

After Your Suicide Attempt: Deciding To Live



By Samantha Heames

Brought to you by:

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FORWARD

Dear Reader,

If you are reading this, then you are probably in the same place that Samantha and I have been. My name is Sabrina Strong, I am the current Chair of New Mexico Suicide Prevention Coalition (NMSPC), and I attempted suicide in March of 2005. I took what I hoped was a fatal overdose of pills and started slicing my wrists with a kitchen knife. Almost 20 hours later, despite my best intentions, I woke up.

If you have just woken up alive, I hope this booklet will let you know you are not alone. Your journey starts now; unfortunately there is no road map for where you are going. Samantha's story in some ways is very different than mine, but in some ways, it's like she's talking about me.

After my suicide attempt, I felt fragile. I got up, showered, brushed my teeth, ate my breakfast, and went to work; came home, put on pajamas, and the next day I did it all over again. There were entire weeks, and months like that. *Simple and fragile*. My parents watched me like a hawk. My friends? I only had one friend left by then - my life had been coming apart in leaps and bounds. I lied to everyone. I said I fell. It at least explained the bruises on my knees. I tried many times to get up off the floor that night, but I was just too drugged, so instead I fell down on my knees, over and over. The cuts on my wrists? Those required strategically placed bracelets.

Why am I telling you all of this? Because if you are reading this booklet, there are a few things you need to know. There are some incredible mental health professionals out there. They know how to help you, and better yet, they can teach you how to help yourself. I personally credit that first appointment with a psychiatric nurse practitioner for changing the entire way I see the world.

The bruises will fade. Yoga classes have gradually healed the damage to my knees, and have taught me how to breathe, and center myself. The bruises on the inside will go away too. Eventually, you will find out where all your bodies are buried. You will vent your feelings and release your pain, until one day, just like in yoga class, you will realize you are much stronger than you ever gave yourself credit for.

One day you will give your bracelets away, just like I did. One day you will realize you don't have to hide. Your attempt on your life is no longer your dirty secret, it is your truth. It really can free you, and through it you will find your purpose for living again.

My purpose was to help other people. Eventually, I made my way to the NMSPC. I started attending their meetings, and one day I found myself leading the organization. I don't know why you're still here, but I'm glad you are, and I promise you, some day, you will find your own "why."

Sabrina H. Strong, May 2009
- *Living again since 2005* -

So, you tried to kill yourself and you botched it. Don't despair; most of the people who have succeeded where you could not, tried at least once before they sealed the deal. In fact, it has been estimated that for every person who completes the act, 8 - 25 more people make an attempt.¹ At least 32,000 Americans die by suicide each year,² so that means that this year somewhere between 240,000 and 750,000 people will be in the same boat as you-- statistically that is; where your head is, only you know. Whether it was a last minute outreach, an unplanned intervention, or simply gross incompetence, you are in a place that many before you have been, and many more will be: your own Purgatory on Earth. And you are in the position of being able to decide which direction you want to go.



Maybe you don't want to read this right now. Maybe you don't think it will help you. Maybe you don't want to be helped. I get that. But there ARE a couple of pros. For starters, reading this might be an excuse to avoid a conversation you don't want to have. Also, it's short. You've got enough time for it.

After all, it's not like you had anything planned today, *right?*
You weren't supposed to be here.

As I begin this, it has been twenty-six days since I tried to take my life. Twenty-six days since I made the decision that it would happen on that exact Monday, after months of contemplation and planning. Twenty-six days since I carried out most of the plan, twenty-six days since I botched it. And twenty-five days of *the look*. You know the one I mean.

