

# You Are Not Alone

A Guide for Survivors in Managing the Aftermath of a Suicide



I don't know why.  
I'll never know why.  
I don't have to know why.  
I don't like it.  
I don't have to like it.  
What I do have to do is to make a choice about my living.  
The choice is mine.  
I can go on living, valuing every moment in a way I never did before or I can be destroyed by it  
and, in turn, destroy others.  
I thought I was immortal, that my family and children were also.  
That tragedy only happened to others.  
But I know now that life is tenuous and valuable, so I am choosing to go on living, making the  
most of the time I have, valuing my family and friends in a way never possible before.

*By Iris Bolton*



Lifeline Newcastle & Hunter offers support to all affected by the death of someone you know and love by suicide.

You can talk to someone who cares 24 hours, seven days a week by calling

**131114**

Or

Talk to the Support after Suicide Coordinator on **49402005** (Mon – Fri)

Or

Make an appointment to talk to a Lifeline Personal Counsellor on **49402000** (Mon – Fri)

For local support groups –check [www.lifelinehunter.org.au](http://www.lifelinehunter.org.au)



## **Why we say suicide 'Survivor'**

We say the word survivor for those bereaved by suicide because it reflects the difficulties that face people who have had someone they love die by suicide.

Some people prefer the word 'suicide griever', fearing confusion with someone who has attempted suicide themselves.

There are no rules you need to follow. Do and say whatever makes you feel most comfortable.

## **Why did this happen?**

You may struggle to understand the reasons for suicide, asking yourself over and over again: "Why?" Many people replay their loved ones' last days, searching for clues, particularly if they didn't see any signs that suicide was imminent.

Because suicide is often poorly understood, you may feel unfairly victimized by stigma. You may feel the suicide is somehow shameful, or that your loved one or your family is somehow to blame for this tragedy.

It is natural to find it difficult to believe what has happened, and when a death is untimely, it is even harder to grasp the permanence of the loss. On one level you 'know' that the person has died, but on another, deeper, level it may seem impossible to accept that the person who has died is not going to be around any more. Confusion, panic and fear are common.

## **Where to start**

There is no rule book about how you will feel when someone you love dies by suicide but here are some statements from other people who have been bereaved by suicide that you might find helpful or can identify with. We know that people have different ways of grieving at different times so what may be helpful for one person, may not be so for another. What is important is that you find something that is helpful for you.

- Shock is a common immediate reaction
- As your loss begins to make itself felt, pining for the person who has died is common
- Powerful and desperate longings to see, touch, smell, talk and to and be with the person who died can be frightening in their intensity
- Symptoms of depression, including disturbed sleep, loss of appetite, intense sadness and lack of energy
- Anger towards the deceased, another family member, a therapist or yourself

- Relief, particularly if the suicide followed a long and difficult mental illness
- Guilt, including thinking “If only I had....”
- Concentrate on getting through one day at a time
- Try to avoid making any major decisions, like moving house or getting rid of the person’s possessions immediately after the death. You may not be thinking clearly and may do things you later regret

“No-one ever told me  
that grief felt so like fear”

C. S. Lewis



(Lewis C.S. (1961) a Grief Observed: Faber and Faber)

### **Coping with Suicide Loss**

The following thoughts and ideas have been made by other people who have been bereaved by suicide that you might find helpful:

- You may struggle with what to tell other people. Although you should make whatever decision feels right to you, most survivors have found it best to simply acknowledge that their loved one died by suicide
- You may find that it helps to reach out to family and friends. Because some people may not know what to say, you may need to take the initiative to talk about the suicide, share your feelings, and ask for help
- Even though it may seem difficult, maintaining contact with other people is especially important during the stressed filled months after the death
- Keep in mind that each person grieves in his or her own way. Some people visit the cemetery weekly; others find it too painful to go at all
- Each person grieves at his or her own pace; there is no set rhythm or timeline for healing
- Anniversaries, birthdays and holidays may be especially difficult, so you may want to think about whether to continue old traditions or create new ones. You may also experience unexpected waves of sadness; these are a normal part of the grieving process

- Children experience many of the feelings of adult grief and are particularly vulnerable to feeling abandoned and guilty. Reassure them the death was not their fault. Listen to their questions, and try to offer honest, straightforward, age appropriate answers
- You may find comfort in community, religious or spiritual activities, including talking to a trusted member of the clergy
- Be kind to yourself. When you feel ready, begin to go on with life. Eventually starting to enjoy life again is not a betrayal of your loved one (although you may experience feelings of guilt which is normal), but rather a sign that you've begun to heal.

