

“If Only”: Self-Blame After a Loved One’s Suicide

Written by Stacey Freedenthal, PhD, LCSW

“I should have _____.”

“If only I _____.”

“Why didn’t I _____?”

Different people may fill in the blanks with different words, but the sentiments are the same: *I am to blame. I should have been able to stop my loved one from dying.*

Feelings of self-blame affect many people who have lost a loved one to suicide. Such feelings are raw, painful, even toxic. They infect the open wound of suicide loss, adding hurt to hurt.

It does not have to be so. You can talk back to your self-blaming thoughts. Even if you regret words spoken or unspoken, actions taken or not taken, or other mistakes that you think you made, you can replace condemnation with compassion.

Hindsight Is...

If you have lost a loved one to suicide, you may feel that your self-blame is justified. Perhaps you believe adamantly that you did or said too little. Perhaps you believe adamantly that you did or said too much. Whatever you believe, two important words may apply: “hindsight bias.” Hindsight bias is the clinical term for that familiar adage, “Hindsight is 20/20.” More technically, [according to two trauma researchers](#):

“Hindsight bias occurs when an individual possesses knowledge about the outcome of an event and falsely believes he or she was capable of predicting (and, by implication, affecting) its outcome.”

If you knew then what you know now, then yes, you almost certainly would have said something different, done something different, shown something different, felt something different – and so on.

Sadly, you did not know.

The Illusion of Control

The tricky thing about self-blame is that, even though it hurts intensely, it also protects us from a greater pain. In blaming ourselves, we nurture the illusion that we have some control over life.

Consider this. If we caused the suicide in some way, then we can learn from our mistakes and act differently. This means that we can prevent suicide from happening again to someone else we love. *Or so it seems.* In reality, tragedies all too often occur beyond our control. It is more devastating to realize how random events are – and how random they will continue to be – than it is to believe that we failed.

The Reality of Control

This is not to say that nobody has any control over a suicidal person’s safety or situation. There are things people can do to help someone who is suicidal:

Ask questions. Listen deeply. Involve others. Wrap the person in love, understanding, and support. Be available to them. Check in. Stay with them. Remove firearms and other instruments of death from their home. Provide resources to the person or take them somewhere for professional help. Pray, if that is in your belief system.

But even if you did not do all of those things, even if you did not do any of those things, it does not mean that the person’s suicide is your fault.

Even when people do *all* of those things, still the person may die by suicide. [We are limited](#) in what we can know and what we can do to stop suicide from occurring.

Suicide is a formidable foe. Sometimes, despite our best efforts, suicide wins.

Placing the Blame Where It Belongs

When someone dies by suicide, it is never one person’s fault. Not yours, not someone else’s, and not the suicide victim’s.

Instead, the fault belongs to *the natural forces that create the potential for suicide.*

Most often, these forces are mental illness. By many accounts, 90% of people who die by suicide have a diagnosable mental illness. Other forces besides mental illness also can cause suicide: trauma, stress, loss, and any other event or condition that creates excruciating pain.

The forces of suicide cause irrational thoughts. They rob the person of the ability to see any possibility for change. They connive to make the person believe that suicide is the only way to end the pain.

Usually it is not just one problem, but instead a multitude of problems, that lead to suicide. There are no simple explanations.

Mistakes Made

Maybe you are reading these words thinking, *"She doesn't get it. I really did fail. It is my fault that _____ died."*

Maybe, painfully, you are even thinking, *"I failed, and I hate myself for it."*

Maybe you did know your loved one was struggling.

Maybe you discounted the enormity of their pain.

Maybe you said things you regret, like, "It's not that bad," "You don't really mean it," "You just are trying to get attention," or any one of a million other statements that are regrettable in hindsight.

Maybe you refused to take a phone call, or said words in anger, or gave up on the person.

Maybe you failed to keep the person safe. Maybe you felt too afraid to recognize the possibilities for death.

Maybe you believed that your loved one would not ever die by suicide.

Mistakes Forgiven

No doubt, such feelings of regret cause searing pain. I do not mean to diminish or discount your pain. It hurts.

At the same time, no matter the ways you believe you failed, I would encourage you to ask yourself the following questions:

Am I telling myself that I could have prevented my loved one's suicide?

How do I know that, even if I had done things differently, my loved one would still be alive?

How could I have known then what I know now?

Can I feel compassion for myself for having said or done things that I desperately wish I could change?

Can I forgive myself for being imperfect?

Self-Blame and Grief

Feelings of self-blame can distract you from grieving and, in the process, from healing. Think of self-blame as an itchy blanket thrown over your grief. When you focus on the blanket, you do not see or feel the naked grief that lies beneath.

Remember, condemning yourself can build some illusion of control. What lies beneath your self-blame are the terrible facts that you cannot control:

Suicidal forces overtook your loved one.

You have suffered an unfathomable loss.

You cannot turn back time, do it over, do it differently.

Each of these is a loss. Mourning these losses is the essence of grief.

Your grief deserves your compassion.

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