

# Healing Your Spirit

Surviving After The Suicide  
Of A Loved One



Alberta Health  
Services

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Provincial Injury Prevention Program Population  
Public & Indigenous Health and  
Provincial Mental Health Promotion & Illness Prevention,  
Addiction & Mental Health  
10101 Southport Road SW  
Calgary, Alberta T2W 3N2  
[www.ahs.ca](http://www.ahs.ca)

## For further information, contact:

Alberta Health Services Provincial Injury Prevention  
Email: [injuryprevention@ahs.ca](mailto:injuryprevention@ahs.ca)

## Alberta Health Services

### Healing Your Spirit: Surviving After The Suicide Of A Loved One

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## **The Sacred Circle**

When the Creator put us on this Earth, he gave us four gifts to help us through troubled times.

The first was the gift of prayer; the second was the gift of sharing; the third gift was the gift of crying to wash away the pain and the fourth was laughter. If you are able to do these four things, it is said that you are on a healing journey.

*(Education is our Buffalo, The Alberta Teacher's Association. 2016)*

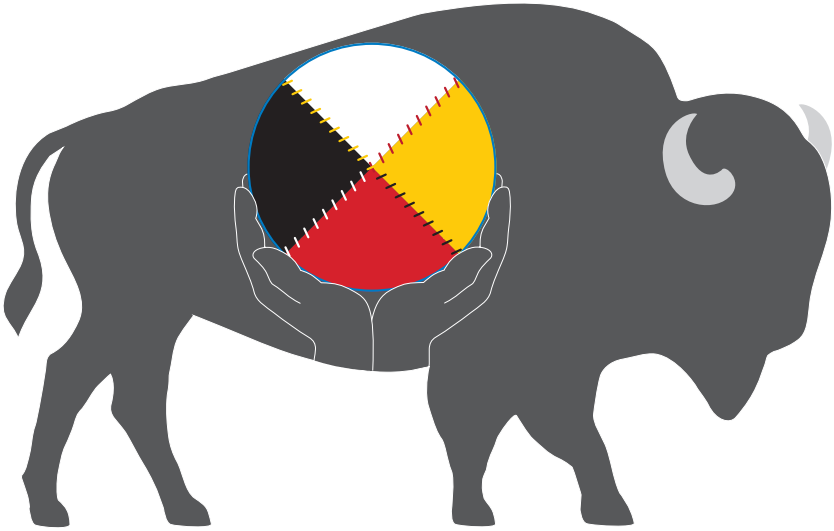
## INTRODUCTION

The artwork throughout this publication has been created especially for 'Healing Your Spirit'.

The medicine wheel recognizes life as a circle that connects us all. The wheel reminds us to live in harmony—balancing our spiritual, physical, emotional and mental needs.

The hands let us know that we are not alone.

The buffalo symbolizes subsistence, strength and the ability to survive.










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*We are humble in our offerings and don't see this booklet as the answer on your healing path. We simply hope that our words bring a spirit of hopefulness that may provide you with some comfort and supportive ways to cope with your loss. As you travel on your journey, we sincerely wish that you will allow yourself to reach for the healing your heart desires.*

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\*The colour used in the left quadrant of the Medicine Wheel vary between blue and black. We have intentionally alternated between the 2 colours throughout this booklet.

## Words of Hope From Our Elders

-  *"We pray for life, not death. We need to let nature take its course."*
-  *"Suicide hurts your heart. It breaks life tradition. Indian people are here to honour life."*
-  *"Seek advice from your Elders<sup>1</sup> when you are troubled."*
-  *"We need silence, a time for reflection to think about the life lost. We celebrate the person's life, and remember the good times."*
-  *"We should look at our stories. My grandmother would tell me stories in Blackfoot, and I would find the message in the story. Gathering information is done through storytelling, accept what is spoken."*
-  *"We remember the person, we hold a wake. There is lots of laughter because we celebrate their life. We celebrate what we hold in our hearts. We talk about the things they did when they were here. We tell stories about that person... we do not exclude them from ceremonies."*
-  *"For some of us, we grieve for four days. For the wake, for three nights someone has to stay awake all night, to feed the fire, to always have food, tobacco, tea, coffee, for those coming. In the day, you feast. In the night, you do the singing and prayers. The burial takes place when the sun rises. The spirit will rise with the sun. It encourages the family to keep moving on. Continue with silent mourning for one year. Have a memorial every year, an honour feast. This is a way of celebrating their life."*

## How to Approach an Elder

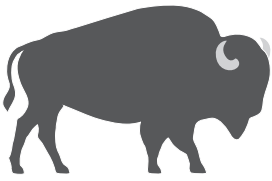
You may not know how to approach an Elder. Some Elders will accept an offering from someone asking for guidance. Many times this is an offering of tobacco; sometimes cigarettes are acceptable. Elders use this tobacco to pray for you or the person or thing for which you have come to see them. It's important to listen and to hear what your Elder tells you.

Sometimes your Elder will share a story with you to help you search for the answer in yourself. Sometimes you may not be able to afford tobacco, an Elder offers this advice: *"If a person is in need of something from an Elder, and all they have is two cigarettes, then that will do .... a gift with a story is good. Everyone has a different meaning to what is valuable and a different way to look at things."* A gift that is given to an Elder is usually something that has personal value and meaning to you.

Not all Aboriginal people have the same traditions or customs and you may want to ask somebody who is considered a leader in your community for guidance on what to do.

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<sup>1</sup> An Elder is a person who is recognized and respected by his or her people. Aboriginal people look to their Elders for guidance and hope.



