

Important Contacts

Crisis Support Centers

Crisis Support Services of Alameda County
1-800-309-2131

Contra Costa Crisis Center 1-800-833-2900
or 1-925-938-0725 TTD/TTY

Marin County: Suicide Prevention
and Community Counseling (415) 499-1100

Crisis Hotline San Francisco Suicide Prevention
(415) 781-0500

San Francisco Linea Nocturna (Spanish):
8:00 PM to 12:00 AM (415) 989-5212

San Mateo County – YFES Crisis Intervention
& Suicide Prevention Center
North County (650) 579-0350
South County (650) 368-6655
Coastside (650) 726-6655

Santa Clara County Mental Health
Suicide & Crisis Service San Jose (408) 279-3312
North County (650) 494-8420
South County (408) 683-2482

REMEMBER

The Mayo Clinic suggests that, in trying to cope with your loss, you may find purpose or strength in reaching out to others. Do not withdraw from life at this time.

- Keep in touch with others.
- Share your story. Be honest.
- Do what is right for you. Grieve in your own way. There is no right or wrong. Each family member may react differently. Grief is absolutely and uniquely personal.
- Do not rush yourself, and let healing take its own time.
- Remember some days will be better than others.
- There is a future left to you, though not the one you might have expected.
- You will never completely get over the loss and reminders like an anniversary will renew the pain.

HOSPITALS & EMERGENCY ROOMS

Marin

Marin General Hospital 415-925-7000
Novato Community Hospital 415-209-1300

San Francisco

St Francis Memorial Hospital 415-353-6000
UCSF Medical Center/Mt Zion 415-567-6600
San Francisco General Hospital 415-206-8000
St Luke’s Hospital 415-647-8600
California Pacific Med Center 415-750-4403
St Mary’s Medical Center 415-750-5500

MISSING PERSONS DATABASE

California Attorney General
<http://ag.ca.gov/missing/>

CORONER’S OFFICES

Marin County Coroner 415-499-6043
San Francisco County Coroner 415-553-1694
San Mateo County Coroner 650-312-5562
Contra Costa County Coroner 925-313-2850
Alameda County Coroner/
Public Administrator 510-268-7300

WEB SITES

There are a number of national organizations – many with local affiliates – that you may find helpful. Consider the following:

American Association of Suicidology: suicidology.org

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention:
afsp.org

Alliance of Grandparents–A Support in Tragedy:
agast.org

Bridge Rail Foundation: bridgerail.org

Suicide Prevention Action Network: spanusa.org

Suicide Prevention, Awareness and Support:
suicide.org

“In memory of
Matthew Whitmer,
1987-2007,
and all those others
lost to us
from that bridge”

A publication of BridgeRail.org,
which aims to raise the rail on the bridge

Information current as of February 2008
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A Bridge Suicide is Suspected

What Do You Do Now?

You have been informed of a possible tragedy – that a loved one may have taken his or her life by jumping from the Golden Gate Bridge.

This is going to be a difficult time for you and your family. You will experience overwhelming feelings during the next few hours, days and months.

There are things you need to be aware of and things that you need to do at this time. This brochure is meant to provide guidance at a time when you are not sure what to do next.

First, consider the help you may need for support during this period. You may wish to contact your personal physician, clergy, therapist or your local Crisis Center. The Bay Area Crisis Centers are listed in this brochure.

What Will the Authorities Do?

The California Highway Patrol (CHP) will do an initial investigation. If a body is recovered and identified, the case is closed. However, it can take up to 90 days to recover a body and the case will remain open during that time.

The Coast Guard is immediately called in to perform a search and rescue if a person has been seen falling from the bridge. They will search up to several hours and if a body is recovered, it is usually taken to the Marin County Coroner. In San Francisco Bay the low and high tides and the speed of currents are incredibly variable making the search very difficult.

You need to be aware that until the body is recovered and definitive identification can be made, the person is considered missing.

Within the First Four Hours

- Contact family members or other close friends to inform them of the situation. Use facts only, especially if the loved one is still missing.
- You have to file a missing person report with the local law enforcement agency where the person resided. They will assist in the investigation. Have a current photo(s) of the person to submit with the report.
- Ask someone to answer the telephone and take messages. Return only calls that are truly necessary.
- Notify employers of household members.
- Notify schools that your children attend.
- Contact your attorney to assist with legal matters as they arise.
- Ask someone to keep a list of calls, flowers, food donations, and cards so you can acknowledge them at a later date.

Everyone will experience a sense of helplessness and want to do something to help. Let them do what you cannot do at this time, or even what you can. It will help you both.

