

Suicide: Those left behind join forces

By Bill Glovin
 Staff Writer

Paula Sampson knew her husband was depressed and couldn't sleep, but she felt helpless. Each night as he left their bed, she'd somehow wake up and try to comfort him. The one night she didn't, an explosion jolted her out of a deep sleep.

Her husband had put a gun to his head and pulled the trigger. After the initial shock, Mrs. Sampson realized she was left with two preschoolers, a life-insurance policy that was five weeks short of a two-year suicide clause, and in-laws who acted as though she were responsible for the tragedy.

"After I moved out of our house, my in-laws [who lived next door] played games with the keys and made me feel guilty about coming to get my own possessions," she recalls. "At a wedding, a friend told me she met my husband's cousin, whom I hardly knew. She said the cousin was on their side."

Mrs. Sampson is telling her story to Survivors of Suicide, a new self-help group that meets twice a month in Christ Church,

251 S. State St., Hackensack. The group, which consists of relatives, lovers, and friends of suicide victims, is a place where those left behind can talk openly about their grief and can lend each other emotional support. They also help each other find answers to such practical questions as how to handle the deceased person's possessions and what to tell children, relatives, friends, and acquaintances.

This northern New Jersey group is one of

hundreds of self-help bereavement organizations across the country that have formed in the last few years. The idea for the Hackensack group began with Jo Pesaresi, who can't forget that there weren't enough places to turn when her husband, a psychiatrist, committed suicide four years ago.

"It's very hard to come to peace with any death," says Mrs. Pesaresi, who has a degree in psychiatric social work. "No mat-

ter how sick or how old, there's always a feeling that if I'd done more, loved them more, or been around more, it might have been different. With a suicide, it's a hundred times worse."

Members of the local Survivors of Suicide chapter agree that a serious stigma is still attached to the act. If society wants to decrease the suicide rate and help the survivors, they say, it must consciously work to remove that stigma. One member of the

group, whose brother hanged himself, says that suicide is an individually suffered sickness, like cancer, but that at times he has been made to feel like a leper — as if he also was sick.

Another recalls that after his girlfriend committed suicide, everyone close to the woman first blamed themselves, then each other. Most members have experienced funerals that felt awkward and particularly stilted. They claim that funeral homes often assume the family prefers a closed casket or quick cremation. "We don't even have a chance to mourn," complains one member of the group.

"People come up to you and say: 'Did you see it? ... Did your family see it? What was wrong?'" says one woman. "You feel like you're not only going through a mourning process, it's like you're being interrogated. And all you know is that someone you loved died."

Dr. Lawrence Denson, Bergen County medical examiner, is familiar with the problem. He has met with hundreds of family members of suicide victims over the years — he reserves Fridays to talk to

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Ways to detect a loved one's urge to die

No formula exists for recognizing an impending suicide, say experts, but these telltale signs could help save the life of a friend or family member:

● **Alcoholism.** Dr. Lawrence Denson, Bergen County medical examiner, says his office finds alcohol in almost all suicide victims.

People may be using the alcohol to lose impulse control and gather the courage to commit suicide, but the suicide rate among alcoholics is 50 times greater than the normal population and alcohol is linked to 30 percent of all suicides,

says Richard Ward, coordinator of alcoholic services with the Bergen County Department of Health Services.

Ward estimates that there are some 50,000 alcoholics in Bergen County — and that only about 10 percent ever make it to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. "If there was another disease going around that affected that many people in this county, everyone would be up in arms," he says. "We seem to accept the fact that there's so much drinking, so many alcoholics. When are we going to address the

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