



# Survivor's Link

COMMUNICATING INFORMATION AND RESOURCES



## September is Suicide Prevention Awareness Month

*By Jennifer M. Schultz, LICSW, CNRNW Gold Star Coordinator*

The current suicide prevention awareness efforts in our country are fueled, in no small part, by the experiences of those who have endured suicide loss. Within the first quarter of calendar year 2020, our military experienced a loss of at least 85 service members (active and Reserve components combined). That is at a rate of nearly one loss per calendar day. If you are reading this article, it is possible that your loved one is represented within that cold and uncomfortable number. If you are a suicide survivor, please always remember – you are not alone. We are here to support you, and our community is listening for your voice.

Suicide prevention is for all of us. You are invited to consider joining in community campaigns and virtual events that emphasize suicide is preventable.

For more information on suicide prevention, check out the following resources:

- The REACH Campaign (WeAreWithinREACH.net) is an initiative started by the President's Roadmap to Empower Veterans and End a National Tragedy of Suicide (PREVENTS). Sign the REACH pledge today!
- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (afsp.org) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to conducting research and providing advocacy to eliminate suicide as one of our nation's leading causes of death. They are hosting "Out of the Darkness" walks throughout the month of September.
- Suicide Prevention Resource Center (sprc.org) is funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The organization works to coordinate the National Strategy for Suicide Prevention and promote the Zero Suicide campaign.

As a suicide loss survivor, the journey of grieving and healing can be complicated and can occur over the course of many years. Resources for direct support may be available in your local community:

- Survivors of Suicide (SOS) Support Group Directory – [afsp.org/find-a-support-group](https://afsp.org/find-a-support-group) – community groups.
- Tragedy Assistance Program's (TAPS) Suicide Loss Support Groups – [www.taps.org/suicide](https://www.taps.org/suicide).
- Alliance Of Hope – [allianceofhope.org](https://allianceofhope.org) – offers online support options.

Save the date! International Suicide Survivor's Day, a day of hope and healing, is annually recognized the Saturday before each Thanksgiving. This year, the date is Nov. 21, 2020.

If you, or someone you know needs help, support is available 24/7. Call the Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255 (press 1 if you are a military member or veteran) or text TALK to 741741.





## Chaplain's Corner: Hope

*BY CNIC Force Chaplain's Office*

Hope is one of those words that if we stare at long enough, we begin to see that there is much more to this four-letter word. Depending on how it is used, hope can be a noun or a verb. The same can be said for the word “love.” We often live out both words interchangeably. We often take both words for granted.

In the midst of COVID-19 and a cascading effect of our “routine” being anything but routine, how can a message on hope be of any practical use to us? The sceptic would say, “What is there to hope for when the world as we know it has changed almost overnight?” Thousands of Americans are falling ill and dying from a disease for which medical researchers are rushing to develop a cure. These same smart people are learning new things daily about the impact of this virus. Uncertainty is our present life situation. And hope is also our present life situation.

