

A personal letter ...



In loving memory of Zen Dylan Koh

To the newly suicide-bereaved Mum and Dad,

If you are reading this, there are not enough words to describe how sorry I am for your tragic loss. Grieving the loss of a precious child to suicide is equated to one of the highest levels of pain inflicted on mankind. Grief is exhausting to the core.

I was initially hesitant when Valerie Lim from Child Bereavement Support (Singapore) asked me to contribute an article about my grief journey in order to help the newly bereaved parents like you. Firstly, only 8 months has passed since losing my beloved son, Zen Dylan Koh, to suicide in Melbourne and I am still in the valley of anguish and pain, both physically and emotionally. It feels so surreal and I am trying to navigate each day. There is no such a thing as 'moving on' - words which we hear all the time.

Secondly, I didn't want to put on a strong front, as it wouldn't be very honest to give you the impression that I am the exception to the norm.

But after much soul-searching, I decided to take down my mask and bare my soul by sharing my struggles as candidly as I can with you. This way you will be prepared for what's to come and know that your fears are real and are validated. I want to also share how I have learnt to cope hour-by-hour and now, day-by-day. I have not gone past the 'time flies us by' stage yet. I'm still counting the days since my son left and looking towards the day I can be with him again.

I still use present tense when talking about my son and I don't ever want to get to talk about him in the past tense. He will always be in my present and also my future, when we meet again.



[Beloved Zen Dylan Koh](#)

Zen is my beloved first born. He took his own life one month away from his 18th birthday and 2 months away from graduating from Trinity College in Melbourne where he was pursuing his Foundation Studies, a pre-university course.

Zen is an avid sportsman, popular with lots of friends, intelligent and has a goofy sense of humour with a very caring heart. He treats all his friends with respect as we brought him up to be both "colour and gender-blind". He comes from a loving family with a younger brother. We go on a lot of memorable big holidays yearly.

I share a particularly close bond with Zen and more so after he started living in Melbourne. We would do video calls and instant messaging several times daily despite the long distance. So you see, depression does not discriminate and is contrary to the misconception that only kids from dysfunctional families are prone to depression. He had everything and yet he struggled with anxiety and depression.

(You can read more about his struggles at the links below).



[Letting him go](#)

I spent 3 nights with Zen lying in bed with him and hugging him while he was fighting for his life in the Royal Melbourne Hospital. When the doctors told us we must be prepared to let him go, I had to muster the

strength to speak to him, telling him we forgive him and thanking him for choosing me as his Mummy, even if it was for only 17 years 11 months. I told him Mummy loves him so much so that I cannot be selfish to hold him back; I love him too much to see him suffer and he should let go to find his eternal happiness. Tears rolled down his eyes and that night he passed.

My husband and I decided to donate Zen's organs and today he lives in 6 people in Melbourne. He took his own life but selflessly gave 6 back.

[Forgiveness](#)

One of the first things both my husband and I did was to surrender our anger and forgive the irresponsible psychiatrist who had prescribed Lexapro to Zen - which eventually led him to carry out his suicide ideation. We also forgave his 2 friends whom he had reached out to in his last moments - but they failed to act with urgency. Forgiveness is really the first step in positive healing.

The next few hours and days became such a blur to us. We were blessed to have family and friends who flew to Melbourne to provide emotional support and handle all the arrangements for us.

PTSD

Grief takes a toll on the body and mind! For the next few weeks and into the months that followed, my body reacted acutely as a result of the trauma I experienced. This presented itself as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD): -

Physical Pain

1. I wore my thick winter parka all the time while in Melbourne to keep warm even when the summer season had already set in. I was cold and trembling non-stop. Even when I got back to Singapore, I wore thick hoodies to keep warm. I was later told I was cold all the time because my body had gone into shock!
2. On Zen's 18th birthday, which was a month into my grief, I had a major meltdown and was screaming non-stop for my husband and friends to take me to a hospital for a jab to take away the pain.
3. Another time I could not stop shivering throughout the night even after my husband turned off the air conditioner and I slept under the duvet dressed in thick hoodie and sweatpants. My body had gone into shock again!