## For Family and Friends

The following guidelines may help you to understand what may be comforting to the family. However, before you assume responsibilities, it is important to ask survivors whether they need your help. Some survivors gain added strength from performing many of the responsibilities listed, while others may want to rely on friends or family for support and guidance.

- Try not to say 'committed' suicide. This harks back to a time when suicide was a crime and some bereaved people find it distressing. You can say died by suicide, suicided, took their life
- Do not use clichés and platitudes to try and comfort by saying things like 'you're so strong', 'time will heal', 'he's at peace now', 'you have other children', 'you'll get married again' or 'I know how you feel.' While well-intentioned, they rarely comfort and can leave the bereaved person feeling misunderstood and more isolated
- Avoid judgments about the person who has died by suicide, such as saying they were selfish, cowardly or weak, or even brave or strong. People need to come to their own understanding of the person and what has happened
- Avoid simplistic explanations for the suicide. Suicide is very complex and there are usually many contributing factors
- Surround them with as much love and understanding as you can
- Give them some private time. Be there, but don't smother them
- Show love, not control
- Let them talk. Most of the time they just need to hear out loud what is going on inside their heads. They usually aren't seeking advice
- Don't be afraid to say their loved one's name – it can hurt more to not talk about them
- Encourage the idea that decisions be made by the family together

- Expect them to become tired easily. Grieving is hard work
- Let them decide what they are ready for. Offer your ideas but let them decide themselves
- Keep a list of phone calls, visitors and people who bring food and gifts
- Offer to make calls to people they wish to notify
- Help with errands
- Keep a list of medications administered
- Give special attention to members of the family
- Allow them to express as much grief as they are feeling at the moment and are willing to share
- Allow them to talk about the special endearing qualities of the loved one who has died by suicide

### **In the longer term**

Don't assume your friend will only need help in the immediate aftermath of the death. Grief can last a long time and there may be times that are particularly difficult – such as birthdays, anniversaries of the death and other special occasions, when they value your support.

Keep in touch regularly, not just in the first few weeks.

Include your friend in social activities, but be sensitive to their needs; they may prefer to go to the cinema or for a meal rather than a large social gathering.

Sometimes bereaved people are so overwhelmed by grief that they become depressed and feel that life is not worth living. If you are worried about your friend, it might be helpful to suggest that they seek professional help.

(Reprinted with permission, The Link Counselling Centre for Suicide Prevention and Aftercare and Support after Suicide Jesuit Social Services)

### **Young People**

As a young person, you are no different to anyone else in the range and intensity of experiences you are likely to feel when someone you know has died.

It could be the first time someone you know has died, and the feelings you are experiencing can be frightening. You may worry about how you will cope and what you are going to say to other people

You may find that some friends avoid you because they don't know what to say. Let them know that you'd like to see them and that it's OK to talk –or not, if that's what you prefer

## **Suicidal Feelings**

Some people who have been bereaved by suicide can have suicidal thoughts themselves. If you have thoughts like this, it's important to talk to someone about them.

If you feel you have nobody to talk to, you can always contact **Kids Helpline** (24 hours) **1800551800**, **Lifeline** (24 hours) **131114** or connect to **Reachout.com.au**

## **Losing a brother or sister**

If your brother or sister has died by suicide, you have lost someone with whom you grew up, with whom you've probably had fights and arguments and of whom you might have felt jealous, as well as loving and caring for them.

You may also feel angry towards them for what they have done – these are common feelings.

Your parents may be so overwhelmed by their grief that they can't help you with yours, and you might feel angry with them for not paying attention to you. Other people may concentrate on helping your parents and may overlook your needs.

## **Losing a Friend**

If it's your friend who has died, it can be devastating.

You may have felt closer to them than to your own family and regret that you didn't realize how bad they were feeling, or think that maybe there was something you could have done to help.

It might help to visit your dead friend's family and to share your memories with them.

## **What shall I tell other people?**

It can be harder to talk about suicide than other forms of death, but you can decide how much you want to tell people.

