

Eye of the Survivor: Continuing Bonds, Storytelling and Healing for People Bereaved by Suicide

Invited lecture · Sally Spencer-Thomas

Dr. Sally Spencer-Thomas holds a deep commitment to not only help prevent suicide, but also to encourage people to sustain a passion for living. As a clinical psychologist, mental health advocate, and researcher, she sees the issues from many perspectives. Her heart, however, is called, and her dedication to the mission unwavering due to the suicide death of her brother. Her goal is to give voice to people who have lived through depression, addiction, and the impacts of suicide and leverage their wisdom to develop bold, gap-filling strategies and programmes – approaches that empower cultural and systems change in our workplaces, education systems and communities. Internationally she is a Farberow Award recipient and currently Sally is the president of United Suicide Survivors International. She is an accomplished speaker with a popular TEDx talk and a White House address to her credits.

Abstract. Too many people bereaved by suicide feel alone in a ‘Canyon of Why.’ What are ways we can support people in their time of grief and trauma and help them turn their pain into purpose? In the first part of the presentation, Dr. Sally Spencer-Thomas will share grief and trauma recovery pathways through the devastation that the tsunami of suicide leaves behind. She begins by sharing her personal story of the trials and tribulations she faced after losing her brother to suicide. She then helps participants appreciate the complexities that arise after a suicide and shares research on ‘continuing bonds’ after suicide. For the second part of the presentation, she argues that storytelling can be a powerful meaning-making tool for people bereaved by suicide. At the heart of any community change effort are the stories. The basic narrative is this: ‘This is me. This is how my life and others like me have been systematically destroyed. This is how I see change is possible.’ We are hardwired for storytelling – stories move our hearts and build community. As part of a suicide prevention and mental health promotion strategy they let others know they are not alone and collectively, they can tell a powerful tale of hope, recovery and change.