## WHEN SOMEONE YOU LOVE DIES BY SUICIDE

**You will survive.**

*Yes, the grief is overwhelming. It's hard to believe now, but one hour at a time, one day at a time, you will get through it. And then, as time goes on, the pain will lessen. Believe in yourself, your family and your community who share in your sorrow.*

### What Helps in the Short Term

You feel as if your world is crumbling around you. An Elder offers this guidance *"You are here... only you decide what you are going to do now."* We offer these words to help you through the emotions you may be feeling.

#### **What to Expect**

Most survivors find it hard to think clearly. You may forget things. You may replay the suicide over and over in your mind, and find you cannot stop asking *"Why?"* It's not unusual to feel overwhelmed by sorrow, physically ill and angry. You may feel ashamed or have regret. It's important to remember that you are not to blame for the choice made by another person. Sometimes, survivors think about suicide themselves. These reactions are normal, as are other strong feelings you may have.

**If you are having suicidal thoughts, talk to your Elder or go to the nearest Emergency Department.**

#### **Let Others Help You**

Your sense of confusion is likely so great at first that it can be very hard to cope—so let other people help you. Look to your Elders, friends, family, community and others for support. It's okay to let them guide you in making decisions and to help you remember what you need to know. They can also be there to simply listen.

### Telling Others

#### **What to Say**

One challenge you might face is telling others about the suicide. Although it may be difficult to speak openly about suicide, it's important to tell family and friends the truth. This allows them to help each other cope with their grief and also helps you work through yours. In addition to telling family and close friends, you will need to notify people with whom your loved one had regular contact. The list of people to inform might include: school personnel, an employer and work colleagues, a health care provider and a landlord. In these situations, you might choose to say something brief such as *"they were struggling with depression and died by suicide"*.

### Telling Children and Teens

#### **Tell the Truth**

You need to tell children and teens that the death was a suicide. While they may not need to know all the details, especially if they are very young, they do need



to know how the person died. Young people can sense when they are being lied to and this creates an atmosphere of mistrust, fear and loneliness. If you don't tell them the truth, eventually they will find out through someone else. That will be far more painful for them.

Make the explanation fit the age of the child (e.g., *"they were sad and didn't want to live anymore"* or *"they didn't know that there were people who could help them"*). Children and teens will tell you what they need to know, and you only need to answer what they have asked you about.

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*"There are different ways of reaching your children...go about it with love in your heart. It's very important that your children see you have time for them, and that you are trying to speak to them from your heart."*

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### **Show Your Grief**

It's okay for young people to see your anger, helplessness and confusion. This helps them understand that their own feelings are normal and okay. Check in with them to make sure they don't take on responsibility for your feelings. They need to know it's not their job to make things better for the family. Reassure them that you and others will still be able to take care of them.

### **Listen and Reassure**

Children and teens may be confused when they are told the death was a suicide. They may ask a lot of questions to make sense of the news: "Didn't they love us?" or "Why were they so sad?" Answer the questions that you can. Tell them that you don't have all of the answers but you are always there to listen. Encourage them to talk about their feelings. You may find there are times when young people benefit from talking to someone else, such as a family friend or a mental health professional.

Young people will need plenty of reassurance that the suicide was not their fault, that they are still loved, and that other people they care about will not die too. Emphasize that there are always other solutions to problems so that they don't see suicide as a way of coping with their problems.

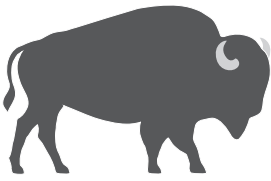
### **Share the Sacredness of Life**

This may be the time to share the sacredness of the gift of life. An Elder may help with this process. Elders tell us that when we talk to our children about the sacredness of life, especially at a young age, it may help them to make good choices. Let them know there are other ways to deal with problems and that they can always ask you for help.

### **Seek Help**

Children and teens need a lot of support and comfort when a loved one dies. You may find it too difficult to support children or reassure them when you are in the early stages of grieving. If this is the case, call on someone you trust or seek the help of a mental health professional or a bereavement support group.





## EMERGENCY RESPONSE AND INVESTIGATION

*When the person dies by suicide, you face legal and emergency situations not typical of other deaths. The events and procedures that take place after a suicide can cause great anxiety for survivors. It can help lessen the distress if you know what will happen.*

### Response to the Emergency Call

When a sudden death is discovered, Emergency Medical Services (EMS), the fire department, police and the medical examiner's office all play a role when responding to the 911 call.

#### **Emergency Medical Services**

EMS provides medical assistance and determines if a death has taken place, or will take the person to a hospital for further care if death has not occurred. At this point the hospital takes over care.

#### **Fire Department**

The fire department provides medical assistance to Emergency Medical Services, as well as extra help where needed.

#### **Police**

The police become involved in a number of ways. They secure the scene, which is considered a crime scene until the investigation is completed and the cause of death determined. They will notify the Medical Examiner's Office who will assist the police in the investigation. The police will collect identification, valuables and other items related to the person and the investigation. They may also take photographs at the site. The police may ask the person who reported the death or identified the deceased to make a statement. The same may be asked of those who found or spoke to the deceased. The police will also attempt to notify the next of kin.

#### **Medical Examiner**

The Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME)<sup>2</sup> investigates all unexplained and all violent deaths, which includes suicides. In the case of a suicide, only the Medical Examiner can sign and issue a death certificate. The OCME pays the cost to transport the body from the place of the death to the facility where the body is examined by medical examiners (medical doctor).

#### **Victim Assistance**

If you don't live in a First Nations Community (reserve), emergency personnel may have requested that a 'victim assistance support team' be made available to help you. If you live in a First Nations Community (reserve), your community may have a 'crisis response team' or 'victim services' that may help you through this time.

<sup>2</sup>The Fatality Inquiries Act requires that a medical examiner from the OCME investigate any sudden, unexpected or unexplained death.



