

The Journey of Learning to Tell My Story of Surviving a Loss to Suicide

My first experience -----

My son died by suicide in 2012.

I shared about my loss in public for the first time 13 months later along with another mom. It was at a community suicide awareness walk and there were perhaps 100 people there. The person at the mental health agency who was my point of contact was kind and encouraging. He provided general guidance on what I might want to share but reassured me it was my story. He let me know the full agenda so I knew who would present before me and after me and I knew what they would be speaking about.

He made sure I knew it would be outside, rain or shine, and I would have a microphone. He explained the audience would be made up of local residents who cared about suicide awareness. Some may be living with thoughts of suicide, some may be helping a friend, some may be grieving a loss.

He suggested I bring a support person with me (I brought about 20) and he was there to greet me as soon as I arrived. I shared a little bit about my son, about his life. I shared about the day he died and may have shared too much detail; I don't remember (keep reading for more tips on safe sharing). Mostly, I shared about how joy and pain can co-exist and that I was learning to have hope again.

My worst experience -----

In 2014, I worked with a group of loss survivors and mental health workers to create a L.O.S.S. Team. A Local Outreach to Suicide Survivors Team supports people in the immediate aftermath of a loss. The local newspaper reached out and wanted to interview me about the team and our mission. During our phone conversation the reporter asked to go on a scene with us.

Me: "No, going on a scene with us would not be appropriate."

Reporter: "How about I meet with the volunteers immediately after they leave the scene to interview them?"

Me: "What questions would you ask them? What would be the purpose of the interview?"

Reporter: "I would not ask for the decedent name, but I would want to know the age, race, sex, and method of death."

Me: "Nope. No way."

Reporter: "I just want to find out if it was a typical suicide."

The conversation continued - briefly - and the reporters last comment prompted me to hang up on him...

Reporter: "If you won't do this, I'll just find another L.O.S.S. Team in Ohio who will."

A few days later I spoke with a suicide prevention agency letting them know about my experience. They had already heard from the reporter and referred them to another L.O.S.S. Team for the interview. I was told, "You're new to this, Denise, and this other team has more experience with reporters." I thought I had handled the reporter correctly, but when this person who I perceived to be an "expert" said this, I had some doubt. I learned (eventually) that I DID do the right thing.

What I've learned -----

Here are some do's and don'ts I've accumulated over the past decade:

DO remember that you are not obligated to share your story of suicide loss. It is NOT dishonoring to your loved one if you choose to never share publicly. It is NOT a reflection of your love for them.

DO reflect on whether you are ready to share your story of suicide loss. Reflect on questions like these:

- Have I done enough of my own grief work?
- How has my perspective of my person's life and their death changed since the first year of my grief?
- What is my intended impact or take-away of sharing my story of suicide loss?

Share your thoughts and responses to these questions with a trusted, safe person(s). Invite them to give you feedback. Remain teachable.

DO educate yourself about safe, hopeful messaging. Just because you're comfortable sharing something, that doesn't make it safe or hopeful for everyone to hear.

Here is a short list of tips:

- Avoid sharing method or other activating details associated with your person's death. It's normal and healthy to need to talk about hard details of your person's death. Find a safe person(s) to do this with. But it is usually best to refrain from sharing method, location, and other activating details in front of large audiences. I have been in circumstances where loss survivors feel the audience needs to hear the details, they need to be shocked, because that's the reality the survivor lives with. What we don't realize is that many people in the audience may have their own traumatic stories and images they live with. It can be harmful to share your own, especially in large settings.
- Be prepared to point people to helpful and hopeful resources.
- Be cautious not to blame a particular person or circumstance as the singular reason for the suicide. Suicide is complicated and there are usually multiple factors involved.

- Avoid making broad generalizations that may be inaccurate and unintentionally hurtful. "The worst thing that can ever happen to a person is to lose a child to suicide." Statements like this can unintentionally minimize other people's grief. Or as another example, "The one feeling that every suicide loss survivor experiences is guilt." I personally know people who did not experience guilt after their loss. One time I unintentionally mentioned guilt as a universal feeling among survivors and made someone feel like they were grieving wrong, and they didn't love their person enough. Thankfully they taught me that guilt is not universal. It was a teachable moment I will never forget.
- Helpful Links:
 - <https://www.suicidepreventionalliance.org/about-suicide/suicide-language/>
 - <https://mha.ohio.gov/about-us/media-center/media-resources/reporting-on-suicide>
 - <https://suicidepreventionmessaging.org/safety>
 - <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9970321/>
 - <https://www.psychiatry.org/news-room/apa-blogs/how-to-talk-about-suicide-on-social-media>

DO identify your primary take-away message for the audience and make sure you open and close with this.

DO take into consideration that others who knew your person may be in the audience. This could influence what you share and can impact how you may feel seeing this person.

DO be prepared with a polite response to a question you're not comfortable answering. I have presented to teens before and I have been asked, during Q&A, "how did your son kill himself?" My go to response is, "I'm not comfortable sharing that information in a group setting but I am willing to speak with you one on one afterwards."

DO be prepared for people to follow up with you and say or ask activating things. Be gentle with them AND with yourself. Recently after speaking at an event, someone came up to me and shared in detail how their person took his life. She was newly bereaved. I listened and supported her. Then I took the time after the event to decompress and care for myself. This included talking to someone about how I was impacted by this detailed sharing.

DO have a self-care plan - for before and after speaking. Even if you have shared your suicide loss story dozens of times and have done a lot of hard work of mourning, remain alert to self-care.

DON'T let anyone shame you, guilt you, or bully you into sharing your story or into sharing specific information you are not comfortable sharing.