**So, you tried
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botched it.**

Almost four weeks. In my head it is as if it just happened. I turn on the TV or my computer, stare at a book or sit in front of a window and I just zone out, sometimes for hours on end. I go almost nowhere. I crawl inside myself and pick at whatever is left of my psyche, trying to figure out where it all went wrong. I imagine that I am actually in a coma in the hospital where I awoke in the harsh fluorescent glare of failure. I pretend that all the thoughts and feelings I have experienced in these weeks are the result of my brain being in its own purgatory. I'm analyzing the options, and I can

¹ Strategies to Improve Non-fatal Suicide Attempt Surveillance: Recommendations from an Expert Roundtable, SPAN USA: August, 2006.

² www.spanusa.org

decide if I want to wake up or if I want to keep receding into my dream world until I'm so stuck there is no coming out.

Attempted suicide is not some white-light filled, life-changing, near death experience. It sucks. There aren't even words to express the crush I felt when I realized that I was alive. Sometimes I wake up and feel it again: *Why am I still here?*

I didn't know what to do, so I trolled the Internet for suicide attempt survival stories and looked around for books about suicide. Some of them seemed directed at people who are thinking about it. Most were for the families and friends of suicide victims. Almost all of them were just pages of numbers cleverly disguised as words.

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What I wanted was something that told me what I was supposed to be feeling, as though it was a well-documented progression with a simple cure. Take two capsules every six hours. If symptoms persist call a physician. Something like that.

I wanted to know what other people went through in the days and weeks after their attempts, but I didn't really want specifics of their situation. I wanted to know what came after waking up alive. I think this is that.

I am not a psychologist. I am not a doctor. I am not extremely spiritual. And there is not a simple cure in these pages.

However, there were things that I did in the weeks since the attempt that worked, others that didn't, and I've learned a little along the way that I hope will guide you through the days until you decide to help *yourself*.



1. The most important thing I can tell you is to take your weeks one day at a time and your days one hour at a time. If you have to break the hours into minutes, do it. I repeat it to myself throughout the day: *One hour at a time, Sam.*

We will all go through this in different ways, and the length of each journey will vary. Don't put pressure on yourself to get to a certain place in a certain amount of time, and don't let anybody else do it, either.

2. Remember that everything you feel is right, and normal for you and your process. While there are things you might *do* that won't help your situation, there is nothing you will *feel* that you should think is wrong. Be honest with yourself.



3. Your friends and family don't know how to help you. They want to, but their primary goal is to make sure you are safe because they love you.

They may have sought advice or read a book, but they, too are experiencing a lot of confusing feelings. They will never be able to anticipate everything you need or when you need it. I talked to some of my friends to figure out what they were going through during this time.

The answer I found to be most honest: "I was pissed that you did it, I was pissed that you didn't seem to care, I was pissed at myself for not being there for you, I was scared thinking about the possibility of you not being there, scared at...what might happen when I left, scared that there was nothing I could do...angry with myself for not doing anything sooner."

Their love and support is important, and I encourage you to keep them around as much as possible, but you also have to talk to someone who doesn't have the emotional investment that your loved ones do. Find a therapist. The sooner the better. Get someone to make the appointment for you, and if possible, accompany you on the first visit. Just go. Even if you think there is no way you can be helped. Even if you think you

don't want help. Trust me. The first appointment is easy.

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4. Make a safety plan. When you get to a point where you are thinking of a more efficient way to do the deed—and it's likely you will—have a list of people you can call and activities you can do to keep yourself from going there. Include the number to the suicide hotline and the number for the hospital. My therapist had me do this at our first meeting, and I have used it a handful of times in the weeks since. It gets easier each time.

5. Don't feel like you have to explain yourself to anyone. There are people I believe I will never talk to about the way I felt in the months leading up to my attempt. People will ask you what "pushed you over the edge" or why you did it but you don't owe them any explanation.

It has been twenty-nine days since I tried to take my life. I count them now like a child counts the change in her piggy bank, with careful examination and something close to love. I did not feel that way initially.

There was a solid week where I was just plain shell-shocked. I couldn't feel anything. I didn't cry. I didn't yell. I didn't really talk much about it in the days after I left the hospital. I watched TV and slept. I made idle chitchat like nothing had ever happened. I adopted a cat. I went to lunch a couple times. I felt like I was watching myself from ten feet away.

