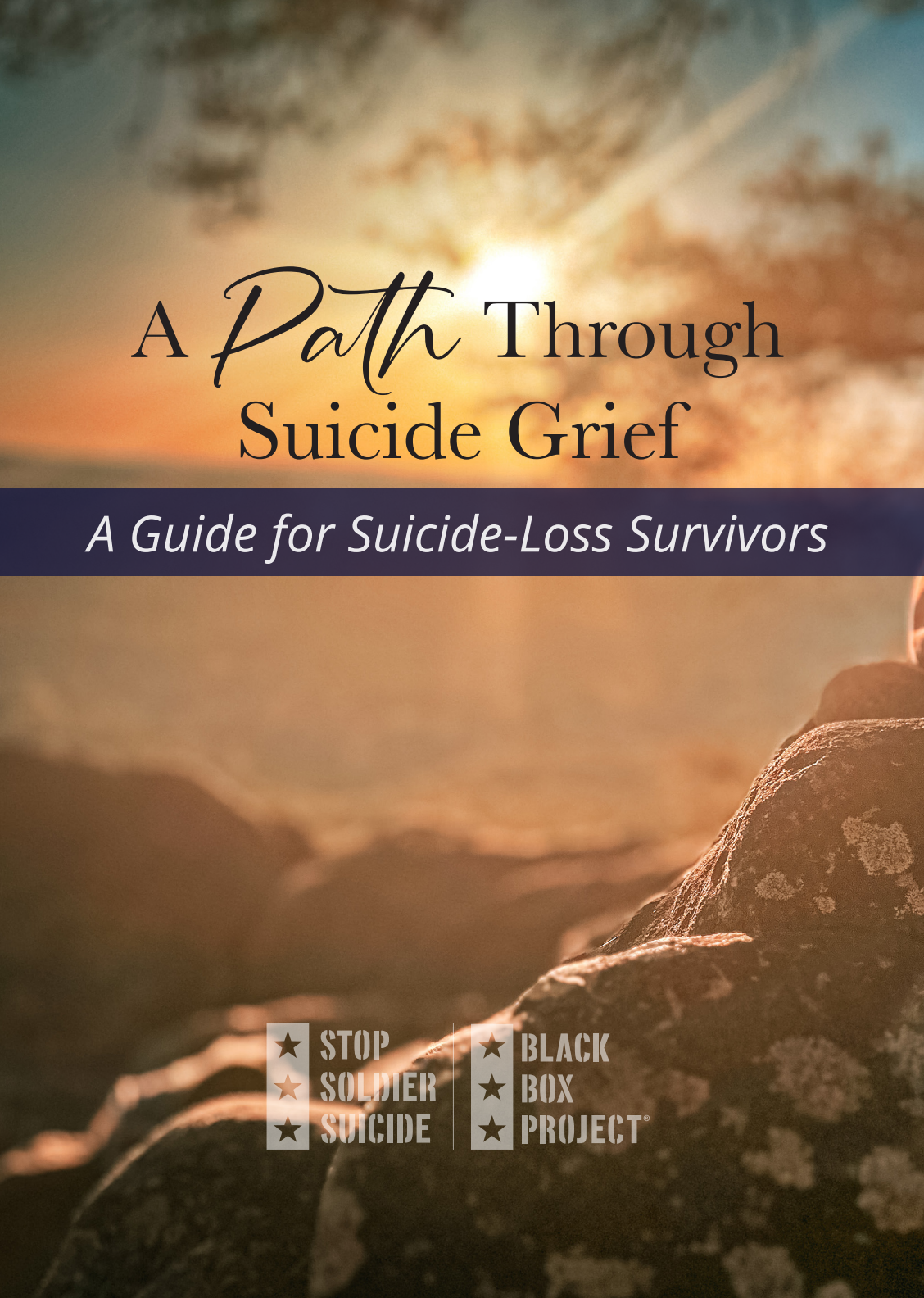

A Path Through
Suicide Grief
A Guide for Suicide-Loss Survivors
STOP
SOLDIER
SUICIDE
BLACK
BOX
PROJECT®

For Jon.
For Mike.

For all those
we've lost to suicide,
and for everyone who
grieves them.

In their honor, and in
hope for every story still
unfolding.

A Path Through Suicide Grief:
A Guide for Suicide-Loss Survivors

This guide, authored by Kim Burditt Bartlett, MSW, is published by Stop Soldier Suicide as part of its Black Box Project initiative.



Dear Survivor,

If this booklet has found its way to you, I want to begin by acknowledging what brought you here: you lost someone you love in a way no one should ever have to endure. I'm so sorry. Suicide loss is a kind of heartbreak that can feel disorienting and destabilizing, and nothing about it is fair. I don't know your story yet, but I already know this: you lost someone you loved deeply to suicide. And that love is why this hurts the way it does.