You could just say "my brother died" or "my mum died by suicide" and that you don't want to talk about the details.

## What will help?

Coming to accept that the person has died does not mean that you will forget them.

- Saying goodbye helps.
- The funeral can also help people accept the reality of the death and to say goodbye and share their grief with family and friends.
- If you decide you don't want to go to the funeral, you could help plan a memorial service later, where people can remember the person who died and share good memories.
- You could make a memory box or scrapbooks where you can keep photos and letters and things that remind you of the person who died.
- It might help to write a letter to them, telling them things you wish you'd told them when they were alive.
- Birthdays, Christmas and other special occasions will be difficult times. It can help to plan in advance what you're going to do with family and friends.
- Talking about your feelings can help you manage and make sense of them.
- You could make a list of people you could talk to, like parents, other relatives, friends, neighbours, a close friends parents, a doctor or a telephone help line.
- Look after yourself and do things you enjoy.
- It's OK to laugh and have fun.
- You can't be sad all the time and it doesn't mean you don't miss the person who has died.
- Try not to bottle things up, but find a way to express your feelings, maybe through art, music or physical exercise

## What is unlikely to help?

You may find that you are doing things that are out of character for you: drinking too much, taking drugs, becoming involved in relationships that you instantly regret and getting into arguments or even fights.

If you feel out of control, try to think about your behaviour and ask yourself if it is because of the pain that you are trying to deal with.

## **Within a School Community**

A death can affect a school community at various levels. Those affected directly or indirectly may include an individual student's, teachers, other school staff, a class or student community and families. The experience of the death and associated grief will affect people in different ways.

Death by suicide will affect each individual and community differently. Some people may appear obviously affected while others may not. Regardless of those directly affected, the suicide death of a student, teacher or family member will have an impact on the community as a whole.

A suicide death may lead to shock, confusion, disbelief and anger, to name only some common responses. A suicide death often is often a stigmatised death and can lead to a lack of appropriate support for those affected.

It is also important to be aware that the effect of bereavement can go well beyond the initial crisis period. For those most affected, grief can be a long-term process. It can also have a cumulative effect as the impact ripples through a school community, sometimes unseen. In these circumstances, it can be important to find an appropriate way to commemorate the death.

Students, staff and families within the school community will each have unique responses, which will vary according to such factors as age, level of understanding, the person's character and their relationship to the person who has died, as well as previous experiences of grief and bereavement.

Sometimes school communities are concerned that talking openly about a suicide death may lead to further suicides. However, the opposite is true. Open and honest accounts of suicide death and the provision of information and support are imperative to a school community.

## **When the student returns to school**

Talk to and or visit the bereaved student before they return to school. This will provide an opportunity for the student to express how they are feeling about returning to school and what support they may specifically need.

## **How Employers and Work Colleagues can help**

Returning to work can be very stressful for a bereaved person. The employee should only return when they feel able and they may prefer to work flexi-time or part-time for a while. Employers and colleagues should be aware of and empathetic towards the person's need for time off, which may be to attend an inquest or receive counselling.

Bereaved people may find it difficult to concentrate and harder to assess complex situations and react as quickly as they did, which can lead to a lack of confidence.

By showing understanding and acknowledging their loss, you can contribute greatly to their regaining their confidence in their own ability to cope.

Some bereaved people may have jobs where they work with people who are experiencing problems and trauma (for example health care staff, social and care workers, police) and this can be very difficult after a bereavement. They may feel vulnerable and that the problems of others weigh heavily on them. This can emphasize their grief and affect their ability to be detached in their work. Be understanding and sensitive to these feelings.

Sometimes a bereaved person finds it easier to talk to those who are more 'distant' from the death and may talk to you or other colleagues about it. You might find this embarrassing or awkward, but you can help simply by being a good listener, by not giving advice and by mentioning the death rather than avoiding it.

If someone who works in a small close-knit working environment takes their own life, the whole group is likely to be affected. Colleagues may have to take over the workload of a person who has died, at a time when they might be in distress and not functioning as they normally would. It is important to be sensitive to each other's needs, accepting that everyone will react in different ways.

Sometimes professional counselling may be offered on a group or individual basis, but with no pressure to attend.