Don't think that denial is a bad thing; just don't let it keep you too long. It's a shock, failing. A result was desired, expected, and the outcome is not only the complete opposite, it's traumatizing as hell.

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If there was a clinical term for the moment you realize you are still alive, it would have to be something like “emotional hurricane.” It’s too much to handle with only an umbrella. Let your brain process a little bit. Don’t check out completely, though.

Listen to the doctors. Pay attention to what they tell you about your physical condition. Feeling like crap is not going to help. If they give you medicine, take it. If you have follow up visits scheduled, plan to show up for them. Ask someone to make sure you do it. Making a conscious effort to take care of yourself physically is the first step. Listen to your body. Rest.

After it wore off I felt raw, as though every nerve ending had been brutally exposed and there was no way to get comfortable.

Make sure you eat and drink. Move around. Exercise helps a lot, but even if it’s just getting up and walking around the room, move. People will encourage this.

I was never alone. That I didn’t expect. You should, for a little while. There will be people around. Someone presumably saved you. Someone was likely notified. People know. And they’re going to be watching you. You might not be able to piss without the door cracked for a while. Everything you could conceivably use to harm yourself will be removed from your reach.



You will be asked “do you feel a desire to harm yourself right now?” so frequently that you’ll hear it in your sleep. It will get annoying. It will perhaps make you wish you had stayed in the hospital with its blessed visiting hours. It’s something you’ll have to deal with. They need to be there when the shock wears off. After it wore off I felt raw, as though every nerve ending had been brutally exposed and there was no way to get comfortable.

It is likely that whatever plagued you before the attempt has not changed. And now you have a whole new set of issues. It's hard, I won't lie. For me it went a little like this:

First came guilt. The people who visited in the hospital had been so sad, so scared, that it caused me physical pain to be near them. Of course I understood that people would be hurt, but I never expected to have to see it as they tried to smile and fumbled awkwardly for words and turned their heads to hide the tears. I thought that the pain that living caused me far trumped the pain that my not living would cause them. Guilt is a very temporary motivator to stay alive. It's what they will never understand.

That immediately led to depression, self-pity and self-loathing. I didn't want to get out of bed. Some days I didn't. I thought over and over again about how unfair it was that I had to be alive and that everybody knew that I had tried to take my life. It took until day ten for me to want to do it again, and do it right. I added anger to the mix shortly thereafter. I was mad at people for being in my face all the time. I got irritated when I didn't hear what I wanted to hear, even when I wasn't sure *what* I wanted to hear.

I hated people who were calling and emailing when they hadn't been in regular communication with me for ages. I hated people who didn't. The world was out to get me. I was angry to be living. Nothing made me happy. The cycles repeated themselves.



I felt crazy. Instead of the numb I had gotten accustomed to in those initial days, I couldn't stop feeling. I reached out. I lashed out. I needed people. I needed alone time. I thought about running away to parts unknown. It seemed that it would take almost nothing to crush me.

I can tell you some things that I think helped me start crawling out of it—my own personal ways of going about self-medication. Self-medicating is probably not the right term, but sometimes it's fun to use their terms for our purposes. By self-medicate I do not mean jump into a bottle of liquor or drug yourself smiley. I mean find things that can give you a quick "up." All of these things are on my safety list.



Getting the cat. My friend pushed me into it a few days after I got out of the hospital and I am extremely grateful. Taking care of something is a really positive move, and finding it in you to do that is a step in the right direction. Plus animals are therapeutic, and they can be pretty funny.

Journaling. It forces the brain to slow down a little, puts feelings on paper, and leaves a permanent record. Being able to look back on things I wrote on the horrible days makes me see how much better my outlook is today, even in a bad moment. Small steps are important to acknowledge, but often hard to see. Keeping track of the day-to-day let me see that I was moving forward, even if it wasn't far. Step by step, as they say.