My little brother Jon died by suicide in April 2010. He was funny and stubborn and protective in ways only a brother can be. Although he was shy about it, his smile lit up a room – his eyes twinkling in a way that made you laugh before you even knew why. When he died, it felt like the world screeched to a halt – like gravity had shifted and we were expected to keep walking anyway.

Those first months were a blur of shock and confusion, questions without answers. I felt disoriented and unsure where to put any of it. I didn't know how to talk about the loss without worrying I'd make others uncomfortable. I didn't know how to support my parents as they grieved their son while navigating my own grief. I didn't know how to carry the weight of loving someone and losing them this way.

In the years since, one truth has become crystal clear: We grieve because we love.

Loving someone deeply is a privilege — even when the grief feels unbearable because we've lost them. That love is the reason the pain is so sharp, and it is also the reason healing is possible. Love doesn't vanish. It changes shape, but it does not go anywhere.

Since losing Jon, I have had the honor of walking alongside hundreds of suicide-loss survivors — siblings, parents, partners, grandparents, adult children, extended family and friends. Every story is unique, and every grief is deeply personal. But many describe similar experiences: shock, unanswered questions, isolation, longing, how we turn things over in our minds searching for understanding, and the courage it takes to keep moving forward one day at a time.

If there's one thing I want you to hear from me, it's this: You are not doing this wrong.

There is no single "right" way to grieve a suicide, and there is no timeline for when you should feel more functional or "back to normal." Time may not heal all wounds, but time does change grief. With time — and with support — it can become less sharp, less all-consuming, and more integrated into your life. It may feel unfathomable right now, but it does become more survivable. Connection is one of the most powerful forms of healing available to us. When we find someone who nods instead of blinking, someone who does not rush us or try to tidy up our grief, something shifts. It gives us room to breathe again. You deserve that kind of understanding and compassion.

This booklet is my way of reaching toward you — to offer what I wish someone had placed in my hands when Jon died. My hope is that something in these pages helps you feel a little more grounded, a little less isolated, and a little more connected to the love that still lives inside your grief.

With care,





Meet Kim

Kim Burditt Bartlett, MSW, is a suicide-loss survivor, speaker, and postvention professional. After her younger brother Jon died by suicide in 2010, she dedicated her work to supporting others impacted by suicide through trauma-informed education and survivor-centered programming.

Over the past decade, she has walked alongside hundreds of suicide-loss survivors, helping to develop resources and frameworks that guide families through the complex terrain of grief after suicide.

Kim serves as Senior Manager of Family Engagement for the Black Box Project at Stop Soldier Suicide, where she partners with suicide loss-surviving families to deepen understanding and strengthen suicide prevention efforts.

Why Suicide Loss Is Different

All grief is hard. But grief after suicide often carries its own layers and complications.

Suicide loss is traumatic

Even if you were not present, the suddenness and circumstances of a suicide loss can overwhelm the nervous system. You may experience intrusive thoughts, difficulty sleeping, hyper vigilance, numbness, or feeling detached. Trauma-informed support can be especially helpful.

You may search relentlessly for answers

The mind often becomes a detective — replaying conversations, looking for clues, turning moments over again and again. Suicide is complex, and it can be especially disorienting to grieve the very person whose actions you are trying to understand. The search for answers is a natural response to something that feels so hard to wrap your mind around. Over time, this searching often softens, even if not every question is resolved.

Social discomfort and stigma can complicate grief

Suicide can make people uncomfortable. Some may avoid the topic, say unhelpful things, or not know how to truly be there for you. If you experience this, know that these reactions reflect gaps in understanding – not something you are responsible for managing. Some people may struggle to relate simply because they have never experienced a loss like this.

You may experience secondary losses

In addition to losing your loved one, you may also be navigating changes in relationships, roles, identity, faith, financial stability, or your sense of safety. Suicide loss often ripples outward, affecting parts of life you might not have anticipated. These losses are real and deserve acknowledgment.

Your emotions may contradict each other

You might feel love and anger, relief and devastation, compassion and betrayal — sometimes in the same hour. Or your experience may look entirely different. There is no required emotional mix. Grief after suicide can be intense, unpredictable, and confusing. That does not mean you are doing it wrong.

There is a path forward even if you feel stuck right now

Grief after suicide loss is not aimless. There are trauma-informed healing frameworks designed specifically for this kind of grief. While the journey is not linear, healing often follows a pattern — beginning with stabilization and gradually moving into the deeper work of grief.