*You can contact Lifeline Newcastle & Hunter on 02 4940 2005 for assistance with group or individual counselling or training programs for staff.*

## **Handling the Holidays When You're Feeling Blue**

How does one celebrate the holidays when a loved one is so sorely missed?

The powerful and overwhelming emotions that embody the grieving process tend to be magnified during the holidays – a time when memories of our missing loved ones are especially painful. Family gatherings are weary reminders of the stark reality of our loss.

Here are some suggestions from experienced survivors who found them helpful:

- Remember you are important and you can choose how you wish to observe the holiday season. Have a family meeting to talk about what will work for you at this time
- Decide what you can handle comfortably and let those needs be known to your friends and relatives
- If you find things aren't going well, set limitations and do only the things that are most important to you
- Realize it doesn't have to be the best holiday ever – just get through it!

- Plan the holiday – having a schedule of known activities relieves some of the tension
- Don't hesitate to make changes in your holiday traditions; it can make things less painful
- Add something to your tradition that honors your loved one e.g. light a candle
- If you feel the need to cry, remember tears are an honest expression of love and emotion
- Perhaps seeing the holiday season as a series of small events instead of an endless stream of pain. You can handle one event at a time
- Start a new tradition –one as simple as discarding an old recipe and trying a new one, the time you open the presents, time of the holiday meal etc
- Some have found comfort in spending the holidays away from home
- If the thought of sending Christmas cards is too painful, give yourself permission not to send them
- Include the deceased in your conversations with family and friends when you discuss holidays. Some survivors have experienced disappointment when their loved one was excluded from holiday conversations. Having a discussion with your family and friends beforehand helps to avoid this situation and additional grief
- Many have found comfort in doing something for others e.g. give a gift in memory of your loved one to your favorite charity

# The Suicide Survivor's Bill of Rights

I have the right **to be free of guilt**

I have the right **not to feel responsible for the suicide death**

I have the right **to express my feelings and emotions, even if they do not seem acceptable, as long as they do not interfere with the rights of others**

I have the right **to have my questions answered honestly by authorities and family members**

I have the right **not to be deceived because others feel they can spare me further grief**

I have the right **to maintain a sense of hopelessness**

I have the right **to positive feelings about the one I lost through suicide, regardless of events prior to or at the time of the untimely death**

I have the right **to retain my individuality and not be judged because of the suicide death**

I have the right **to seek counselling and support groups to enable me to explore my feelings honestly to further the acceptance process**

I have the right **to reach acceptance**

I have the right **to a new beginning. I have the right to be**

*In memory of Paul Trider, with thanks to Jann Gingold M.S, DR Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, and Rev Henry Milan. Reprinted with permission of JoAnn Mecca, Centre for Inner Growth & Wholeness*

# Resources

## *Phone Support*

**Lifeline** 24 Hour Telephone Counselling: **131114**

### **Suicide Callback Service 1300 659 467**

The Suicide Callback Service is a free nation-wide telephone support service for people at risk of suicide, their carers and those bereaved by suicide.

The Suicide Call Back Service supports callers through a series of six structured 50 minute telephone counselling sessions, scheduled according to the person's needs. It operates seven days a week from 10am until 8:30pm(EST). Professional counsellors, with specialist skills in working with suicide-related issues, assist clients to work through difficult emotions.

**The Salvation Army Hope Line aimed at anyone who has been bereaved through suicide.** If you've been bereaved through suicide the national Hope Line can be reached by calling **1300 467 354**.

## *Reading Suggestions (Books)*

Many of the books recommended below are available in your local library.

### **For Adults**

Clarke, S. (1995), *After Suicide: Help for the Bereaved*. Hill of Content Publishing.

Fine, C. (1997) *No Time To Say Goodbye, surviving the suicide of a loved one*. Broadway Books, New York.

Noel, B. and Blair Pamela D. (2000) *I Wasn't Ready to Say Goodbye*. Champion Press, Wisconsin.

Ross, E. (2001) *After Suicide: a ray of hope for those left behind*, Perseus Publishing, Cambridge, MA.

Rubel, B. (1999) *But I Didn't Say Goodbye*. For parents and professionals helping child suicide survivors. Griefwork Press, New Jersey.