4. Heart palpitations that escalated to chest pains became my constant companion. My heart felt like it had been shattered into a billion pieces.
5. Food tasted so bland. My weight plummeted from an already skinny frame of 37.5kg to 35kg.

Flashbacks and Fears

6. I had trouble falling asleep because each time I closed my eyes I would get flashbacks of the tragedy I endured. I had to take alcohol and non-addictive sleeping pills in order to fall asleep each night. Sleep came with 'anxious' dreams where I was always in very helpless situations. And each time I woke up in the middle of the night, I would get heart palpitations and anxiety attacks at the realization that this was all REAL and not a nightmare I can wake up from. I felt trapped in a Nazi concentration camp!
7. Even when I was awake during the day, I kept getting flashbacks and I would cringe in pain and agony.
8. I was and still am afraid of the dark quiet places. To this day I still leave the TV and lights turned on all day when I am home.
9. I could not bear to leave the house for the first month. I had separation anxiety. It was at home that I felt most connected with my son. Leaving the house made me feel so lost.



Facing occasions without Zen

10. Because Zen took his own life exactly 1 month before his 18th birthday and 2 months from graduating, we were forced to face several 'firsts' head-on within the initial few months instead of the first year. Significant

celebrations including my first birthday without Zen, Graduation Day, Christmas, New Year etc. ...came at us with a vengeance.

11. We also decided to take the big diving trip, that was pre-planned a year before, in honour of Zen instead of cancelling it. It was the most difficult family vacation we have ever had to face. I was so tempted to plunge myself into the deep waters every day from the dive boat.

Finding Sanity

And below is the list of things I did and am still doing to find some level of sanity: -

Physical closeness

1. Wear my son's clothes to feel him close to me
2. Got 2 tattoos on my wrists. One that has Zen's name and Mummy in an infinity sign and the other that says 'we part only to meet again'. This is to remind me that we will be reunited again. Each time I place my hands on the tattoos, I feel Zen holding me, guiding me and comforting me. I kiss the tattoos several times a day as a way of sending kisses to him.
3. Hug Zen's soft cuddly bear to sleep each night.
4. I stroke the cheeks on his photos every morning and night and each time I walk by. We also framed up the handprints and locks of his hair that DonateLife Melbourne sent us. And I would place my hands on the frame several times a day to feel him.



Making sense of what is happening

5. Read tons of bereavement, spiritual and suicide loss books.
6. Go online incessantly to get answers to the afterlife and heaven.
7. Constantly de-clutter to give me some sense of calm; to let go of any material attachments. I would make Marie Kondo proud.
8. Found my healing in the Catholic faith and felt that Zen led me to Lord Jesus. I was a free thinker before Zen's passing. Having a spiritual grounding and strong faith helps me find HOPE. The hope that my separation with Zen now is only temporary and that one-day soon I will be reunited with him and never be apart again.

Staying connected

9. Light a candle every night in our balcony as a way for both my husband and I to 'Face Time' Zen. We continue to do so even when we are out of town.
10. One month into my grief, I started a journal and write to Zen daily.
11. Continuously have conversations with Zen in my head and out loud when I am alone driving or in the shower. And I hear him calling me Mummy and answering me when I call. I stroke his cheeks on his photos all the time! I continue to connect with Zen and draw a lot of comfort doing this.
12. Constantly look out for signs of hope as I draw so much comfort from them knowing that Zen is letting me know he is in a good place now. He has given us a lot of



signs from heaven. The most poignant one was when a beautiful butterfly flew inside the ground floor of our house, landed on my feet and then made its way up to my hair as I walked up to the third floor where I was finishing up my article about Zen's struggles which was later published on The Zen Dylan Koh Fund site. The butterfly rested on my hair for almost 3 hours until I finished typing on my laptop.