It is also common to feel stuck at certain points. Trauma can slow or stall healing. Feeling stuck does not mean you are failing; it often means additional support or different tools are needed.

It is important to be honest about how we cope. Some strategies may numb pain temporarily but make grief harder to carry long term — such as excessive isolation or relying on substances. Supportive care, connection, and healthier coping tools do not remove the pain, but they can help you move through it more safely. With the right support, movement is possible — even if it feels far away.

A Framework for Healing After Suicide Loss

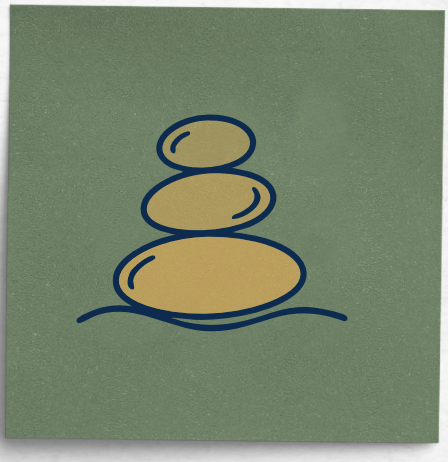


Healing after suicide loss isn't about "moving on." It's about learning to live with both the love and the loss at the same time.

The framework outlined here is informed by trauma-informed postvention models — approaches specifically designed to support individuals and families after a suicide death — including the TAPS Suicide Postvention Model™ (see Acknowledgements on Page 18).

While every survivor's journey is personal, research and lived experience show that certain elements tend to support healing. This framework offers a steady structure — not a rigid sequence, but a guide — for navigating the work of grief after suicide.

Stabilization



After suicide loss, the nervous system is often overwhelmed. Stabilization focuses on creating enough safety — emotional, physical, and practical — to function day to day.

This may include:

- Addressing trauma symptoms
- Getting support around big questions (such as faith beliefs) and big steps (such as what to tell children)
- Supporting sleep and basic routines
- Seeking trauma-informed therapy
- Notifying primary care providers about the loss

Stabilization is not about feeling better. It is about creating steadiness so deeper grief work can begin.

Compassionate Connection



Humans heal in connection. Especially after suicide loss, being with others who understand can reduce isolation.

Peer groups, trained professionals, or survivor communities can provide a space where you do not have to explain every detail. Engaging in conversation with others who have experienced suicide loss — hearing them name feelings and ask questions that sound familiar — can be deeply affirming. It reminds you that your reactions are not unusual, and that you are not alone in navigating them.

Connection does not make grief easy. But being alongside others who have survived this kind of loss offers quiet proof that, over time and with support, it is possible to carry this grief and continue living.

Understanding & Coping



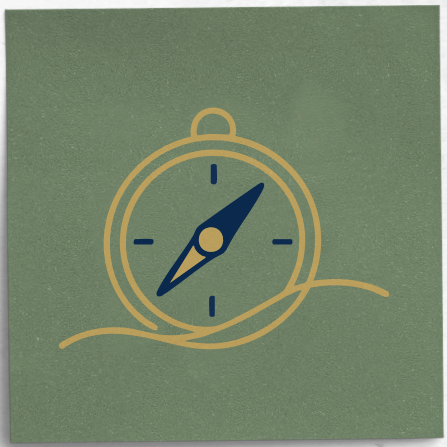
Suicide loss can feel senseless. Increasing your understanding around it does not mean finding a neat explanation — it means learning about trauma, mental health crises, and the realities of overwhelming distress.

Suicide is rarely about one moment or one conversation; it is often the result of complex and unseen suffering. And although education and increased understanding does not erase grief, it can bring shape to what feels chaotic, reduce confusion, and help you place this loss in a broader context.

Coping tools matter, too. Grounding practices, movement, writing, ritual, creative expression, or time in nature may feel unfamiliar at first. Even so, these tools help steady the body and mind during intense waves of grief. You are not trying to become someone different. You are giving yourself support in a season that requires more of you than usual.

Grief is not something to conquer. It is something to move through — and steady tools to help cope make that movement more manageable.

Meaning-Making



After suicide loss, many survivors find themselves searching not only for answers, but for a sense of direction. When something feels chaotic and deeply disorienting, the heart naturally looks for steadiness.

Meaning-making is not about finding a silver lining or explaining why this happened. It is about discovering what helps you stay connected — to your loved one, to your values, and to your life as it continues. For some, meaning shows up through action: advocacy, service, or prevention work. For others, it is quieter — telling stories, lighting candles, keeping traditions, or living with greater intention.

Meaning does not make the loss acceptable. But for many, finding purpose within the grief can feel deeply healing. It allows love to remain active and present, even alongside sorrow.

