicide except their loved one didn't die. The emotions and grief are as difficult to deal with as if it was a completed suicide. The tragedy of an attempt may leave you, as a family, in a state of emotional limbo. You're trying to wrap your minds around what has happened as it hangs between an accident and death. Yet it's neither. It's a difficult place for families to find themselves. But you are not alone.

Experts say up to 20 million people are affected by a loved one's suicide attempt each year. Unfortunately, there isn't a lot of support in the aftermath of a suicide attempt to help families through the crisis, mostly because of the stigma of suicide in our society and lack of resources put toward mental health. Many families can't talk about it openly for fear of the reaction and rejection of others. They may be shunned or judged by those who don't understand it. Families themselves often refuse to accept the reality that a loved one tried to kill himself and they live in denial and refuse help. The stigma adds to the trauma and may prevent families from healing effectively. Lack of resources, education and guidance force families to navigate the journey to emotional healing on their own.

As a family trying to cope and work to regain normalcy after a loved one's suicide attempt, there are valuable things you can do to work through the grieving process—and it is a grieving process. It's important to ask for help. You can't possibly manage the crisis alone. If your loved one is in the hospital, seek out help to manage the day to day demands so you can focus on figuring out what comes next with the person's care. You may need help with meals, chores and child care just because the stress of the situation makes it difficult to even function. You'll need a support system to help you make sense of the trauma you're facing. Find trusted friends and family who will listen and allow you to talk freely about what's happened and your own overwhelming feelings.

A necessary part of the healing process is to acknowledge your emotions following a loved one's attempt. The traumatic experience and grief can be devastating. People will likely feel confusion, anger, guilt, betrayal, blame and intense sadness. It's also important not to suppress or minimize those feelings. In order to handle your emotions in a healthy way it may require counseling. Find a therapist who's trained in grief counseling, especially one who has experience with suicide. Another valuable way to deal with the tragedy is to share with others who are grieving just like you. A newly formed support group for friends and families affected by a loved one's suicide attempt has started in West Michigan. The group "Ment to Mend" meets the 1st and 3rd Tuesday of each month. The weeks rotate between group sharing and experts providing information. Meetings are held from 6-7pm at Forest View Hospital, 1055 Medical Park Dr. SE, Grand Rapids, 49546 (use the south entrance under the green awning). If you would like more information, call Jennifer at 272-3434. And finally, there's a website

www.secondchancefamily.org that provides more helpful advice. Healing is possible for families affected by a suicide attempt.

Caregiver's Corner is provided as a public service of the **Caregiver Resource Network**. The Caregiver Resource Network is a collaboration of West Michigan organizations dedicated to providing for the needs and welfare of family and professional caregivers within the community. Funded by the Area Agency on Aging of Western Michigan with Older American's Act Title III-E, Family Caregiver Support funds. For more information consult our website at www.CaregiverResource.net or call toll free at 1-888-456-5664