## Investigation

An investigation is done to find out the circumstances of the suicide. This includes the identity of the person, the date, time and place of death as well as the cause and manner of death. The investigation often includes a review of the past medical history, an examination of the scene of the death and an examination of the body.

### Autopsy

If there is some doubt about the cause or manner of death, an autopsy may be ordered by the Medical Examiner. An autopsy may include complex laboratory tests and often results are not known for several weeks after the death.

Consent from next of kin is not required for a Medical Examiner's autopsy to be done. Notify the Medical Examiner if there is any cultural sensitivity around the autopsy. If an autopsy is performed you can request a copy of the autopsy report. You will need to fill out an Authorization for Release of Information form. To download the form, go to: [www.justice.alberta.ca](http://www.justice.alberta.ca) and enter 'settle estates' in the search box.

## The Scene After the Investigation

If the death has taken place in the home, the next of kin are responsible for cleaning up the scene. Sometimes family members choose to clean the area themselves. However, when body fluids are present, it's wise to have a certified cleaning company perform the cleaning tasks. To identify a suitable firm, consult the telephone directory or funeral home. Professional cleaning costs can be high but are often covered by household insurance. Contact your insurance provider for more information.

- If you live in a First Nations Community (reserve), your band may help cover costs. If not, the next of kin may be the one responsible for paying for this service.
- If you own your own home, your household insurance may cover this. Call your insurance provider to find out if there is coverage.
- If you rent your accommodation, the next of kin may be responsible for making sure the area is cleaned.
- Besides the physical cleanup, smudging, prayers and other ceremonies may help you cleanse and settle the spiritual and emotional spaces left.

## Tissue and Organ Donations

You may not be comfortable with the thought of donating the organs of your loved one. Many Aboriginal people feel we must return to the Creator whole. However, you may find comfort in donating to help another person. This is a very personal decision, and only the next of kin will be able to make the decision. Talk with family members if you are uncertain of what to do.



The police will tell the Medical Examiner if a donor card was found on the person. Tissues can be donated within certain time limits (about 6 to 12 hours after a death), even when death occurs outside a hospital. If you have concerns with organ or tissue donations being done, you can contact the hospital to discuss your options.

## Proof of Death

You can obtain two types of documents as proof of death in order to settle an estate:

### 1. Certificate of Death

A Certificate of Death is the official government document and is accepted by most organizations as proof of death. This certificate includes the name of the person, date and place of death, marital status, place of residence, sex and age. It doesn't give the cause of death. This certificate may be obtained from a registry office for a small fee (see Licensing and Registry Services in the yellow pages). The certificate will be issued one to two weeks after you apply for it. Several copies may be needed.

### 2. Certificate of the Medical Examiner

A Certificate of the Medical Examiner is issued by the Medical Examiner's Office upon written consent by next of kin. It includes the medical cause and manner of death as well as a brief description of the circumstances. This certificate is issued in place of the "Proof of Death" forms required by most insurance companies in order to settle life insurance claims. A small fee applies.

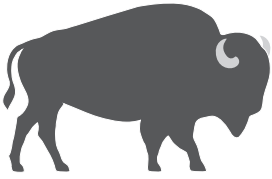
**Note:** In cases investigated by the Medical Examiner's Office only the medical examiner can sign and issue a death certificate. Neither a family doctor nor a hospital may complete any documents as proof of death.

## Public Fatality Inquiry

A public fatality inquiry is a public hearing to determine who the deceased was and by what means the deceased died.

This is very rare in cases of suicide. However, if the person was in custody or was a ward of the court at the time of death, an inquiry is mandatory. The Fatality Review Board determines which cases should go to Inquiry.

## PRACTICAL MATTERS



*A funeral is an important ritual that gives family and friends a chance to reflect and grieve while being supported by others who care. It allows them to say goodbye and begin accepting the reality of the loss.*

### Arranging a Funeral

Each of our communities has its own traditions, customs and ceremonies. What is acceptable in one community may not be in another. Some families may combine traditional Aboriginal beliefs and customs with Christian or other spiritual practices and faiths.

#### **Wake or Funeral Service**

You may decide, or have decided, to hold a wake and/or funeral service. Generally, community members gather at the family's home to remember, share and support one another. If you live in the city, wakes or memorials are most often held at a local centre or gathering area.

You may choose to have an Elder conduct a traditional ceremony and burial rather than a conventional funeral service. You may have held, or choose to hold, a memorial instead of a funeral service. At a memorial, the body of your loved one is not present. How you say goodbye is decided by you and the family depending on your personal beliefs.

If you choose not to have a wake, memorial or funeral service, you may ask a funeral home to care for the body of your loved one.

If your loved one was a member of the Canadian Armed Forces, he or she may be given military honours in a military service. You will need to contact the Canadian Armed Forces to arrange this.

At the wake, funeral or memorial, it's acceptable to share with others how your loved one passed on. Celebrate the life of your loved one and talk about good memories. Some families have an open notebook on a table so others may write down their memories.

#### **Funeral Cost**

Funeral costs can be difficult. If you are a Status Indian, some financial assistance may be available from your band or from Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC). If you are a Non-status, Métis or Inuit person, talk to your individual communities or organizations to see if they can help with costs.

Other sources of financial help include the Canada Pension Plan death benefit; Veterans Affairs (for war veterans or members of the Canadian Armed Forces); band councils (for status Indians); work related benefits programs; and your local social services department. Often, the funeral home has the resources available to assist you in completing the necessary forms when seeking financial help, or will contact the social services department for you. If you are unsure of how to make these arrangements, ask a family member, friend, Elder, band or council member for help.



## The Estate

Disposing of a deceased person's assets is usually done through a Will<sup>3</sup>. In some cases the Will may have to be probated which means that it has been proven valid by a court of law. If the estate is small or held jointly, there may be no need for probate. Any property held jointly (real estate, bank accounts, bonds) can be easily transferred to the surviving spouse or individual named. A bank may require probate if there is a large amount of money that is not held jointly, or for other reasons.