Integration & Growth



Over time, grief can become more integrated into your life story. Integration does not mean you are “over it.” It means you are learning — slowly and often without noticing — how to live with it. Integration may look like being able to speak your loved one’s name without feeling completely undone. It may look like carrying both sorrow and joy in the same day. It may look like remembering with tenderness instead of only shock. And there will still be days when the grief feels just as close. That does not erase the progress you have made.

Growth after suicide loss is rarely dramatic. It is quiet. It unfolds in small ways — in steadier breaths, in moments of connection, in the ability to imagine a future that still holds meaning.

There is no finish line. But there is a path — one shaped by love, loss, and the steady courage it takes to keep going.

A Closing Thought

If you take nothing else from this booklet, we hope that you carry this with you:

You are allowed to grieve this in your own way,

You are allowed to go slowly,

And you do not have to do this alone.

Suicide loss changes us. There will be days that feel heavy, days that feel steadier, and moments that surprise you. None of that means you are doing this wrong. It means you are grieving someone who mattered.

There are people who understand this kind of loss, and spaces where you can speak your loved one's name freely. Over time, there is room for breath, connection, and meaning to grow alongside the grief.

There is a path through this grief — even if you cannot see it clearly right now. May you move forward gently, trusting that love remains.

Resources for Suicide-Loss Survivors

If you're looking for support beyond these pages, the following organizations provide trusted resources for people grieving after suicide. Many offer online support, education, and community that can be accessed wherever you live.

National Organizations

SAVE (Suicide Awareness Voices of Education) www.save.org

SAVE offers education, advocacy, and community resources related to suicide prevention and post-suicide support. If you're not sure where to begin, this can be a helpful starting point.

AFSP (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention) www.afsp.org

AFSP provides resources for those affected by suicide loss, including connections to local and virtual support groups and annual survivor events such as International Survivors of Suicide Loss Day.

Alliance of Hope www.allianceofhope.org

Hosts a moderated online support community specifically for people grieving after suicide loss, offering connection with others who understand this experience.

The Leftover Pieces www.theleftoverpieces.com

An online community created by a suicide-loss survivor offering connection, podcasts, courses, and curated resources for individuals and families navigating grief after suicide loss.

TAPS (Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors) www.taps.org

Provides peer-based support, resources, and programming for military and veteran families grieving a death, including those lost to suicide.

Many states have local suicide-loss survivor groups and community organizations. If you're looking for something closer to home, national organizations like SAVE or AFSP can often help point you in the right direction.

Regional Organizations with Online Support

These organizations are based in specific states but offer resources, and in some cases virtual support, that may be accessible regardless of where you live.

Friends for Survival (California) www.friendsforsurvival.org

A suicide-loss survivor organization offering support groups and community connection.

Kevin's Song (Michigan) www.kevinssong.org

Provides survivor-focused programming, education, and community events.

Samaritans (Massachusetts) www.samaritanshope.org

Provides grief support and resources for people affected by suicide, including some online programming.

Additional Support

You may also find comfort in:

- Books written by or for suicide-loss survivors
- Podcasts focused on suicide grief
- Trauma-informed therapists
- Events (such as retreats, camps, or gatherings) for families bereaved.

If you're searching online and aren't sure where to begin, try simple phrases like "suicide loss support group," "grief after suicide resources," or "support for suicide-loss survivors." You can add your city or state if you prefer something local. Look for organizations that emphasize survivor-centered and trauma-informed support.

If you're not sure where to start — or would like recommendations that fit your situation — you're welcome to reach out. We're happy to help you find support that feels like a good fit.

Immediate Support

If you are in crisis, feeling unsafe, or concerned about yourself or someone you know:

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline Call, text, or chat 988 (U.S.)

Crisis Text Line Text HOME to 741741 (U.S.)

If you are a veteran or service member in need of suicide-specific support, visit:

GoRoger.org/Get-Help or call 833-MY-ROGER (833-697-6437).

Acknowledgment

The approach reflected in this booklet was informed in part by the TAPS Suicide Postvention Model™, a trauma-informed framework developed to support individuals and families after suicide loss. The model was developed through the work of the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS) and later published in Death Studies. (www.taps.org)

Made Possible By

The Black Box Project partners with suicide loss-surviving families to responsibly analyze digital data in hopes of deepening our understanding of suicide and strengthening prevention efforts. Your experience — and the experiences of families like yours — help shape research that matters. To learn more about the project or explore ways to participate scan the QR code below, visit www.StopSoldierSuicide.org/BlackBoxProject, or email blackbox@stopsoldiersuicide.org.

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Notes & Reflection


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