Within 24 hours

These tasks can help determine the person’s state of mind, their last known thoughts and possible whereabouts.

- Have friends walk the bridge for clues. People have been known to leave purses, cell phones or hats behind. These can provide information.
- Check with friends and family to see when anyone last heard from your loved one.
- Check answering machines, voice mail and emails for clues to their location or state of mind.
- Check personal websites, such as myspace.com and facebook.com, to find any messages or blogs.
- Check the “history” of the internet pages on their computer.

Cell phone companies can help localize a signal if the cell phone is used in the future. This requires a subpoena initiated by local law enforcement. Cell phone companies can begin the process by having the law enforcement agency submit a form while a subpoena is being obtained, so no time is wasted. Cell phone companies cannot “ping” the location of a phone unless that phone has a special function. (It is not as seen on TV.)

Check with local emergency rooms. Ask for the person by name and also for any John/Jane Does (unidentified persons) who were admitted since your loved one has been missing. A list of local hospitals is included on the back of this brochure.

If your loved one has been taken to a psychiatric facility, that hospital will attempt to contact the immediate family. Due to privacy issues, hospital staff cannot respond to incoming calls asking if a particular individual has been admitted to their facility.

Ask local law enforcement to submit a written request to the Golden Gate Bridge District to view all video tapes from cameras on the bridge. Law enforcement personnel will be the only ones who can view these tapes, so provide the investigating officer with several different photos and information on what your loved one may have been wearing. Likewise, let the authorities know if your loved one has a certain style of walking. Cameras are not always positioned to view the actual jump, but can view the walkway approach to the bridge, and thus help identify individuals.

Within 2-3 Days

If the body is not recovered within a few days, obtain a copy of the person’s dental records. Have the dentist include any notes that could explain changes since the last set of dental X-rays (sealants, braces, extractions). Gather and store (for future use) items that might contain the person’s DNA, such as toothbrushes or hairbrushes. If dental records or DNA samples are not available for identification use, DNA samples from the individual’s parents can help identify a body.

Call (or have someone call on your behalf) the local and nearby Coroners’ Offices to determine if a body has been recovered. Not all counties are notified when someone has jumped from the Golden Gate Bridge. There may not be any identification on the body so you will need to ask for any John/Jane Does. Specify the date when the person was last seen. This, unfortunately, is a task that should continue once a month for several months. A list of local coroner offices is provided in this brochure.

If a coroner’s office receives a body without identification, they will first check within the county for possible missing people, but then they will check the California Missing Persons Database. This is why you must file a missing persons report immediately.

Obtaining Closure

Without recovery of a body, the family will determine when and what type of service should be held. This is a personal choice. There is no right or wrong way but do what seems appropriate to the family in mourning, including public expression of grief and/or recognizing and remembering the life of a missing loved one. Often more than one type of service is useful – a vigil in the initial period and one or more memorial services at a later date.

If a body is not recovered and an estate needs to be settled, you can obtain from any probate court or county coroner a “fact of death” form. This is an affidavit that is presented to the probate court with documentation of events.

R E M E M B E R

Give yourself time to rest daily. Do little and what you do, do in slow motion. This is an intensely emotional time and physical reaction can vary widely.

Do not ignore your feelings. This is an obvious time to seek professional help, especially as you or other family members experience grief, sleeping problems, appetite changes, nausea, lack of motivation or exhaustion.

There are local support groups specifically for people who have lost someone by suicide. Check the lists in this brochure for local support groups through Crisis Centers as well as online groups/chat rooms.

Telling Children

What do I tell my pre-teenage children? How do I tell them? Shock and disbelief is the universal first response. Less than 2% of jumpers survive, and when death is confirmed, or any reasonable hope of being found alive has passed, then it is important to communicate to children that the person is not coming back, that he or she has died.

If asked, tell children the general outline of how the person died, that he or she took her life. Attribute the death to illness and explain that the bridge is tragically often used as a means to complete suicide. The universal human response to trauma is to have feelings of shame and guilt – “my fault” – because “If I am to blame, that way at least I have some control.” Be a human presence for your children over time as they work through this most difficult of all bereavements – “hear” and understand their self-blame while gently assuring them that illness was the cause and the bridge was the means. Understand that acceptance of tragedy usually comes in stages, with denial often followed by anger, then negotiation (“I promise to be good, if he or she comes back alive.”), then sadness/depression and finally acceptance.

*–Kim Norman MD, Professor of Psychiatry,
Langley Porter Institute, UCSF*