

Suicide “Succs”

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Suicide “Succs” - so much so, that it has taken me a full six years to write about my experience in having a client who died by suicide. In these six years, I have accumulated an entire garden full of succulents, but the first one I purchased six years ago stands out among the others. I stop by my succulent garden to pray often, contemplating what each one of the succulents represent, and the painful moments that led me to plant them.

Dealing with the aftermath of having a client suicide was so different from any other loss that I have experienced. It was difficult to even know how to feel, let alone how to articulate those deep feelings. With the obvious need to protect confidentiality, there were very few places or people with whom I could share my own emotions. My being a senior therapist in our agency also put me in the role of mentoring and counseling others, including therapists who saw my client’s other family members and were walking them through this very difficult time. Truthfully, I had nowhere to process my own trauma and emotions surrounding this tragedy, and I have since realized that great improvements and growth are needed within agencies on this issue. How is it that we expect our trauma therapists, who are most likely to get clients contemplating and dying by suicide, to continue on after devastating losses without their own trauma-informed support and counseling?

Much of what traumatizes us as the counselor can be found within our own fears, secondary trauma and normal questions, such as “What did I do wrong? What else could I have done? Did I miss something?” For me, these fears were exponentially compounded by my agency and their necessary investigations into any death. When other people around me were also asking these same questions, my fears intensified while I continued to be silenced by the demands of ethical confidentiality.

During that time, my friends and family, many with no idea why, found me quite prickly. I found myself quite distracted. One day I was walking through Wal-Mart of all places and found myself in the garden section. There, in front of me was a succulent that somehow just spoke to me. It was pathetic. I simultaneously adored and hated it, somewhat like I at that time, adored and hated being a therapist. I bought it, and I brought it home. I realized, sometime later, that it was a picture of my loss.

I was grateful to have had that client in my life, to have walked with them. I was angry that they had chosen to end their life given our discussions about it and the progress I had seen. I hated that I seemingly carried this alone. That little plant began to remind me that I didn’t have to. I have a faith base, so I turned to prayer, and much later I even sought out counseling for myself when I realized what in that client reminded me of myself and what most angered me.





Prior to that, however, I started telling myself that “**Life Succs, but God is good and things still grow.**” For some reading this, you may need to simply say that “Life Succs” but you can still find good. I want you to make a sentence of your own. What I found that helped me was succulent plants. Yes, that is why I have been spelling sucks incorrectly. Whenever I lose a client, or hear a particularly hard story, I find myself heading to a garden center and picking up a plant. They bring me joy and remind me that some things, like succulents, literally cannot grow unless broken. I will never be able to face a death of a client without being affected, and that is okay. In fact, I think that the day I do is the day I should stop practicing.

Succulents grow ever so slowly, and often you cannot even see that growth for months on end. They are often hard and even prickly on the outside, yet inside there is life, and they are resilient and strong. I realized that even more than my clients, I too, am a succulent. Each client adds to my experience. I can choose to put myself in an environment conducive to my needs, or I can continue to attempt to thrive in an environment that only “succs” the life from me. I’ve sadly lost a few of my sweet little succulent plants over the years, but I haven’t shamed myself nearly as much for those losses. That is when it hit me, that as a counselor working endlessly to aid people in growing and finding hope and healing, I also need to allow myself to make mistakes, feel deep feelings, cry, and learn.

That is my hope for you, as well. If you have read this far it is only because something I have said has touched you. Being a counselor doesn’t make you immune to the pain of this world. If you are contemplating suicide yourself, know that there are people who can help. Please reach out. If you have had a client die by suicide, talk to another provider, regardless of how hard it may seem to be at first. Two seasoned therapists mentored me through my losses, but I waited far too long in reaching out to them. Seek help for yourself. Treat yourself as you would treat one of your own precious clients. And if you feel so led, go get a succulent to start your own garden.

