

# Suicide

## Relatives feel guilty

By MARY CONNELLY  
How do you sort through the confusion?  
One night, your teenage son closes his bedroom door and ends his life with a rifle shot.  
Or maybe you return home after 14 hours at the office and your spouse has purposefully consumed a drug overdose.  
Welling up with the feelings of loss, terror and bewilderment are gnawing thoughts of "What did I do wrong? If I only hadn't..."

THOSE LEFT wrestling with the aftermath of a suicide in their family or peer group are receiving increased attention in the metropolitan area. Project SOS (Survivors of Suicide) is a recently formed group designed to help people work out the problems which follow a suicide.

Initiated and supervised by Dr. Bruce Danto of Birmingham, director of the Detroit Suicide Prevention Center, five SOS groups meet regularly in the tri-county area. In Oakland county, meetings are held in Bloomfield Hills.  
"The group really arose out of the reality of suicide," Danto said. "People are killing themselves. Suicide prevention centers don't stop that tragic style of death. We never will, no matter how many doctors try."

ONCE THE reality of suicide is recognized, Danto said, a corresponding acknowledgement of the survivors and their pain must be addressed.

"A suicide is an elective abandonment of the family," he explained. "The survivors are victims of an elective abandonment by a loved one."

Terming it an "embarrassing form of survivorship," Danto said that as feelings of guilt and responsibility mount with a suicide occurred, many traditional bereavement supports are withdrawn. Those who would offer comfort under normal death circumstances may withhold them at a suicide.

"In-laws are accusing. Neighbors are judgmental and disapproving," Danto commented, adding that gossip which points an accusatory finger at the spouse or parents heightens the trouble.

At the same time, Danto said, survivors may be troubled with possible lost life insurance benefits due to the form of death, police investigations, refusal of burial privileges in cemeteries and other untypical proceedings.

IN AN EFFORT to meet the needs of those confronting a suicide occurrence, Danto began the group sessions in March. Numbering 10 or less, the participants meet weekly or bi-weekly under the guidance of a trained volunteer.

"Project SOS people feel a sense of emotional support because everyone has had the same kind of experience," Danto said. "They feel their skin has been ripped off." Generally, he said, those who at-

tend the sessions have to work through two major stumbling blocks.

"They have to recognize who is really responsible for the suicide and that is the person who killed himself," he said.

Survivors also frequently have to rid themselves of accumulated guilts feelings, Danto said. Family members, for example, may revive a long list of guilts experienced throughout the years.

Among the more affluent socioeconomic population, Danto said, suicide may also prompt cause-fighting, among family survivors. Parents, for example, may pursue and support the interest of a deceased child.

"They try to align themselves with a global cause," Danto said. "So that if they couldn't save their son they will work on a cause he pursued."

"IT HAS been fantastically successful," Danto said of the SOS sessions. "It goes beyond what I ever hoped it would do. We've had people work out their guilt feelings and dissolve their feelings of resentment."

According to Danto, work with suicide survivors is a relatively recent development.

"Suicidologists have dabbled in it," he said, adding that programs for survivors are established in California, Florida and Missouri. "The thing that is unique in our program is that it is run by volunteers."

*I can't say that I'm ecstatically happy to be alive. Somedays I think, well, why didn't it work. But life is a challenge and I'm trying to take that challenge and make it'*

## The ones who try and fail find life difficult

By CHRISTINE WALDEN

Marianne's going to be all right now.

The scared, feverish look is gone, replaced with something more content, sensible and optimistic.

A year ago Marianne didn't know what was happening to her, maybe she didn't care. Now she does, and trying to understand herself and others makes life a little harder and coping often difficult. But she is coping.

It was a year ago that Marianne decided to do something about a life she didn't like. So she swallowed 40 pills and lay down to die. But she didn't.

TODAY, SHE looks back and ahead. Not planning the future, but hoping. Not musing the past, but learning from it.

"I can't say that I'm ecstatically happy to be alive. Somedays I think, well, why didn't it work. But life is a challenge and I'm

trying to take that challenge and make it."

Marianne could be anyone. She could be you, your friend, your daughter. She could be a movie star or a bum.

In reality she is a young woman from the suburbs who, at first glance, has everything going for her. During that year after the divorce and before the attempt, she was a good-time girl.

But that wasn't really her life style. Now making it means coming to realistic terms with herself, and understanding that you can't be everyone's friend.

"I WANTED to help people and make everyone happy. I thought everyone was super. I would meet someone and consider them my best friend. I practically had an 'I love you' list."

"But I was bummed out at myself. As far as my values and morals were concerned, they were the opposite of what I was. I guess you

just try to prove someone loves you."

The divorce, she says, isn't the cause. Nor is her childhood. "Everyday I think about it and I still don't really understand why I did it. Some people do it for marital or financial reason. I think I just got tired of laughing."

THE PAST year has been a tough one. It's been one of assessing, experimenting and second-guessing, of tossing off strange looks and understanding cautious friends, of days that don't seem worth living and days that "erase all the bad ones."

The aftermath of a suicide attempt and the terms given an attempted suicide make Marianne mad.

"Because I wasn't successful, people say it was an attention-getting thing or a cry for help. But I didn't want any help. I didn't feel sorry for myself. I was just tired. And it isn't the coward's way out.

People say that without looking at the person, I was doing it for other people."

Marianne refuses to be ashamed of attempting suicide. Nor is she melodramatic. She accepts it as unerasable history and sometimes considers the attempt itself a sort of challenge.

"I'm not a religious person, but sometimes I think it happened for a reason. Maybe God picked me out to see if I could handle it."

"Hey, I heard you tried to commit suicide? I refuse to be ashamed of it or deny it. It's like saying to them, 'Yes, I heard you broke your leg. Now you're walking and I'm alive.'"

"I THINK it is just as hard afterwards as it is before. Before, when things happened to you, you don't know or realize it. But after, you know what's happening and you have to deal with it."

moment thing, but it wasn't planned either. I used to think 'if I were dead so I'm going to kill myself' and I had gone to the drug store twice to buy pills, but I always chickened out."

When she didn't "chicken out" she made a near completed attempt, spent several days in the hospital and began therapy.

"It sort of became a status symbol. Basking in the glory of it, talking about my therapy sessions and saying mine were better than yours. But there were some good, concrete things you find out and I've gained a lot of insight from it."

MARIANNE IS aware of the effect of her action on other people.

"Families feel responsible for it and they shouldn't," she said. "I tried to blame it on a childhood, but I can't. I had a good life, no problems. I can't say that my parents have accepted it, their kid trying to kill herself, but I do think

they've learned to live with it."

After the "glory" and then the painful realities, Marianne talks openly now about her feeling and attitudes. She wishes more people would.

"SUICIDE IS a serious problem, it's something that shouldn't be hush hush. Maybe if people would say 'Hey two years ago I tried and I know what it's like to hit rock bottom, but it's not all that bad,' maybe a few lives would be saved."

No one ever talked openly to Marianne. It might not have made any difference. But now Marianne's holding the reins. She knows the ruts and the smooth spots and neither frightens her.

"I'm cruising right now. I still don't know what I believe in so I'm experimenting. And I'm still mixed up. I don't know what's in the future, so I'm looking for it and that's a challenge. I guess I am glad to be alive."

Why did she do it? A mother wonders. Was her life that bad?

