Radical Self-Care for Survivors of Suicide Loss
by Nandini Murali

Let’s admit it. Self-care is hardly a priority for most people. This isn’t surprising though—we overvalue caring for others and downplay or minimize caring for ourselves. Worse, self-care is perceived as selfish or self-indulgent!

What does self-care mean, and what does it involve? Simply put, it implies—physical, emotional, psychological, social and spiritual care.

The very idea of survivors of suicide loss practicing self-care can seem radical. The stigma, shame, secrecy and silence that a survivor faces invisibilizes, erases and marginalizes any of their valid concerns. Equally relevant, most survivors themselves feel they are not entitled to any form of support—either from themselves or from others.

As someone who had just survived suicide loss, Cheryl Richardson’s The Art of Extreme Self-Care was a milestone in my path toward recovery and healing.

Extreme self-care meant taking my care to a whole new level—a level that seemed arrogant and selfish, practiced by people who had an inappropriate sense of entitlement. It meant taking radical action to improve my life and engaging in daily habits that allowed me to maintain this new standard of living (…) the practice of extreme self-care forces us to make choices and decisions that honor and reflect the true nature of our soul.

Cheryl Richardson

On a fundamental level, extreme self-care for survivors of suicide loss is about extraordinary self-compassion. It is about making conscious choices to love ourselves unconditionally, accepting our imperfections and embracing our vulnerabilities. Our worlds have been ripped apart by the tragedy that has left deep craters and gaping wounds in our psyches. We need to establish a new normal that not only honors and respects our loved one who we lost, but also enables us to rescript our lives as we move forward through the tragedy.

Each survivor of suicide loss grieves differently. There are no band-aids, quick fixes or a one-size-fits-all approach to recovery. That said, here are a few tips for radical self-care that helped me heal and transform:

First things, first: Attend to your basic needs. Ensure that you eat nourishing food, drink plenty of water and have adequate rest and sleep. In the acute phase of traumatic grief, survivors may experience a loss of appetite. Or, it could be binging and overeating. Either way, ensure a balance. It is quite likely that you may find a good night’s sleep to be elusive. Intrusive memories, crying spells and sheer exhaustion can either prevent you from falling asleep or wake you up after just a short spell of exhausted sleep. I found it
helpful to take prescription sleep medicines in the first month following the tragedy. Then, as I built my resources, I gradually tapered it off under medical supervision.

Stay with your feelings: In the acute phase of the bereavement (the first three months), I was overwhelmed with emotions like anger, sadness, rejection, abandonment and fear. It might be tempting and you will receive plenty of well-meaning advice from friends and family to “fight, conquer or subdue” your difficult emotions. I found (and still find) these militaristic metaphors to be disempowering, self-defeating and non-sustainable. Instead, stay with your feelings; face them (instead of running away from them by immersing yourself in work or other forms of physical addiction like alcohol or toxic relationships). It requires courage to do this because these feelings often ambush you with the ferocity of a predator. It is important to validate every feeling. Avoid labeling or judging them.

However, it requires a considerable self-awareness, authenticity and courage to be able to do this. But trust me, it gets better every time you make the choice of staying with your feelings.

Treat yourself with utmost self-compassion. You owe it to yourself. We are so conditioned to expect love from the outside. Instead, we need to give that to ourselves; be gentle with yourself. “When you treat and view yourself with the respect you deserve, you experience the peace that comes from being present to yourself (...)it forces the ego to step aside as you experience a moment of seeing your true nature: A spiritual being housed in a physical shell,” says Richardson in her book.

Express yourself: Give yourself permission to acknowledge, explore, express and honor every emotion. I found journaling and adult coloring books particularly helpful.