### ***If There is a Handwritten Note***

Sometimes a signed, handwritten note that distributes a person's property and possessions may be used as a Will. This includes suicide notes. You should be aware that this type of note might be challenged in a court of law. In Alberta, any Will that doesn't provide sufficiently for family can be challenged under the *Family Relief Act*. Contact your lawyer for more information.

### ***If There is not a Will or Your Situation is Complicated***

The Office of the Public Guardian and Trustee will protect the interests of potential beneficiaries if an Alberta resident dies and leaves an estate, and there is no one to administer it. If your situation is complicated for other reasons, such as marital separation or common-law relationships, you may need to contact a lawyer.

If your loved one lived in a First Nations Community (reserve), you can contact your local Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada office for assistance.

If your loved one lived in the city and you are unable to call your band or cannot afford a lawyer, you may be able to get assistance from the Alberta Law Line (1-866-845-3425). There may be financial eligibility requirements.

## Financial Matters

A number of financial matters need to be dealt with after a death. You may want to ask other family members or close friends to help you deal with some of these matters during this difficult time.

It's strongly recommended that you seek the advice of a legal or financial professional before making any major decisions that may affect your financial or personal situation.

If you are unsure about banking or legal affairs, let your family know or call your band office to see if they have legal counsel to help you. You also may be able to get assistance from the Alberta Law Line or if your loved one belonged to a First Nation's Community (reserve) you may also contact Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) (1-800-567-9604).

If you are a Status Indian living in a First Nations Community (reserve), some services and expenses may be covered by Indigenous Affairs. If you are Non-status, Métis, or Inuit, talk to your local organization or community to find out if they can help you work through legal or financial matters.

<sup>3</sup> A Will is a written record that details how a person's belongings, or estate, will be divided upon death.

## First Step: Gather Documents

The first step in dealing with financial matters is to gather the deceased's documents. This must be done before you, your financial advisor or the executor of the Will can take care of matters related to the estate. Set up a folder to keep all the personal documents and records of legal and financial matters.

### Personal Documents

#### Death Certificate

Phone: 310-0000, then 780-427-7013

You must have the death certificate before you can cancel, transfer and apply for benefits. If the funeral home doesn't provide them or if you need additional copies, you can obtain certified copies of the death certificate at: [www.servicealberta.ca](http://www.servicealberta.ca)

#### Birth Certificate

Phone: 310-0000, then 780-427-7013

#### The Will

The executors of the Will are responsible for the estate and should be notified as soon as possible after the death.

#### Indian Status Card

#### Driver's License

You can cancel a driver's license and obtain a refund for the unused portion of the fee at any Registry Office.

#### Marriage Certificate

## Next Steps: Cancel, Transfer and Apply for Benefits

Once all documents have been gathered, you will have to cancel, transfer and apply for various financial benefits or obligations. Be aware that there may be fees associated with some of these matters.

#### Passport

Phone: 1-800-567-6868

If the deceased held a valid passport you can make it null and void by diagonally cutting off the right-hand corner. Return it to the nearest passport centre or mail it to the processing centre. Include a copy of the death certificate or a letter stating why you are returning the passport.

#### Social Insurance Number

Phone: 1-800-206-7218

You can cancel the deceased's social insurance number by mailing the card, along with a copy of the death certificate to:  
Social Insurance Number Registration  
Box 7000, Bathurst, NB E2A 1A2

#### Indian Status Card

Phone: 1-800-567-9604

#### Social Services

(Income support or welfare cheques)—if your loved one lived in a First Nations Community (reserve), your band office may take care of these payments. If your loved one lived in the city and received provincial benefits, you will need to let the local office know of their passing.

## Health Care

### Alberta Health Care Number (AHCIP)

Phone: 310-0000, then 780-427-1432

An authorized registry office can assist you in person. You will be asked to provide a certificate of death and the Personal Health Number.

### Alberta Blue Cross

Phone: 1-800-661-6995

Alberta Blue Cross requires the name and AHCIP of the deceased, the name and address of the executor, and the name and address of the person providing this information.

### Health Care Providers

Notify doctors, dentists and other health care providers.

## Financial

### Bank Accounts

Contact all financial institutions that the deceased had chequing or savings accounts. Ask the issuing banks to cancel bank cards held by the deceased. Any accounts held in common can be transferred to the survivor. You will need to contact your financial advisor or the bank holding these accounts for specific information on how to transfer the accounts. If you require information on unclaimed bank balances you can contact the Bank of Canada.

Phone: 1-888-891-6398

### Estate Account

You may wish to open an estate account to protect estate funds. Seek advice on this matter from reputable legal sources and advisors.

### Funeral Costs

Take final invoices and a funeral director's proof of death or the certificate to a bank manager. Most financial institutions will draw up a bank draft from the deceased's account to pay for all funeral-related expenses.

### Investments (RRSPs, GICs, bonds, stocks)

Ask your financial advisor or bank for information on how to transfer these assets.

### Safety Deposit Box

Make an appointment with the bank manager to review the contents of the deceased's safety box.

### Credit Cards

Contact the issuing institutions (e.g., banks, stores) to cancel. Most credit cards have a phone number on the back of the card. For joint-signature cards, you will have to provide a copy of the death certificate to cancel the deceased's card.

### Loan and Rental Agreements (monies owed or owing)

These may or may not be insured. You need to cancel or transfer individual or co-signed loans from issuing bank or institution.

