

The question of whether suicide is a choice is one of the most painful a survivor can carry. It arrives not as an abstract question but as a personal one: did the person I lost choose to leave me? This handout draws on peer experience and clinical research to help survivors understand what was happening in the mind of the person who died, and why 'choice' may not tell the story they fear it does.

## Why the Word 'Choice' Cuts So Deep

- When others say 'they made their choice,' survivors often hear: the person I loved chose to abandon me. That interpretation is understandable and very common in early grief.
- Research on suicide loss confirms that survivors experience the death as intentional, which unlocks self-blame and questions about whether their love was enough. Dr. John Jordan's forty years of clinical work identifies this as the central wound of suicide grief.
- The word 'choice' implies a functioning mind freely weighing options. That is not what happens during a suicidal crisis. Understanding the difference is about seeing clearly what illness does to a person.

## The Pain That Drove the Crisis: Psychache

- Suicidologist Edwin Shneidman coined the term psychache to describe psychological pain so intense it overrides everything else. His research found the most common sentiment in suicide notes was not 'I don't love you' but 'I can't stand the pain anymore.'
- The person who died was not running away from the people who loved them. They were trying to escape pain that felt unbearable and endless, with no visible way out. That distinction matters enormously.

## When the Brain Enters the Suicidal Trance

- Researcher Richard Heckler describes a suicidal trance in which the mind narrows to a single point and the person loses awareness of alternatives, of those who love them, and of any future beyond the pain.
- In that state, they could not feel your love, even though it was real. Their brain sent them false messages that felt absolutely true: that they were a burden, that the pain would never end, that everyone would be better off without them.
- Many people who survive serious attempts describe those moments as automatic, like watching themselves from outside their body. Some cannot remember the events leading up to the attempt at all. That is not what free choice feels like.

## What This Means for Survivors

- Anger, guilt, and a sense of abandonment are all valid responses, and they can coexist with understanding that the person's brain had been overtaken by illness. You do not have to choose between the two.
- There was no combination of words or actions that would have fixed their broken brain chemistry. The guilt survivors carry is one of the most common and painful parts of this grief. You are not alone in it.
- More than 90% of those who die by suicide had a diagnosable mental health condition, according to AFSP research. They lost their lives to an illness. Your love was real and it mattered.
- Healing does not require resolving the question of choice. Many survivors find peace in choosing to remember the full life of the person they lost. The path is not linear, and there is no stage you are supposed to reach by a certain date. Connecting with other survivors is one of the most meaningful steps you can take.

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### Source

<https://sunflowersaftersuicide.com/is-suicide-a-choice/>