

## *MY JOURNEY IN GRIEF by S.L.*

Even as I write this article, I hear news of yet another young life lost through suicide. The repercussion of suicide on surviving loved ones extend way beyond that of a normal death. Its aftermath leaves nothing but desolation in the lives of the survivors who had in some way, shared life with the victim. The scene in the life of suicide survivor is comparable to that of Fukushima Japan after a 9.0 earthquake unleashed a Tsunami that decimated the land. Similarly, suicide leaves the same barren landscape, with every foundation, perspective, dream and hope, suddenly filched.

This narrative is about my personal journey coping as a parent and I will be looking at the physical, social and emotional aspect in my attempt to navigate through the rubble. I wish to describe my thoughts and feelings, sometimes quite graphically, so as not to make light the horror of the ordeal in view of my coping approaches.

The aftermath of a suicide survivor is one of total confusion, the abrupt and unexpected loss left me feeling like an astronaut floating in deep, dark space with no life-line attached. No matter how hard I tried to move in any direction, I remained in the barren, pitched dark presence of a lifeless space. Yet, I knew I had to continue to keep going as I had other loved ones who were equally if not more traumatised by the ordeal. My husband and I tried our best to keep the same routine, of a life we used to know before the loss but albeit at a slower pace. I realised that our brains, suffering from the post-traumatic stress could not grapple with the demands of daily living as it used to. One routine that I had pre-ordeal, was an exercise regime at least 3 times a week. However, in those early days, I would hit the gym but find that I had no energy and no motivation to even lift a finger. I realised that there was an actual physical sensation experienced in such profound lost. The emotional pain of the lost translated into a physical pain similar to a dagger plunged into my chest, which made it very trying in a vigorous exercise routine. Hence, I opted for activities that were less physically demanding. Walking proved to provide some measure of solace and peace for my husband, as it allowed him both the exercise and time to process his thoughts. And of course, there are those sleepless nights when my mind swirled with the reminder of that horrific night when we found the lifeless body of our child. Sleeping aid could only do so much for me so I decided to be kind to myself and not force a sleep. Instead, I allowed my mind to go through the positive memories of my child, looking at the pictures of the beautiful times that we had spent.

My family and I wouldn't have progressed steadily without the support and love of a few faithful friends. They started a chat group for myself and my husband, and took pain to read and understand bereavement better. I must admit that when your mind is tormented with deep anguish, you sometimes forget social graces and say all the wrong things you would normally not say. I learned to forgive myself for the harsh words that I unwittingly said, even as my friends forgave me. We kept to a small, safe community that was willing to embrace us for what it takes. It was in such times that we realised who were really our friends.

Most people are compassionate when it comes to the loss of a loved one, even more so when it's a young life but most are often at a loss at what to do and say. CBSS, provided the platform where I received a meeting of our experiences and an understanding of my pain. I am usually expressive and vocal about how I feel, however I found myself rather reticent in sharing about the manner in which my child died as suicide holds a stigma, even for the most compassionate of hearts. Nobody wants to die but suicide is a thief that does not discriminate. No matter how good a parent, sibling, friend you

are, a severely damaged and depressed mind cannot access and hold on to the good memories. Few people know this. I kept the information about the suicide and my deepest thoughts to one-to-one meetings with professionals and the trusted few. I learnt that I did not have to reveal more than I could personally handle and if my silence and refusal to disclose offended some, then so be it.

Perhaps the most arduous part of the journey is tempering the emotional pain. In the very early days of my grief, I hated to hear the words 'be strong', I wanted very much to, but my core and entire being was crumpling by the seconds and no words nor action made any difference. Everything in daily life triggered a memory and ignited the pain of the loss. I was like a person suffering from third degree burn where even medication could cause a convulsion. I experienced on a daily basis, an avalanche of emotions from intense sadness, anger, guilt and fear, which had no respect for the supposed Stages of Grief theory. Because the lost was sudden and unexpected, such catastrophic grief created a lot of confusion within me. For some of my family members and close friends of my child, the dissonance of what we believed in and what had actually happened took on a devastating toil, as some succumbed to depression. In order to help my other family members who were severely affected by the ordeal, I took to finding as much information as I could. I read as much as I could about the disease that took my child's life, spoke with school counsellors and embarked on an intense search to understand what really happened. I found professional help for some family members and took on professional learning in therapy to help my remaining loved ones.

The 'What if' question pervaded my thoughts for a large part of my early grief journey; 'what if different decisions were made'; 'what if I had been less nonchalant about the pressures my child experienced'; 'what if I had been more vigilant to better understand the clues from my child's struggles'. Although many successful suicides are preceded by a mental condition, most are often the workings of external pressure and the demands of the environmental, real or imagined. I have learnt that the 'what if' question should not be feared, that these questions are necessary and should be processed with proper guidance. As parents, we all want what is best for our children and we put in effort to ensure that they have a good future. However, the methods prescribed by our society to attain this future for our child may not necessarily be best for every individual. I have learnt this the hard way and I have resolved to stand firm and say 'No, I will not send my child to the Hunger Games'.

Every grief journey is different. I have learnt that what works for me does not work for the rest of my family. It is a deeply personal journey that must be taken with respect, understanding and love for yourself and other affected members. I am fortunate that my child had not only expressed her life's ambitions but that these goals are noble ones that would bring about a better world. Hence, going forward, keeping that dream of hers alive, will form the fabric of my grief journey.

There is no recovery or healing for loss through suicide. To recover means to regain what is lost and to heal means to return to a previous normal state. That can never happen in catastrophic loss. Life that is shredded by suicide and stitched back together will always ooze with pain. But there is light at the end of the tunnel if we choose to create a new normal so that life can continue to have purpose and meaning.

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