Prior to the butterfly, on a separate occasion, a moth appeared for the very first time amidst our anguish after we opened a package from DonateLife Melbourne containing his handprints and locks of his hair. We saw many various signs on the clouds too. I took pictures of all the signs and organized them into one album on my phone and I would look at them whenever I need assurance that Zen is not gone forever but spiritually very much alive.

[Using Technology](#)

13. Set up an Instagram account called [#zenmummyforever](#) where I share photos of our precious memories with his close friends. This also allows his friends to heal.
14. Set up a Spotify playlist called [zenmummyforever](#) with songs taken from his playlist and added those that are very poignant in describing my grief.
15. To this day, his mobile phone remains activated so that his close friends as well as myself can continue to message him. The family chat also continues to be active. Staying connected gives us comfort.

[Seeking help and support](#)

For the next couple of weeks I knew that I needed support and professional help before I spiral downwards into the pits of my

anguish. So I reached out to the various support groups like Pieta, CBSS and Healing Bridge. I tried Nutripuncture, a 'treatment' system in which homeopathic nutrient pills works like acupuncture needles, as well as, signed up for Grief Recovery Method (GRM) which is a tool that helps you deal with your grief through a bereavement counsellor.

I was so afraid of what's to come that I even sought grief therapy with 2 different psychologists concurrently. One of them uses Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EDMR) psychotherapy, which is supposedly good for those suffering from PTSD. The other used the Singing Bowl Therapy, based on Tibetan medicine for mental wellness, but it did not help. I was told the bowl could not even 'sing' as my grief was just too deep!

I also saw a psychiatrist who wanted to prescribe anti-depressants, which I refused vehemently. He said because I refused to take them, my PTSD would be more acute and would take longer to heal. But having learnt from what Zen went through with anti-depressants, I was not about to follow in the same path. Instead I took beta-blockers for my chest pains and herbal anti-depressants for my anxiety and depression.

Honestly, all of the above did not really help lessen my pain.

[Friends will fade](#)

In the early weeks, friends will rally around you and constantly check on you. But as the months pass, they would all have gone back to their own lives thinking that you should have 'moved on' by now. Furthermore, some of the things they say to you are unintentionally the most insensitive. And it will become difficult for you to be around them.

I don't expect them to understand and to know my pain, but I also don't want them to ever have to either.

Peer Support

It was only when I met Mums who had lost their precious child to suicide, just like me, that I found my solace and lifeline. They are the only ones who truly understand the anguish and we will never say the wrong things to one another. They don't tell you what to do or what not to do. We are not repulsed by each other's grief journey. We can share our innermost thoughts and feelings with each other without being perceived as having gone bonkers. We validate each other.

Today we meet once a month in my house for drinks and dinner where we uplift each other and share fellowship. We talk non-stop about our children - we call it a night in heaven with our children gathered together - and we feel so comforted in each other's company. At one of these dinners, a moth flew onto my thigh and we knew instantly that our children are with us spiritually!

I am also thankful to my therapist, Geraldine, who with my urging started a support group for suicide bereaved mums called Healing Hearts. Other support groups available out there support all types of child loss, which I am not trying to minimize nor compare types of losses. Child loss is in itself traumatizing enough. Adding on the layer of losing a young child to suicide, adds on another layer of pain for parents to work through. Especially for Mums, the grief is



unfathomable. We feel like our womb has been ripped out of us! This is a club that you don't want to belong to but once you are in, you can never get out!

Finding Purpose

I needed to find a sense of purpose in the weeks that followed and knew that I needed to honour my love for Zen in positive ways. So I poured what's left of my energy into making various donations in his name.