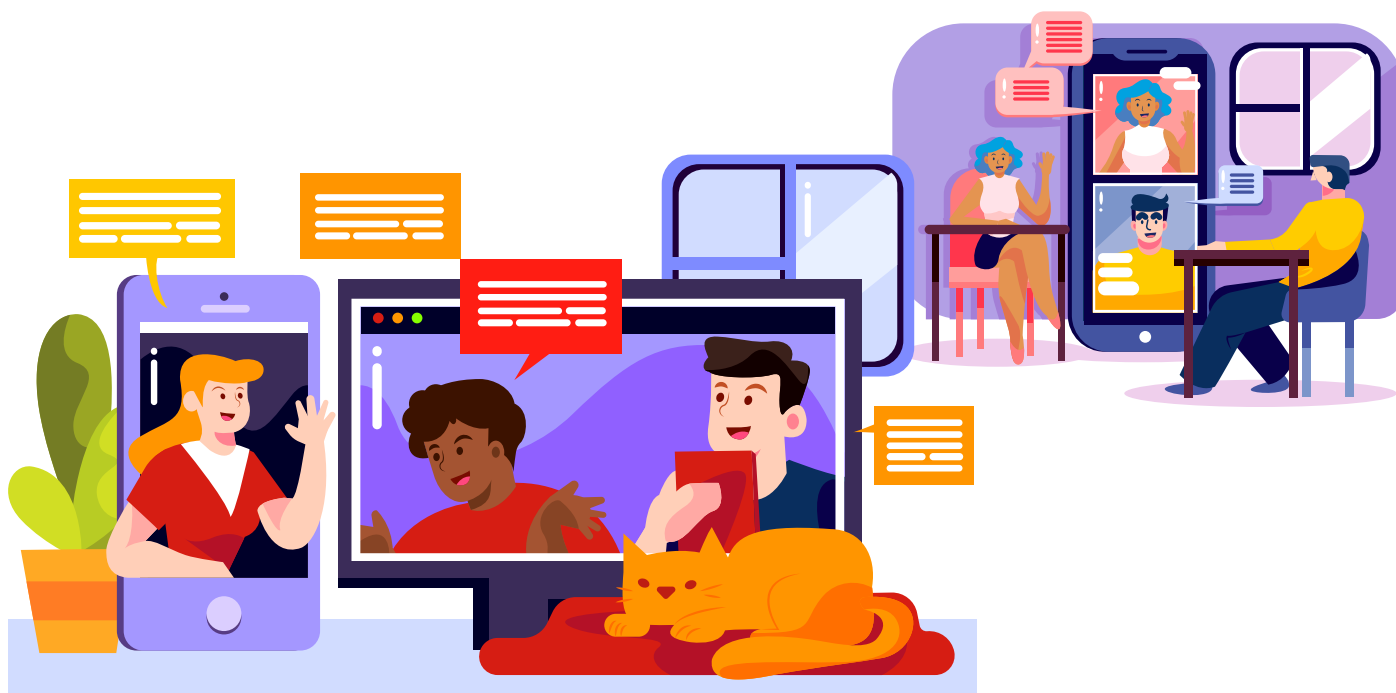
We live in hope, as medical researchers globally work on developing a cure for COVID-19. Hope sits next to our grief. We grieve what we once took for granted – sitting at a high school or college football game or hosting family gathers over the grill with good food, good conversation and a good feeling about being around people we love and respect. This type of social interaction is now our collective loss. This is a spiritual law: Every loss in our lives demands a period of grief. Hope helps us with living through that period of grief. Hope helps us adjust to a new reality due to experiencing loss.

So, what is hope? Hope is something that abides inside. Hope is in our hearts. Hope manifests as the good thoughts and best wishes that we have for that niece who just graduated high school and will launch her college studies this fall (probably remotely, but most definitely in a fashion that none of us could ever imagine in terms of necessary health precautions). Hope is also a gift. This gift requires us to hold on and at the same time to release. Hold on to the belief that tomorrow will be a better day. Release the dated realities that no longer define us.

Hope resides in the reality of the present moment and marries up to the promise of tomorrow. Hope presents us with the “urgency of the now.” The “urgency of the now” looks like this: We begin to simply cherish the moment and cherish our loved ones for who and what they are. They are God-given gifts who add meaning to our lives. This is not to say that we do not presently cherish our loved ones. The point is we begin to appreciate just how every single moment in our lives count as a sacred blessing.

Hope is hugging tightly to whatever gives us reason to get up each morning and face a new day. Hope is the inspiration that we will have another chance. To do what? Whatever needs to be done? For whom? Anyone who needs our presence, our energy, our good wishes, our prayers, and our love.

***Hope as a noun or a verb is a lot like love. Hope never fails.  
Let's resolve to hold tight to hope. Now. Tomorrow. Forever.***



## Survivor Support Groups – Creating Therapy Within Your Inner Circle

By Ray Cunnikin, CNRMA Gold Star Coordinator

We are now approaching 180 days since we have been thrust into the midst of this life-changing pandemic, and finding some normalcy out of the “new normal” has become a stressful challenge for many, if not most. Reflecting back on how life was just a few months ago has created stress, anxiety and sometimes a sense of hopelessness.

In this new normal, the tendency can be to hold on to those things that have bought us a sense of security and joy prior to COVID-19 in hopes that life will eventually return to normal. This is a common feeling that is true for most of us and can serve as a buffer from the harsh realities of our ever-changing lifestyles. As we search for innovative ways to create normalcy in our lives, there are some things that we can do that will promote stability during these trying times.

One such way is to stay connected to your friends and family during the pandemic by joining or creating a virtual survivor support group. There are many virtual platforms; some examples include Facebook, Zoom, Skype, Google Duo, Cisco’s WebEx, and Blue Jeans. All have innovative features where survivors can choose to join an existing survivor support group or create their own if there is a desire to do so.

Choosing to join or host a survivor support group can be more than just therapeutic. It can also provide a sense of belonging and purpose by giving back to the bereaved community through encouragement and comfort. Although each individual survivor’s journey is uniquely different, there may be times when similar feelings or questions are experienced while navigating through the personal grief journey of others. Survivor support groups can provide an excellent opportunity to network with others with similar experiences, foster deep friendships, exchange resources, and host or arrange social events. The awesome thing about virtual survivor support groups is that you get to create a healing space within your own inner circle.







