

REMEMBERING TOM

Coping with Youth Suicide

Tom was 18 when he killed himself, leaving his family to deal with the anguish of his death. **Remembering Tom** explores the tragic aftermath of a young man's suicide and the painful impact on his family.

We meet Tom's mother, father, sister and brother two years after his death. They convey how they have learned to live with, not "get over," Tom's suicide. Rachel, 17, describes how the event changed her life and how she coped with "the greatest pain anyone can imagine." She recounts overcoming her own suicidal thoughts in the months after her brother died.

This documentary underscores a family's grief and bereavement following a suicide. Their strength and resilience provide hope that although we cannot always prevent such a tragedy, we *can* make choices about how to cope.

Director: Daryl K. Davis

Producers: Lori Kuffner and Jennifer Torrance

Co-produced by Cooper Rock Pictures and the NFB.

24 minutes

Order number: C9199 287



Closed captioned. A decoder is required.

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National Film Board of Canada
P.O. Box 6100, Station Centre-Ville
Montreal, Quebec H3C 3H5

Printed in Canada



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Coping with Youth Suicide

Photo: Dave Hansen



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VHS

C9199 287



A National Film Board of Canada Release

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Remembering Tom brings youth suicide out into the open and provides a springboard for discussion. Talking about this tragedy helps us to understand the myths and taboos surrounding this sensitive subject and encourages us to confront a major social problem. This video can be used as a bereavement and loss resource, as well as a tool in suicide prevention.

Previewing Suggestions and Recommendations

Remembering Tom may elicit strong emotions among viewers, some of whom may recall their own loss. Sadness, depression and sometimes even suicidal feelings may be triggered, so *pre-screening* discussion is as important as post-screening debriefing. Educators and counsellors can prepare themselves through the steps outlined below.

Become Familiar with the Topic

- Study the language and concepts of grief and bereavement under complicated circumstances, especially suicide related to adolescents and young adults.
- Do some research on suicide prevention, and be prepared for a broad discussion that includes grief, suicide and suicidal behaviours.

Make Resources Available to Students

- Provide information and resource materials dealing with trauma and grief after suicide, suicide intervention/prevention guidelines, bereavement counselling, support groups and suicide prevention agencies and organizations in your community. (See the References and Resources sections.)
- Invite experienced colleagues or speakers to co-facilitate group discussion.
- Prepare a list of suggestions for how to support family members and friends trying to cope with the aftermath of suicide.

Director:
Daryl K. Davis

Producer:
(Cooper Rock Pictures)
Lori Kuffner

Producer (NFB):
Jennifer Torrance

Editor:
Daryl K. Davis

Camera:
Donavon Fraser

Audio Tech:
Thomas Hale

Music:
Jason F. Plumb

Executive Producer:
Svend-Erik Eriksen

Consultant:
Jeannette Ambrose

Videojacket Guide:
Jeannette Ambrose

Order number:
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24 minutes



- Ensure that young viewers with strong reactions to the video are connected to appropriate supports such as family members or counsellors.

Establish Ground Rules

- Anyone can leave the room during the screening. (Designate a resource person to assist those experiencing intense feelings.)
- Be mindful of your own sadness, fear, anxiety or anger. This might not be the best place for you to express intense emotions.
- Be thoughtful about your comments. It is possible that someone in the group has been touched by a tragic loss.
- Remember that this is *one* family's story. What has worked for them may not work for everyone.
- During the discussions, respect each other's feelings. Feelings are never right or wrong.
- Discussions about death, and especially suicide, often result in anxiety and bad jokes. Be tolerant of comments that seem uncaring or judgmental.

Suggested Activities After Viewing the Video

It is often easier to discuss sensitive issues in small groups. The following questions can be written on the board or on a handout.

- Which parts of the video had the most impact on you and why?
- How is losing a loved one to suicide different from dealing with death from another cause?
- How would children, teens and adults react differently to the loss of a family member? How might *you* react?
- Why is it difficult to talk about suicide? (The discussion leader can talk about historical/cultural and religious taboos, stigma, fear, lack of knowledge, etc.)
- Make a list of suggestions for healthy ways to cope with the suicide or tragic death of a loved one. How is Tom's family an example of positive ways of coping in a tragic situation?

- How has sharing this family's experience changed your understanding of grief and loss, especially after suicide?
- How could you help a friend who has lost a family member or friend to suicide? How would you know if what you've done is helpful or not? What might happen if you make a mistake and say the "wrong" thing?
- Brainstorm a list of warning signs of possible suicidal behaviour.

General Information on Suicide and Suicide Prevention

- In Canada, suicide is the second leading cause of death among youth under the age of 24. While some groups are at higher risk, suicide cuts across all segments of society.¹
- According to the American Psychiatric Association, suicide is the third leading cause of death in the US among young people 15 to 24.
- Approximately 3,900 people die by suicide annually in Canada. At least 5-6 people are closely affected — about 20,000 each year.¹
- Suicide is still accompanied by stigma and shame, often leaving survivors alone in coping with their loss. We need to provide opportunities for survivors to talk openly about suicide and grief. Support groups and counselling can help.²
- Those who are left behind following the suicide of a loved one often have a harder time coping than those whose loved ones die in other ways. Suicide survivors may need more support from friends and family, and for a longer time.²
- Those who have experienced the suicide of a loved one are at greater risk for suicide and suicidal behaviour than those who have not.
- Many suicides can be prevented. And very few occur without some kind of warning. Learn about the common warning signs, and treat talk about suicide seriously; don't believe that it's "just attention seeking." Don't promise to keep talk about suicide secret. A good friend should try to get help. Encourage the person to go to a counsellor, minister, parent, etc. for help in sorting out their feelings. If the risk for self-harm seems high or immediate, do not leave the person alone, and get help.

Related NFB Videos

Patrick's Story (1999) introduces a young Aboriginal man who attempted suicide, but turned his life around.
Order no. C9199 286.

Surviving Death: Stories of Grief (1998) presents intimate stories of people who have lost a loved one.
Order no. C9198 029.

See the NFB website for other titles: www.nfb.ca.

Resources

- Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention (CASP).
Write CASP, c/o Support Network, 301-11456 Jasper Ave.,
Edmonton, AB, T5K 0M1. Tel: 780 482-0198.
Fax: 780 488-1495. Website: www.suicideprevention.ca.
- Kids Help Phone. Tel: 1 800 668-6868 or online at
kidshelp.sympatico.ca.
- Suicide Information and Education Centre (SIEC), a national
database. Tel: 403 245-3900. Website: www.siec.ca.
- *Survivors of Suicide* (1993), brochure published by the
American Association of Suicidology.
Write AAS, 4201 Connecticut Ave. NW, Suite 408,
Washington, DC. Tel: 202 237-2280.
Fax: 202 237-2282. Website: www.suicidology.org.

References

1. *Suicide in Canada: Update of the Report of the Task Force
on Suicide in Canada*, Mental Health Services Division,
Health Canada, 1994.
2. Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention brochure, 2000.