



The Glass Full of Water: Why Suicide Rarely Has One Cause

Survivors of suicide loss often fixate on one final moment, believing that if it had gone differently, the death would not have happened. This handout draws on the glass full of water, a teaching metaphor used in suicide loss support groups, along with clinical research on suicide causation, to help survivors and the clinicians supporting them understand why suicide is almost always the result of accumulated pain rather than a single triggering event.

Why Suicide Happens Is Rarely About One Moment

- Suicide is rarely caused by a single event; it is far more often the result of an accumulation of unresolved pain that finally overwhelms a person's capacity to cope.
- Unresolved struggles add to this accumulation slowly and often invisibly, including untreated mental health conditions, old wounds, and years of quiet difficulty that others rarely see.
- A useful comparison is a psychologist's demonstration with a glass of water: the glass does not get heavier, but the longer a person holds it, the harder it becomes to keep holding.

What Was Actually Filling the Glass

- According to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, more than 90 percent of people who die by suicide were living with a diagnosable mental health condition, and many were never diagnosed or adequately treated.
- AFSP's risk factor research also names physical health conditions, financial or relationship crises, childhood trauma, family history of suicide, and inherited genetic vulnerability as part of what can fill the glass.
- A previous suicide attempt is one of the strongest known risk factors for a later death, which is a specific weight many survivors carry that deserves acknowledgment.
- Alcohol or other substances are present in roughly a third of suicide deaths according to CDC surveillance data, though substance use alone does not cause a suicide.
- Mental health struggles are not always visible; someone in real pain often does not look, from the outside, like someone in that much pain.

Why the Last Drop Gets All the Blame

- Hindsight bias causes survivors to believe, after the fact, that they should have seen warning signs that were genuinely invisible at the time.
- The mind searches for a cause it could have acted on, which is why grief tends to fixate on the last conversation or the most recent warning sign rather than the fuller picture.
- The guilt many survivors carry usually comes from mistaking the last drop for the whole glass, not from anything the survivor actually did.

The Real Answer to Why Suicide Happens

- Suicide is not about a desire to die; it is about a desire to end pain that has become unbearable, a concept researchers call psychache.
- Suicide is rarely a choice in the ordinary sense of that word, since the options a person could once see clearly are often no longer visible to them by the time the glass overflows.
- Clinical frameworks for suicide loss grief describe the death as the end point of a long and largely hidden struggle, not as a single isolated act.

What This Means for the Guilt Survivors Carry

- The if-only list survivors replay is almost never a list of things that would have actually changed the outcome.
- One practical exercise that helps many survivors is writing the if-only list once on paper, then noting next to each item what was actually known at the time, not what is known now looking back.
- The person who died deserves to be remembered for the whole of who they were, not only for the moment their pain became too heavy to hold.

Source

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