Simolin, A. and Quinan, J. (1993), *Healing After The Suicide Of A Loved One*, Simon and Schuster, New York.

Wertheimer, A. (2001) *A Special Scar: The Experiences of People Bereaved by Suicide*. Psychology Press.

## **For Young People**

Ross, E. (2001) *After Suicide: a ray of hope for those left behind*, Perseus Publishing, Cambridge, MA.

## **For Children**

The Dougy Center (2001) *After a Suicide Death: an activity book for grieving kids*. The Dougy Center, Portland, Oregon. ([help@dougy.org](mailto:help@dougy.org))

## *Online Information and Support*

### **For Adults**

#### Lifeline [www.lifelineaustralia.org.au](http://www.lifelineaustralia.org.au)

A comprehensive web site with relevant resources and links which can assist with understanding suicide, suicide prevention or helping someone at risk.

#### Bereavement Care Centre [www.bereavementcarecentre.com.au](http://www.bereavementcarecentre.com.au)

The Bereavement Care Centre offers complete bereavement care services including bereavement counselling, educational courses, educational books & DVDs and information for bereaved adults and children. Located in Sydney.

#### White Wreath Association [www.whitewreath.com](http://www.whitewreath.com)

An Australian voluntary organisation that advocates changes to the mental health system and also raises funds to build care centres. The site provides an overview of White Wreath's goals and services. It also contains personal stories of people bereaved by suicide.

#### Suicide Call Back Service [www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au](http://www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au)

The Suicide Call Back Service website provides information and resources for people at risk of suicide, their carers and those bereaved by the suicide of a loved one. It includes video interviews, a support forum for carers, and a directory of community resources.

#### Hope For Life [www.suicideprevention.salvos.org.au](http://www.suicideprevention.salvos.org.au)

Hope For Life is a suicide prevention service focusing on those bereaved by suicide. The site contains links to online training programs in suicide prevention and suicide bereavement support in addition to a range of helpful downloadable resources for those bereaved by suicide.

#### Survivors of Suicide [www.survivorsofsuicide.com](http://www.survivorsofsuicide.com)

The Survivors Of Suicide is an American web site that aims to help those who have lost a loved one to suicide resolve their grief and pain in their own personal way. The site provides information for those bereaved by suicide and those supporting another bereaved by suicide. Suicide survivors may also participate in an online forum - a fee applies.

Suicide Prevention Australia [www.suicidepreventionaust.org.au](http://www.suicidepreventionaust.org.au)

Suicide Prevention Australia is a non-profit non-government organisation working as a public health advocate in suicide prevention. Whilst not a crisis intervention service this site contains a 'Getting Help' section that provides links to nationwide numbers.

Grieflink [www.grieflink.asn.au](http://www.grieflink.asn.au)

An information resource on death-related grief for the community and professionals. As the site is based in South Australia some information about support services and educational activities is specific to that State.

Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement [www.grief.org.au](http://www.grief.org.au)

ACGB provides a statewide specialist bereavement service for individuals, children and families who need assistance following the death of someone close to them. The service also offers a range of bereavement support programs.

Cruse Bereavement Service (UK) [www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk](http://www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk)

Cruse Bereavement Care exists to promote the well-being of bereaved people and to enable anyone bereaved by death to understand their grief and cope with their loss.

Living Is For Everyone [www.livingisforeveryone.com.au](http://www.livingisforeveryone.com.au)

The Living Is For Everyone (LIFE) website is a suicide and self-harm prevention resource, aimed at reducing the rate at which people take their lives in Australia.

## *Online Support for Children and Young People*

**Kids Helpline 1800 55 1800**

A 24 hour telephone and online counselling for children and young people in Australia.

**HeadHigh** [www.headhigh.org.au](http://www.headhigh.org.au)

Information and resources specifically for young people bereaved through suicide.

**Reach Out** [www.reachout.com.au](http://www.reachout.com.au)

A web-based service that inspires young people to help themselves through tough times.

**Headspace - Australia's National Youth Mental Health Association** [www.headspace.org.au](http://www.headspace.org.au)

The Headspace site provides youth going through difficult times with useful information on mental health where to get help in their local community and what to expect when they go for help. The site also has stories from other young people a Carers page and a 'Knowledge Centre' that contains a list of downloadable factsheets about a range of mental-health related issues including suicide and self harm.