Seek out support groups: I found membership in support groups—both online and in person to be very helpful. Meeting others with similar experiences creates a sangha—a strange communion that only those with lived experience of suicide loss can truly empathize with. Listening to other people’s experiences of the loss, how they responded, the challenges they faced and their strategies serves to normalize the experience of suicide loss and it makes us feel that it can happen to anyone any time. We come to realize that we, the survivors of the loss, are in no way responsible for our loved one’s act.

Seek out counselling services and therapies that are trauma-informed and survivor of suicide loss centric: I explored several body based therapeutic modalities such as Gestalt Therapy, Integral Eye Movement Therapy (IEMT), Core Transformation, and psychodrama (both in groups and individual settings) that helped me pare away the different layers of suicide grief. I found that most mental health professionals had inadequate knowledge about counselling survivors of suicide loss. I responded to this lacuna by qualifying myself as a life coach who specializes in loss and transition.

Make changes in your physical environment: I made the difficult and courageous choice to live in the same home as where I had lost my loved one. Despite the trauma, the home—which my late husband and I had lovingly built—also held happy memories for me. Besides, I could not deal with another transition at that point in my life. Since I had chosen to continue living in the same place, I decided to make several changes in the physical space. Repainting the house, rearranging furniture, getting rid of junk and decluttering, buying a few new items of furniture, all this gave the house a “new look.” It was also symbolic of my effort toward rearranging my life.

Surround yourself with supportive family and friends: It’s not about the number of people.
Besides my birth family, I had (and still have) friends who were unconditionally loving and supportive. Soon after the tragedy, my elderly parents decided to divide time between Madurai (where I live) and Chennai (where they reside). Their loving compassionate presence was a salve for my soul. They have been the central pillars in my recovery and healing. My closest friends in Madurai opened the doors of their homes and hearts for me. In the early stages of grief, it was impossible for me to stay at home in the late evenings as memories would assault me. So I would go over to their homes, spend time with them, have dinner and then head home. It made all the difference. They would also phone me every day to enquire how I was doing, and to show how much they cared for me.

Explore traditional systems of healing: In the early stages of grief, I had intractable headaches and elevated blood pressure, I wasn’t able to process my thoughts clearly because of brain fog. The latter settled in a couple of months, but the headaches didn’t stop; medicines I took for it didn’t help. In desperation, I tried acupuncture, Bach flower remedy, ayurveda and marma massage therapy. The headache miraculously settled down almost instantaneously. Since then, I have been following all three modes of treatment regularly. They worked for me at the physical, emotional and spiritual levels and helped me process the grief—organically and viscerally. Grief is not something that only exists mentally; it is stored in every cell in the body. The deep tissue massage and massage techniques along the nerve meridians gradually but surely restored my vitality and wellness in a holistic manner.

Develop new hobbies, find creative outlets: I acquired a new hobby—I began to learn Carnatic music and started to re-engage with my twin passions—travel and writing. Wildlife photography; tarot and oracle card reading; exploring energy-based healing techniques; getting involved in suicide prevention activism—pursuits like these helped me transform my pain into a purposeful energy.

Dealing with triggers: My wedding anniversary, the anniversary of my spouse’s death, and his birthday were and continue to be powerful triggers that unleash a tsunami of memories. I deal with them by visiting my parents on those days and this year, on my husband’s second anniversary, I visited the Sri Krishna Temple at Guruvayoor—my ishta devata or chosen deity. There were several miraculous experiences at this sacred spot that helped me heal.

Empower yourself with knowledge: I read extensively about suicide and survivors of suicide loss. These resources—material I found online and in books—have enabled me to acquire informed perspectives that have empowered me.

Anchor yourself in spirituality: This has been the central pillar of my healing journey. I committed to my daily sadhana with renewed vigor—it includes doing a kriya, praying, practicing pranayama, yoga and meditation. These are yogic practices that incorporate breathing. The concept of sharanagati—loosely translated it means surrender—is now an integral part of my life and one that has helped me stay the course.

These self-care practices have helped me find meaning and purpose in life; to move through the tragedy and still live a meaningful, joyous life.