### Canada Savings Bonds

Phone: 1-800-575-5151

For more information, go to: [csb.gc.ca](http://csb.gc.ca)

### Canada Pension Plan Benefits (CPP)

Phone: 1-800-277-9914

You will be asked to provide the name, address and social insurance number of the deceased. For more information, go to: [www.servicecanada.gc.ca](http://www.servicecanada.gc.ca)

## ❑ Old Age Security Benefits

Phone: 1-800-277-9914

For more information, go to: [www.servicecanada.gc.ca](http://www.servicecanada.gc.ca)

## ❑ Veterans Services Benefits

Phone: 1-866-522-2122

If the deceased was receiving benefits from other countries, notify the relevant agency of the death so they can cancel payments and provide benefits to survivors, if applicable. For more information, go to: [www.vac-acc.gc.ca](http://www.vac-acc.gc.ca)

## ❑ GST Credit

Phone: 1-800-959-8281

If the deceased received the GST credit, their spouse or common-law partner may be eligible to receive the credit based on their net income. If the deceased was a child receiving the credit, payments stop the quarter after the child's date of birth.

## Income Taxes

Phone: 1-800-959-8281

A final income tax return must be filed for the deceased. If the death occurred between January 1 and October 31, the final T-1 return is due by April 30 of the next year. If the death occurred between November 1 and December 31, the final T-1 return is due six months after the death. If tax returns from previous years have not been completed, they must also be filed. If an estate trust must be established, a T-3 tax return must be filed for each year of the life of the estate trust.

You will need to get a *clearance certificate* before you distribute any property. It certifies that all amounts for which the deceased is liable to the Canada Revenue Agency have been paid or that security has been accepted for the payment. For more information, go to: [www.cra-arc.gc.ca](http://www.cra-arc.gc.ca)

## Property

### ❑ Land Title(s)

Phone: 310-0000, then 780-427-7013

If the deceased owned real estate and designated a beneficiary in their Will, the property can be transferred. Contact a lawyer and an Alberta Registries office for details.

### ❑ Mortgage

Notify the mortgage holder of the death.

### ❑ Utility Accounts

Cancel or transfer all utilities (e.g., cable, phone, water, power, gas, Internet).

### ❑ Home Insurance

Who can cancel or make changes to the policy can vary. You will need to provide the policy number of the deceased and in some cases, the name and address of the executor.

### ❑ Canada Post

Canada Post will redirect mail from the deceased's last known address for one year at no charge. You need to apply for this service in person at a post office. You will need a copy of the death certificate and proof that you are the deceased's legal representative.



## Vehicles

### Vehicle Insurance

Who can cancel or make changes to the policy can vary. Most insurance companies require you to notify them about policyholder's death within 30 days. You will need to provide the policy number of the deceased; in some cases, only the executor can cancel the policy.

### Vehicle Registration(s)

If the deceased had vehicles registered in their name, the ownership of these vehicles will need to be transferred. You will want to check if there is a lien on the vehicle or a Will directing disposition of the vehicle. A probate registry agent can help you do this.

## Other Items to Cancel

### Disability Benefit

Phone: 1-800-277-9914

You will need to cancel disability payments, both federal and provincial. Provincial disability payments may include AISH (Assured Income for Severely Handicapped).

### Memberships (sport clubs, professional associations, libraries)

Cancel the memberships or transfer them to another name if appropriate.

### Life Insurance Policies

In Canada, life insurance policies must have been held for at least 24 months to be valid if the death is by suicide (check the policy to see if there are exclusions). There may be special circumstances where a policy held for less than 24 months may be challenged in court by the family of someone who died by suicide. Consult your lawyer or insurance provider for more information.

### Mortgage Life Insurance

If the deceased held mortgage life insurance, the mortgage will be paid upon death. The mortgage company will require a copy of the death certificate. Some policies will not cover deaths by suicide if they occur within two years of the start of coverage. Review the policy or consult with the bank for the specific details.

### Life Insurance

Notify insurance companies of the death and enquire about payouts. The deceased may have had more than one type of insurance policy.

## Items to Apply For

### ☐ Allowance for the Survivor

Phone: 1-800-277-9914

This program provides a monthly non-taxable benefit to low-income widows. This benefit is payable to someone who, at the time of death, was married to the deceased or living common-law (including same-sex relationships). This benefit is not retroactive and must be applied for immediately.

### ☐ Veterans Services Benefits

Phone: 1-866-522-2122

If the deceased was a veteran, for one year after their death, the surviving spouse may be eligible to receive a pension equal to the amount that the deceased was receiving at the time of death. For more information, go to: [www.vac-acc.gc.ca](http://www.vac-acc.gc.ca)

### ☐ Canada Pension Plan Survivors Benefits

Phone: 1-800-277-9914

The Canada Pension Plan (CPP) provides three types of survivor's benefits:

#### 1. **CPP Children's Benefit**

To qualify for this benefit, children must be 17 years of age or younger; or 18-25 years of age and attending school full-time. If you are the caregiver of children of the deceased who are under age 18, you should apply for this benefit on their behalf. Dependent children between 18 and 25 and in full-time studies should apply for this benefit themselves.

#### 2. **CPP Death Benefit**

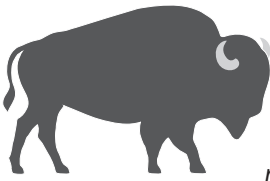
This benefit is a one-time payment made to the estate of the deceased contributor, a surviving spouse, a common-law partner or other next of kin. The lump-sum payment is based on the CPP contributions of the deceased.

#### 3. **CPP Survivor's Pension Benefit**

This benefit is paid to the deceased's spouse or common-law partner. Legally separated spouses may also qualify if the deceased didn't have a co-habiting common-law partner. The amount of the benefit awarded will depend on the age of the surviving spouse or common-law partner and other dependency.

### ☐ Guaranteed Income Supplement

Surviving widows/widowers over the age of 65 may be entitled to this benefit. This benefit is based on income qualifications.