Getting in to my first therapy session.

I wanted to kill myself that morning in the waiting room. But she came at me from the right angle and asked a lot of questions and I learned an important thing: you don't have to answer all of them. "I don't know" and "I don't want to talk about that" are pretty acceptable answers. But once you start figuring out which ones are hard for you to answer you may find a clue as to what you should be focusing on.

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Being outside for large portions of the day. Even pulling weeds for a half an hour changed my mental state. A little natural light and fresh air makes for a positive change of scenery. Physical labor helped me rest better at night. I made an effort to start spending as much time as possible outdoors, sometimes just staring at the sky.

You'll find your own things that help in your process. They may be similar to these or completely different. The important thing is that you recognize them and embrace them and return to them.

It has been thirty-one days since I tried to take my life.

Today was my first time speaking with another attempt survivor and I learned that every year gets better, that as time passes you stop getting handled and start handling yourself, and that people won't always give you *the look*.

She says that 4 years later people are surprised when she tells them she is an attempt survivor. That is what you and I have to look forward to. I initially thought that I was never going to get better. I didn't really even want to. I thought that going back to my life would just remind me why I wanted out in the first place, and I didn't want to do the work to make that life different. I lost twenty-five days trying to decide if I was worth it.

On day twenty-six, I made the decision to live. There have still been moments in the past few days when I wish that I hadn't survived that night. I imagine there will be more of them. Making the decision to live does not mean I am magically better. Making the decision to live means I am willing to try to get better. That's all you have to do: decide to try. Once you have it in your head the rest gets easier.

So, you tried to kill yourself and you botched it.
You're alive. Deal with it.



Resources for Suicide Attempt Survivors:

In New Mexico:

Agora Crisis Center

In Albuquerque: 277-3013
Statewide: 1 (866) HELP-1-NM (435-7166)

Crisis Response of Santa Fe

In Santa Fe: 820-6333
Statewide: 1 (888)920-6333

Southern New Mexico Crisis Line

In Southern NM: (575) 646-CALL (2255)
Statewide: 1 (866) 314-6841

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1 (800) 273-TALK (8255)

Veterans Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1 (800) 273-TALK (8255) Press "1"

Para la Prevencion de Suicidio Nacional: 1 (888) 628-9454

National Hopeline Network/Kristin Brooks Hope Center

1 (800)-SUICIDE (784-2433)
1 (800)-SUICIDA (784-2432) *En Español*

Native Youth Crisis Line: 1-877-209-1266

The Trevor Line for Lesbian/Gay/Transgender/Questioning Youth

1-866-4-U-Trevor (866-488-7386)

On the Web

New Mexico Suicide Prevention Coalition: www.nmsuicideprevention.org

New Mexico Suicide Intervention Project: www.nmsip.org

Agora Crisis Center Online: www.AgoraCares.org

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org

Kristin Brooks Hopeline: www.hopeline.com

Facing Us (wellness information for youth): www.facingus.org

Depressions and Bipolar Support Alliance: www.dbsalliance.org

National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI): www.nami.org

Books

How I Stayed Alive When My Brain Was Trying to Kill Me: One Person's Guide to Suicide Prevention by Susan Rose Blauner

New Lease on Life: Facing the World After and Suicide Attempt by John A. Chabot

Children of Jonah: Personal Stories of Survivors of Suicide Attempts by James T. Clemons

Choosing to Live: How to Defeat Suicide through Cognitive Therapy by Thomas E. Ellis & Cory F. Newman

Waking up Alive: The Descent, the Suicide Attempt, and the Return to Life by Richard A. Heckler

An Unquiet Mind: A Memoir of Madness by Kay Redfield Jamison

The Beast: A Journey Through Depression by Tracy Thompson

Are you Survivor of Suicide Attempt? Was there something that helped you in your recovery? Please send your suggestions to info@nmsuicideprevention.org so we can add them to our website.