

GUILT

Dear Harriet,

Two years ago my younger brother, David, killed himself on his twenty-second birthday. My mother is still overcome with guilt and remorse. To be honest, she has good reason to feel responsible for David's death because she always criticized him, and cut him off entirely several years ago. Could she have caused his suicide?

Dear Reader,

A suicide is a profoundly devastating event that sends emotional shock waves through a family for years, decades, and even generations to come. Every family member needs help dealing with such a traumatic loss- not just your mother.

Mothers are often the hardest hit by the death of a child, and your family may be no exception. Your mother- like all parents- might have made mistakes in parenting for which she rightfully feels guilty. But she is NOT responsible for your brother's death. If anyone bears the ultimate responsibility for David's suicide, that person is David.

Countless children grow up in families where they are subjected to unspeakable violence and rejection, and the majority of these children do not respond by killing themselves. Furthermore, suicide- like any dysfunctional or desperate behavior- also occurs in families where there is no lack of love.

Although numerous theories are put forth on the cause of suicide, we know relatively little about the complex, multiple factors that predispose a particular individual to suicidal behavior. We do know that suicide is not "caused" by one family member, nor can it be understood by focusing narrowly on a particular relationship within the family. Similarly, a family member cannot keep alive someone who is determined to die.

In the aftermath of suicide, or any other tragedy or untimely loss, it is normal for family members to ask, 'is someone to blame?' Blaming can be overt or it can be subtle and indirect. Because those left to deal with a loved one's suicide can never obtain all the facts or reconstruct the complete picture, fantasies about its cause will flourish wildly.

You and other interested family members might benefit from consulting with a family systems therapist. This process can help you move away from distancing and blaming so that you gain a more objective perspective on David's suicide and support one another at this difficult time.

Your mother might gain much from reading the autobiographical book *Stronger Than Death* by Sue Chance, MD. This respected psychiatrist provides a moving and plainspoken account for her emotional journey following her son's suicide. Since approximately 50,000 people a year commit suicide in the United States, your mother need not feel alone with her feelings of profound guilt and grief.

Harriet Goldhor Lerner, Ph. D. *New Woman* magazine May 1992