## A Survivor's Story - Connecting with Others During the Pandemic

By Julie El-Taher, Gold Star Mother

On Feb. 22, 2020, my entire life changed. My amazing son, Patrick Stellanato, who was a Navy aviation machinist's mate airman apprentice, died in a motorcycle accident. I cannot even begin to express my grief.

Since then, the mothers from the Navy Gold Star Program and TAPS have surrounded me with care, love and support. In spite of the pandemic, they persevered, and with the ingenious use of social media, Zoom, etc., they have provided me with guidance, love and support in a devastating time in my life. I am not the most technologically-savvy person, but with their guidance and use of social media, I have been able to find healthy, positive outlets for my grief.

Connecting with other mothers, spouses and families that have also suffered the loss of their loved ones has provided me and my family with a new network of friends and contacts to share my feelings and experiences. I am in weekly contact with my TAPS connection of mothers and counselors. I know that in the middle of the night when the nightmares come and I feel alone, I can pick up the phone and there is a TAPS counselor on the other end of the line.

During the day, I can have a Zoom meeting with Navy Gold Star families called a "happy hour," and this brightens the toughest of days. We have had a great time playing virtual trivia on Friday

nights, and knowing I can step away from the camera for a moment and cry if I need to can be really handy. I am not a fan of crying in public, so being in my home and interacting with these wonderful people without the fear has helped me seek more support than I normally might have.

I have even discovered that I can paint via a virtual paint night. I am now trying to doodle some with the paints to help heal my broken, grieving soul. I have a counselor I meet with via telemedicine and it has been a tremendous help. Knowing my family and me are not alone, and suffering, is more important than the method of how we receive that support.

I do look forward to the day when I can finally meet everyone in person and express my gratitude. So, look for me. I will be the mother that is hugging everyone and crying at the same time.

To locate your closest Navy Gold Star coordinator and find out about activities in your area, visit [www.navygoldstar.com/locations](http://www.navygoldstar.com/locations).

Visit [www.taps.org](http://www.taps.org) to learn more about TAPS.



## NAVBASE Coronado Welcomes New Navy Gold Star Coordinator

Thomas Williams is the new installation Navy Gold Star Program coordinator for Naval Base Coronado, providing support to survivors in Southern California, Colorado, Nevada and Guam. For the past three years, he has served in various roles at Fleet and Family Support Center (FFSC), Metro San Diego, including lead case manager with the Individual Augmentee (IA) Deployment Support Program and site coordinator for the FFSC at Naval Base Point Loma. Tom brings his dedication of serving our Navy families into this new position, and he looks forward to establishing positive relationships with our survivors. Tom is a native of Maryland/Washington, D.C., but relocated to San Diego five years ago. He holds a Bachelor of Arts degree from American University and Master of Arts degree from Johns Hopkins University. In his spare time, Tom enjoys art, photography and hiking.

## What You Need To Know about Moving Forward vs. Moving On

*By Joanne Steen, MS, NCC*

I was one of the lucky ones – depending on how you define luck. My late husband, Navy Lt. Ken Steen, and I talked about what he would want for me in life, if he should die in the line of duty.

Just a few days after Ken and I were married, we had the “Page 2” talk, which in “Navy speak” means updating the service member’s personnel records for emergency contact information, next-of-kin changes, death gratuity designee, and the like. It’s a sobering conversation, and I recall that Ken, a naval aviator who flew helicopters out of NAS Norfolk, told me it was just a necessary paperwork drill. He assured me he was well-trained and confident that he could handle any emergency in the cockpit and safely get the aircraft back on deck – I liked that type of confidence in my Sailor. We put the topic behind us quicker than you could say “SGLI.”

We had another one of those talks about a year later, one also initiated by Ken. I thought he was nuts to bring up this life-and-death topic again, as we were in the middle of moving and baby planning. In hindsight, we had just come home from my father’s funeral and I guess life, love and death were still on his mind. And so, on an unimportant Friday evening in June, in so many words, Ken told me that if he were to die, he hoped I would make another life for myself and not spend the rest of it alone. I liked it better when we talked about babies.

Exactly two weeks later, Ken and his six-person crew were killed when the helicopter he was piloting exploded in midair, just a stone’s throw from our new home and his duty station.

“You’ve got to move on with your life.” The first time I was told that I needed to move on with my life was at my late husband’s funeral. This tired, old cliché never fades away, for reasons I’ll never understand. But I do believe when it’s said – however inappropriate and misinformed that may be – it was intended to help ease our grief.