**Dougy Centre** [www.dougy.org](http://www.dougy.org)

Support for children, teens, young adults and families grieving a death.

## *Words of Comfort in Bereavement*

**Grief is a powerful, universal feeling, but it is survivable.** *Kirsti A. Dyer, MD, MS, FAAETS*

### **“Elephant in the Room”**

There's an elephant in the room  
It is large and squatting, so it is hard to get around it.  
Yet we squeeze by with, "How are you?" and "I'm fine."  
And a thousand other forms of trivial chatter.  
We talk about the weather.  
We talk about work.  
We talk about everything else-except the elephant in the room.

There's an elephant in the room.  
We all know it is there.  
We are thinking about the elephant as we talk.  
It is constantly on our minds.  
For you see, it is a very big elephant.  
But we do not talk about the elephant in the room.  
Oh, please, say his name.  
Oh, please, say "John" again.  
Oh, please, let's talk about the elephant in the room.  
For if we talk about his death,  
Perhaps we can talk about his life.

Can I say "John" and not have you look away?

For if I cannot, you are leaving me  
Alone...  
In a room...  
With an elephant.

*Kirsti A. Dyer, MD, MS, FAAETS*

### **There is a Sacredness in Tears**

There is a sacredness in tears,  
They are not the mark of weakness,  
but of power.  
They speak more eloquently  
than 10,000 tongues.  
They are the messengers  
of overwhelming grief,  
of deep contrition,  
of unspeakable love.

*Washington Irving*

## **Yes Men Do Cry**

I heard quite often "men don't cry"  
Though no one ever told me why.  
So when I fell and skinned my knee  
No one came to comfort me.  
And as I grew to reasoned years  
I learned to stifle any tears.  
No pain or setback could there be  
Could wrest one single tear from me.  
Then one long night I stood nearby  
And helplessly watched my son die.  
And quickly found to my surprise  
That all the tearless talk was lies.  
And still I cry and have no shame  
I cannot play that "big boy" game,  
And openly without remorse  
I let my sorrow take its course.

*Ken Falk (reprinted from Mesa County, CO TCF Chapter newsletter)*

## *Words of Comfort from Songs*

### **Tears in Heaven**

Would you hold my hand, if I saw you in heaven?  
Would you help me stand, if I saw you in heaven?  
I'll find my way through night and day  
'Cause I know I just can't stay here in heaven  
Beyond the door, there's peace I'm sure  
And I know there'll be no more tears in heaven  
Would you know my name, if I saw you in heaven?  
Would you be the same, if I saw you in heaven?  
I must be strong and carry on  
'Cause I know I don't belong in heaven.

*Eric Clapton, Will Jennings*

### **Angel**

Spend all your time waiting for that second chance  
For the break that will make it okay.  
There's always some reason to feel not good enough  
And it's hard at the end of the day.  
I need some distraction, oh beautiful release  
Memory seeps from my veins.  
Let me be empty and weightless and maybe  
I'll find some peace tonight.

In the arms of the angels, fly away from here.  
From this dark cold hotel room, and the endlessness that you fear.  
You are pulled from the wreckage of your silent reverie.  
You're in the arms of the angle  
May you find some comfort here.

*Sarah McLachlan*

### **Bridge Over Troubled Water**

When you're weary, feelin' small,  
When tears are in your eyes, I'll dry them all.  
I'm on your side oh, when times get rough and friends just can't be found.  
Like a bridge over troubled water, I will lay me down.  
Like a bridge over troubled water, I will lay me down.  
When you're down and out, when you're on the street,  
When evening falls so hard I will comfort you.  
I'll take your part, oh, when darkness comes and pain is all around.  
Like a bridge over troubled water, I will lay me down.  
Like a bridge over troubled water, I will lay me down.  
Sail on silver girl, sail on by.  
Your time has come to shine. All your dreams are on their way.  
See how they shine, Oh, if you need a friend, I'm sailing right behind.  
Like a bridge over troubled water, I will lay me down.  
Like a bridge over troubled water, I will lay me down.

*Paul Simon*



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W.A Information & Support Pack – *Clark, S.J., Hillman, S.D. & Ministerial Council for Suicide Prevention (2001)*

Support after Suicide Service – Jesuit Social Service Victoria