## WORKING THROUGH YOUR GRIEF

*Grief is more complicated when a death is sudden. There was no chance to say goodbye. Very strong emotions arise as a result of the suicide, such as extreme sadness, anger and shame, and this complicates your grieving. Survivors often feel guilt. You must remember that you are not to blame for the choices made by another person. The search to find out “why” is a painful yet important part of working through the grief. Often, there are no answers.*

### Your Grief is Unique

The grieving process is different for each person. Reaction to death may vary according to one's personality, age, gender, spiritual beliefs and their relationship with the deceased. There isn't a 'normal' or 'expected' way to grieve but there are many aspects of grief that are predictable.

#### **Numbness and Shock**

Survivors usually feel numb and in shock when they first find out about the suicide, and for several weeks after or even longer. This feeling is like sitting on the side of a play about your life, but not really taking part in life itself. Nothing seems real. The feeling of shock has a purpose, it cushions you from the pain of what has happened. Over time, the numbness fades and you will proceed with your grieving.

### Loss and Disorganization

As you grieve, you will experience a range of thoughts and very strong emotions. Survivors commonly feel intense anger, sorrow, loneliness and guilt. At times you might feel as if the suicide never really happened.

There can be times when everything in life seems meaningless. You might be obsessed with the thought that you could have prevented the death. It's common to have trouble sleeping and eating during these times.

### Reorganization and Acceptance

As time passes, your thoughts and feelings will change. Instead of feeling pain all the time, you will feel it some of the time. "From a sadness that is with us frequently to a sadness that is always a part of us but no longer gets in our way. We can begin to be happy and move on in our lives." (Alberta Funeral Service Association, 1991)

#### **Grieving Takes Time**

How long people grieve varies. Occasionally survivors get stuck as they work through their grief. If this happens, a counsellor can help. Clinical depression is different from normal grief in that it's more intense and prolonged. If you are concerned about depression, please contact your doctor.



### **When Children Grieve**

Children don't show their feelings in the same way adults do. Sometimes they look as though they have not been affected by the death. They may cry for a while and then return to play, not because they are not upset, but because their words and behaviour don't always reflect how they feel inside. You may see their grief expressed in their play. They may talk about their feelings with other children rather than with adults.

It's common for children, as they grow, to grieve the loss of their loved one at a later time. They may develop new feelings and new responses to the death, even years after the suicide. They often ask different questions as they try to understand what happened from a more mature point of view. And they may experience grief again as they pass through various developmental events, such as graduations, proms, getting married and the birth of their first child.

Children need to deal with their grief. Be available to talk about the death with them or have them talk to someone else they trust. If the pain is still too great for you, an Elder or family or community member may help.

### **When Teens Grieve**

Teens grieve differently than adults and, because their brains are still developing, problem solving may not be a well-developed skill. Teen mourning rituals tend to be more collaborative and less private than adults'. Peer groups and other groups they may belong to (e.g., clubs, teams, cultural and religious groups) can be helpful to teens. Expressing themselves through technology is common and can be useful in the grieving process (e.g., writing an online journal or blog). (CAMH, 2011)

Teens may exhibit more anger and feel guilty about not knowing about the risk of suicide or doing something to prevent it. Like adults, they will ask why and try to comprehend how someone can end their life. Teens need support, regardless of how they seem to be grieving. (CAMH, 2011)

## **What Helps Healing**

Healing doesn't mean forgetting. It means that the sadness and other feelings don't get in the way of your life as much as they did in the beginning. You will get through it and the pain will lessen.

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*Seek out what gives you the most strength and comfort, and allow yourself the time to heal.*

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### **Keep on Talking**

Some survivors seek out information about suicide and grieving; others choose not to do so. Many survivors say they talked their way through their grief. As you heal, talk about your memories and honour your loved one who has passed. Focusing on how they lived can be very healing. Find a safe person, or several



people, who will let you talk and are comfortable hearing about your pain. The people you choose to talk to may or may not have experienced the suicide with you. When you are open about the suicide, you give others permission to talk about it too. Keeping the suicide a secret adds to the burden of shame. A lot more people than you realize have been touched by suicide.

At times you may need to be distracted from your grieving. That is okay. Don't feel guilty about losing yourself in something else for a while.

### **Hold on to Your Memories**

Often survivors, both adults and young people, have found comfort in holding on to items that remind them of their loved one, such as furniture, clothing, jewelry or favourite objects. Elders remind us to find the balance in all things. Hold these items close to you. Soothe yourself with 'alone times' to remember your loved one. Just remembering the small things can sometimes give you the most comfort.

### **Do What Works for You**

Some families remember their loved one by leaving an empty chair at the dinner table, or by calling them by name in ceremony or prayer. Others talk with their loved one's spirit simply to share what is going on in day to day life. You may choose to give something up, like cutting your hair. Whatever your personal beliefs are, traditional and spiritual faith may help you through.

Remember to do what feels right for you, not what pleases other people. It's okay to say "no" when invited to do something you don't feel ready to do.

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*"We need silence, a time for reflection to think about the life lost.  
We celebrate the person's life, and remember the good times."*

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## **Later Reactions**

Some survivors feel even more pain and emptiness several months after the death. The tasks of planning the funeral and dealing with financial and legal matters have been completed. Friends and family have offered their sympathy and then needed to get back to their lives. Be prepared for this and reach out for help when you need it. Our Aboriginal community is a great source of strength. Try to keep your family, friends and Elders close.

### **Difficult Days**

There will be many times through the years when coping with the loss becomes more difficult, such as the anniversary of the death, birthdays and holidays. You may feel more on edge in the weeks leading up to them. It will help you to plan ahead and talk to other family members about how they want to spend the day. This gives everyone a chance to support each other and talk about their grief. Some ideas are to write a card to the deceased and place it in a significant place or remember the deceased by going to a place that has some connection with them.