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## Moving On

In the language of grief, there is no place for “moving on.” For those of us who have lost a loved one, moving on implies breaking the emotional, physical and spiritual ties to the one we loved. It conveys letting go. Leaving the past behind. Ending the bond of love. Forgetting about our loved one. Gold Star families do none of these things. And fortunately, none are a part of healthy grief.

## Healthy Grief

I use the term healthy grief to mean that it's healthy - and needed - for surviving family members to do the work that grief demands. What is the work of grief? Usually called “grief work,” it's a process of recognizing needs and taking actions that help you get through the worst of your pain, and begin to adjust to life without your loved one. In easy-to-understand terms, the needs and actions of working at grief usually include:

- Face the reality that your loved one is dead and feel that pain in its many forms.
- Accept that your earthly relationship with them has ended, replaced by one of memory or spirit.
- Search for meaning in your loved one's life and death, and, perhaps, in your own as well.
- Figure out the many sides of who you are now.
- Reinvest in living.

While your grief will never fully go away, working at grief can lessen its intensity, make it manageable, and help to mend your body, mind and spirit.

I struggled with these needs of grief in the months and years following my late husband's death. It was hard and exhausting work, but I grew in ways I never thought possible. Did I wonder if the intense pain would ever go away? Yep. Did I try to understand myself better by learning everything I could about Gold Star grief? I sure did. Did I ask for help when I needed it? Yes.

## Moving Forward

Moving forward does not mean you're leaving your loved one in the past, because in moving forward, you bring their love along as you make your way in a world without their physical presence. Simply said, you don't move forward without them; you move forward with the strength of their love for you.

In reflecting back on my late husband's powerful conversation just before his death, I came to understand that his message for me was to live my life to the fullest. And like many survivors I've talked with over the years, in those fragile times early in grief, I would ask, “What would Ken want for me?” But as I developed the courage to move forward, the question evolved into, “What do I want for myself?” Not surprisingly, my hopes for the future aligned with Ken's.

## Gaining Strength in Body, Mind and Spirit

I know some Gold Star family members take exception to the term healing, as they feel they will never completely heal from this life-changing loss. It's true you never return to who you were before your loss, but healing doesn't mean it's all or nothing. Healing comes in degrees. And each instance of healing makes you stronger than you were before.

Try to look at healing as gaining the strength in body, mind and spirit to work through the toughest parts of your grief. And as you do this, grief will lose its hold over you. It'll become manageable. You'll discover more good qualities about yourself and start to enjoy things in life again. And that's all OK.



## Signs You're Moving Forward

Moving forward has a ripple effect in your life, and often the progress you make may be noticed by others before you're aware of it. I recall asking another Gold Star survivor how would I know if I was moving forward in grief. He replied that one day I would wake up and my late husband wouldn't be in my first waking thoughts. I was appalled. But it happened one day, without warning or fanfare. And I didn't realize its significance until long after the fact. That's a peculiar thing about moving forward - usually you don't realize it until you look back and see how far you've come. Here are a few ways you may have moved forward. Now is a good time to look back and see your progress.

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## 7 Signs You're Moving Forward\*

Getting out of bed and not dreading the day.

- Thinking more about your loved one's life than the death.
- Finding comfort in memories of him or her.
- Genuinely laughing at something funny.
- Enjoying yourself and not feeling (too) guilty.
- Taking a time-out from grief.
- Building personal resiliency and strength.

A good point to remember about moving forward is that two steps forward and one step backward is still progress. And you're headed in the right direction!



## Bumps in the Road

Like most things in life, the path forward is not without a few bumps along the way. They often come from people, places, events, and the like. And they can vary in length and importance.

With a little knowledge beforehand, you can be aware of some of life's obstacles that may get in the way of managing your grief now and in the years to follow. Some bumps in the road are common to civilian and military losses alike, such as unpredictable bursts of grief, secondary losses, and other bad news; other bumps in the road are more specific to Gold Star grief, such as memorial overload, a personal loss entwined within a public loss, national holidays, classified information, and new or changing details when after-action reports are released.

A substantial bump in the road is the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic. It's safe to call this pandemic a traumatic event, for it has overturned our belief on how the world is supposed to work. It has filled our daily lives with unconventional changes and health-related uncertainties, and heaped upon us loads of anxiety, stress and feelings of loss. As Gold Star family members, we hold America close to our hearts and hate to see her wounded, regardless of how it happened.

A number of complicating factors common to COVID-19 deaths may be too familiar to Gold Star families and trigger grief attacks. These factors include the inability to be with their loved ones in their final moments, or the fear that they died alone; no chance to view the body and "see for themselves"; no control over autopsy decisions or burial options; and a national identity attached to the loss, such as "COVID-19 deaths" or "line-of-duty deaths." It would be normal to have strong feelings in these circumstances. At times such as these, hold close the thought that families of the fallen are strong. And Gold Star tough.