### **Finding the Answers**

You may never know the answer to, “Why?” Many times survivors mistake a ‘triggering event’, such as a relationship breakup, for the ‘cause’ when, in most cases, the person was in extreme emotional or physical pain for a long time. As you work through your grief you will gradually learn to live with questions that cannot be answered. An Elder offers these words *“Try to live your regular routine in looking after yourself, like doing household chores, giving yourself personal care. I have life in me to keep going, getting some rest, spending time with nature, talking about how I feel...”*

## **Talking Circles and Support Groups**

You may find it easier to talk to other people who have gone through the same loss as you. One Aboriginal woman explained “I understand because I have walked in those shoes.”

If you live in a First Nations Community (reserve), call your health centre, healing lodge or crisis unit to find out if they have any talking or healing circles you could attend. Some people choose to go to a Sweat Lodge or other ceremony to cope. If you live in the city, sometimes the local Friendship Centre or other gathering place has programs you can take part in. If you are not comfortable with talking circles, or not ready to share in such a public way, you may ask a counsellor, clergy or health nurse to find out what might be available. You can also call the local health region for information on local suicide support groups.

## **Looking After Yourself**

### **In the Short-Term**

Grieving takes energy, so forgive yourself when you simply can’t do the things you think you ‘should’ do. In the beginning, your grief journey may use up all of your energy, especially if you have to care for others or deal with some practical matters. During this time you may find it difficult to make healthy decisions. The more you take care of yourself, the better you will be able to get through each day.

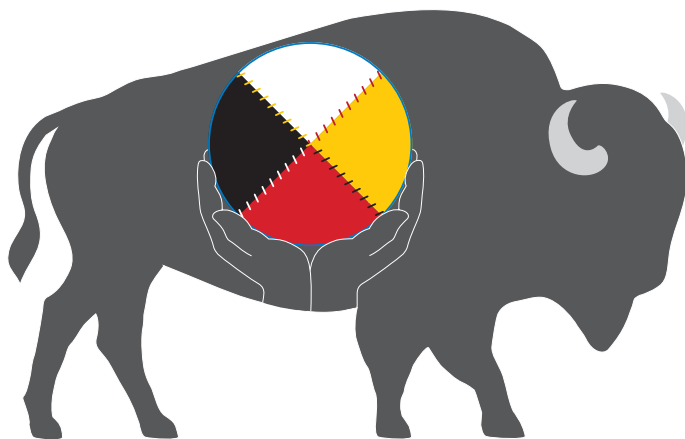
- Make time for you. Use your alone time to think, plan, meditate, pray, journal, remember and grieve.
- Surround yourself with safe people and safe places to support you on this difficult journey.
- Accept help. Don’t be afraid to tell people what you need. Often, people may not know what to say or how to help unless they are told directly.

## *In the Long-Term*

As time passes, you will find the courage and resources to keep going and have the energy to be more purposeful about taking care of yourself.








- Manage your health. Eat a balanced diet and get physical exercise. Drink plenty of water and avoid or limit intake of alcohol and caffeine. For more information on all aspects of your health, go to: [www.myhealth.alberta.ca](http://www.myhealth.alberta.ca)
- Keep a journal. Record your thoughts, feelings, hopes and dreams. Writing them down may help make them more real.
- Talk things out. Confide in a trusted friend, family member, colleague, religious leader or professional therapist.
- Practise relaxation techniques. Try relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, art therapy and visualization.
- Create a list of resources. Include the people and organizations that can help you when things are not going well.
- Take a break from your grief. See a movie, visit a museum or art gallery, pursue a hobby or go for a walk with a friend.
- Re-establish a routine in your life. Survivors often find the structure and distraction of returning to work or getting a new routine helpful.
- Give back to your community. Many survivors have found a sense of peace and fulfillment in shared compassion and using their experiences to help others.
- Take small steps. Recognize each step forward and reward yourself in some way.

Read about suicide, grief and the ways in which people have used their spirituality to cope in times of tragedy. Sources of information include your local library, bookstores, the Internet, funeral homes and community agencies.



## FINAL WORDS

### *More Words of Hope From Our Elders*

-  *"We are all created equally, there is good in every human being. Pray for the good things."*
-  *"We need prayers to release our grief. The prayers for their spirit are to be received by the Creator. It is not an end. We pray that they are surrounded by life, that they go through light."*
-  *"Call upon the grandparents, the Elders, the ancestors, to help us when we are the ones in pain."*
-  *"Our Indian language is encouraging. Use your language to ease the pain of your loss."*
-  *"Pray for the spirit of your loved one. Visit each other. Just listen."*
-  *"Humour is a big part of healing and life. We do practical jokes and tell funny stories to overcome things that we are going through. Laughter is important to help the family to heal."*
-  *"Our past journeys will help us into the future."*



## *Prayer For Strength, Healing & Hope*

Oh, Great Spirit, whose voice I hear in the winds.  
Whose breath gives life to all the world, hear me.  
I come before you, one of your many children.  
I am weak and small.  
I need your strength and wisdom.

May I walk in beauty  
Make my eyes ever behold the red and purple sunset.  
Make my hands respect the things you have made  
And my ears sharp to your voice.  
Make me wise, so I may learn the things you have taught your children.

The lessons you have written in every leaf and rock.  
Make me strong—!  
Not to be superior to my brothers, but to fight my greatest enemy—myself.

Make me ever ready to come to you with straight eyes,  
So that when life fades as the fading sunset,  
May my spirit come to you without shame.