## When Moving Forward Isn't "Moving Forward"

There may be a time when you're stuck in grief, and mending of your body, mind, and spirit isn't moving forward. If you're feeling stuck – or it someone points it out – then it's probably time to do something about it. The best way to get "unstuck" is with a little assistance. Seeking out help isn't a sign of failure. It's an act of determination.



## Living Life

I believe there will come a time when I'll see my late husband Ken again. And I hope and pray that when we meet again, he'll give me a big hug and tell me that he's proud of the way I faced the future and lived my life without him. I wish the same for you.

\*Adapted from *We Regret To Inform You* (Central Recovery Press, 2019), p. 150

# Navy Gold Star Program Directory

Name	Phone	Address*
NAVY REGION SOUTHWEST REGIONAL COORDINATOR	619-532-2886	FFSP / 937 N HARBOR DR BOX 53 SAN DIEGO CA 92132-0058
NB VENTURA COUNTY INSTALLATION COORDINATOR	805-982-6018	FFSC / 1000 23RD AVE BLDG 1169 CODE N91 PORT HUENEME CA 93041
NAVBASE CORONADO INSTALLATION COORDINATOR	619-767-7225	FFSC / BUILDING G SAUFLEY RD SAN DIEGO CA 92135-7138
NB SAN DIEGO REGIONAL COORDINATOR	619-556-2190	NB SAN DIEGO FFSC 3005 CORBINA ALLEY STE 1 BLDG 259 SAN DIEGO CA 92136-5190
NAVY REGION NORTHWEST INSTALLATION COORDINATOR	360-396-2708	FFSC / 610 DOWELL ST BLDG 35 KEYPORT WA 98345
SMOKEY POINT SUPPORT COMPLEX INSTALLATION COORDINATOR	425-304-3721	SMOKEY POINT SUPPORT COMPLEX 13910 45TH AVE NE SUITE 857 MARYSVILLE WA 98271
NAVY REGION SOUTHEAST REGIONAL COORDINATOR	904-542-5712	FFSC / BLDG 919 LANGLEY ST NAS JACKSONVILLE FL 32212-0102
NAS JACKSONVILLE INSTALLATION COORDINATOR	904-542-5706	FFSC / 554 CHILD ST NAS JACKSONVILLE FL 32212
NSA MID-SOUTH INSTALLATION COORDINATOR	901-874-5017	FFSC / 5722 INTEGRITY DR BLDG 456 MILLINGTON TN 38054-5045
NCBC GULFPORT INSTALLATION COORDINATOR	228-871-4569	FFSC / 5301 SNEAD ST GULFPORT MS 39501-5001
NAS CORPUS CHRISTI INSTALLATION COORDINATOR	361-961-1675	FFSC / 11001 D ST CORPUS CHRISTI TX 78419-5021
NAVAL DISTRICT WASHINGTON REGIONAL COORDINATOR	202-433-3059	FFSC / 2691 MITSCHER RD SW BLDG 414 WASHINGTON DC 20373
NAVAL DISTRICT WASHINGTON INSTALLATION COORDINATOR	202-685-1909	FFSC / 2691 MITSCHER RD SW BLDG 414 WASHINGTON DC 20373
NAVY REGION MID-ATLANTIC REGIONAL COORDINATOR	757-445-3073	FFSC / 7928 14TH ST SUITE 209 NORFOLK VA 23505-1219
NWS EARLE INSTALLATION COORDINATOR	732-866-2110	FFSC / 201 RT 34 BLDG C59 COLTS NECK NJ 07722
NAVSTA GREAT LAKES INSTALLATION COORDINATOR	847-688-3603 ext. 127	FFSC / 525 FARRAGUT AVE STE 300 BLDG 26 GREAT LAKES IL 60088
NB NORFOLK INSTALLATION COORDINATOR	757-322-9182	FFSC / 7928 14TH ST SUITE 102 NORFOLK VA 23505-1219
SUBASE NEW LONDON INSTALLATION COORDINATOR	860-694-1257	FFSC / BLDG 83 BOX 93 GROTON CT 06349-5093
NAS OCEANA INSTALLATION COORDINATOR	757-492-8282	2073 TARTAR AVENUE, BUILDING 585, FFSC AT DAM NECK ANNEX, VIRGINIA BEACH VA 23461-1917

\*When communicating with your coordinator via mail, please add NAVY GOLD STAR PROGRAM and contact column info to all mailing addresses to ensure deliver.