*Translated by Chief Yellow Lark, 1887*



# RESOURCES

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## Medical Examiner

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### Edmonton

Office of the Chief Medical Examiner  
7007 116 St.  
Edmonton, AB T6H 5R8  
Phone: 780-427-4987

### Calgary

Office of the Chief Medical Examiner  
4070 Bowness Rd. N.W.  
Calgary, AB T3B 3R7  
Phone: 403-297-8123

For other locations in Alberta, contact the nearest of office.

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## Important Phone Numbers

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### Emergency

Phone: 911

### Kids Help Phone

Phone: 1-800-668-6868

### Health Link

Phone: 811

### First Nations & Inuit Hope for Wellness Help Line

Phone: 1-855-242-3310

### Alberta Mental Health Help Line

Phone: 1-877-303-2642

### Crisis Line/Suicide Grief Support

#### Calgary

Phone: 403-266-HELP (4357)

#### Edmonton

Phone: 780-732-6654

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## Suicide Bereavement Support Services

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### Airdrie

Airdrie Family Services Grief Support  
Phone: 403-988-4611

### Fort McMurray

Some Other Solutions Society Crisis  
Prevention  
Phone: 780-743-4357

### Grande Prairie

Suicide Prevention Resource Centre  
Phone: 780-539-6680

### Lethbridge

Lethbridge Family Services  
Phone: 403-327-5724

### Peace River County

Suicide Survivors Bereavement  
Support Group  
Phone: 780-624-6151

### Red Deer

CMHA Bereavement Support  
Program  
Phone: 403-297-1748

### Vermillion, Lloydminster, Wainwright

Walking Through Grief Society

Phone: 780-846-2576

### Suicide Prevention Service (Toll Free)

Phone: 1-833-456-4566

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## Organizations

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### Native Counselling Services of Alberta

Phone: 403-237-7850 (Calgary)  
Phone: 780-423-2141 (Edmonton)

### Indigenous & Northern Affairs Canada

Phone: 1-800-567-9604

### Alberta Native Friendship Centres Association

Phone: 780-423-3138

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## Websites

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### **Anunnnginiq Centre “Inuusiqatsiarniq**

National Aboriginal Health Centre

The Anunnnginiq Centre has compiled information on suicide rates in Inuit regions, causes of suicide, and places Inuit can call if they are seeking help.

[www.naho.ca/](http://www.naho.ca/)

### **Acting on What We Know: Preventing Youth Suicide in First Nations**

First Nations Inuit Health, Health Canada

This report picks up the dialogue on First Nations youth suicide by sounding out the depths of the problem from the various perspectives of the field of research in examining the role of government programs, community responses and individual choices. The Advisory Group has attempted to look at First Nations youth suicide through many different lenses, applying its best thinking in considering what concrete solutions will be most helpful to First Nations communities. [www.hc-sc.gc.ca](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca)

### **Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada**

Contain links to many resources available to Aboriginal and First Nations people. [www.canada.ca/en/indigenous-northern-affairs.html](http://www.canada.ca/en/indigenous-northern-affairs.html)

### **Native Counselling Services of Alberta**

NCSA is an Aboriginal-based agency focused on the healing and harmony of the entire community and provides a great number of programs and services committed to family wellness, addictions, parole, probation and prison liaison services, resource, media and research, residential correctional and healing centres, and development of community wellness. [www.ncsa.ca](http://www.ncsa.ca)

### **Information Centre on Aboriginal Health (ICAH)**

ICAH is a central database of Aboriginal health information on bibliographic and Web-based resources, programs and services, health careers, and scholarships and bursaries. It's a 'virtual' library that provides, wherever possible, links to information that is free on the Internet. [www.ica.h.ca](http://www.ica.h.ca)

### **Nechi Training, Research and Health Promotions Institute**

Nechi is an Aboriginal Movement committed to holistic healing and healthy addictions-free lifestyles. The web site contains information on the services provided. [www.nechi.com](http://www.nechi.com)

### **Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP)**

Links to a number of RCMP resources and offices in Alberta. [www.rcmp.gc.ca/](http://www.rcmp.gc.ca/)

### **Turtle Island Native Network Healing and Wellness**

Includes a number of resources and links to other web sites related to Aboriginal suicide and suicide in general.

[www.turtleisland.org/healing/healing-suicide.htm](http://www.turtleisland.org/healing/healing-suicide.htm)

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## Books

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- **Chee Chee: A Study of Aboriginal Suicide.** Evans, Al. 2004.  
Benjamin Chee Chee was an Ojibway artist who died by suicide just as he was beginning to get international success. He lived with anger and frustration for more than 30 years before completing suicide. Author Al Evans, noted suicidologist and former RCMP officer, explores Chee Chee's wild, reckless, creative life to reveal how the clash between Aboriginal and White society has affected the suicide rate of young Aboriginal men and women, now among the highest in the world.
- **In Search of April Raintree.** Culleton, Beatrice. 1983.  
This story explores the underlying racism in the foster care system and in Canadian society, and how it affects those caught up in it. This book tells the story of Métis sisters, April and Cheryl Raintree, who are removed from their family, and are raised in several foster homes. It follows their lives leading to the eventual suicide of Cheryl.
- **Darkness Calls.** Sanderson, Steve. 2006.  
An age-old Cree figure is adapted to the 21st century as a superhero who fights teen suicide in this new comic book. Presented in a format youth are more inclined to read, Darkness Calls addresses the epidemic of Aboriginal youth suicide.
- **Horizons of Hope: An Empowering Journey.** Nishnawbe-Aski Nation Youth Forum on Suicide. 1996.



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To order this resource through the  
AHS Provincial Catalogue go to:  
<https://dol.datacm.com/>  
(Search item number: HH002)  
If you don't have access to the catalogue  
email: [ahscalgary@datacm.com](mailto:ahscalgary@datacm.com)

You can also download a copy of this resources at:  
[ahs.ca/healingspirit](https://ahs.ca/healingspirit)

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