I read his WhatsApp messages saying that he was born to be sad and wanted to take away the sadness of everyone, as he cannot be sadder. He was also planning to be a Psychologist to help others, as he can understand their pain. This prompted my husband and I to start The Zen Dylan Koh Fund with Limitless, a non-profit organization that promotes mental wellness for youths. The fund provides free counselling to disadvantaged youths. It still gives me a lot of comfort knowing that I can help fulfil his wishes to continue to help others and keep his memory alive in positive ways. We launched it in the morning of 1st Jan 2019 and though it was not raining that morning, a beautiful rainbow appeared on our balcony and we took it as a sign of approval from Zen.

At the same time, I decided to share our story with Straits Times. Honestly I was at times afraid that the interview might create a backlash due to the stigma and taboo associated with suicide. I was also wondering if Zen would be okay with me sharing such intimate details of the tragedy, as he has always been a private person. I asked for signs and all I got was this surge of energy directing me to forge on. I strongly believe that my selfless boy and the Holy Spirit guided me.

Today I am glad I went ahead even though it was heart wrenching having to bare my soul to the public with the online video which went viral. Thousands were touched and many

including youths reached out to me privately to share their own struggles. The number of applications to the fund seeking free counselling also surged.

Zen loves his clothes and he has a rather big wardrobe full of designer labels. His friends were asking to have one each as keepsake so my husband and I decided to put aside some for this close friends. In return, they donated whatever amount they can afford to The Zen Dylan Koh Fund.

Where I am now

8 and half months have gone by at the time I started writing this grief journey. The pain of missing, yearning and pining for my son is not any lesser but more acute, contrary to what well-meaning friends who kept telling me that time heals. Look! A mum can never stop grieving until her last dying breath! I continue to navigate the waves of grief but at least it does not crash over me, throwing me to the floor in agony. Lord knows I still sob every day. I have not worn any make-up since the hospital, as all the tears will just smudge my make-up anyway.



I find my days the hardest while the nights are more bearable. Once the sun goes down my husband and I will light a candle for Zen in our balcony, we will have our whisky and talk about Zen with each other and look to the sky to talk to Zen. We feel most connected to Zen here because it was here where we bonded over heart to heart conversations.

The daily heart palpitations and anxiety have become my constant companion especially when I have a traumatic

flashback and each time I have thoughts of not being able to see and hug my son again for a long time. Other times, it's a nagging ache in my heart. Now I truly understand the meaning of heartache!

Sometimes I feel so breathless that I have to remind myself to breathe. I still hate waking up in the mornings and in fact, feel very disappointed to be alive because the whole cycle starts again. But whenever I open my eyes each morning, I will "greet" Zen with "I love you, I miss you so much and today Mummy is one day closer to seeing you again!" I keep sane by telling myself that each day I remain here on this earth doesn't mean I am getting further away from Zen but we are one day closer to our glorious reunion. I still count the days and months.



Self-care

Please brace yourself for what I am about to say to you next. It is not uncommon for a suicide-bereaved parent to also have suicidal thoughts. I am fighting this hour-by-hour and day-by-day. To fight the thoughts, I keep telling myself I cannot fail Zen. When he sees me again, I want him to welcome me home with pride and telling me "well done Mum!"

Likewise, I cannot be selfish to my younger son, Max. He needs me and it was his Mother's day letter to me that touched me to the core. He said he wants to see Mummy find happiness again and that he wants to make memories with me! So in the midst of my struggles, I remind myself of the

need to be present for Max. Max is my now! I must not think of Zen as my past as he is still my present as well as my future.

I am no longer afraid of the day when my journey is completed because I know it will be beautiful. For now I need to walk the rest of this journey as bravely as I can in order to be a great mum to Max and to help others wherever I can as a way to honour my love for Zen. I long for the day where the dark clouds will dissipate. Meanwhile, I choose to deal with my grief head-on rather than trying to zip it up and ignore it; I am determined to avoid ending up with complicated grief later on.

I am not alone and neither are you!

*With Love,
Elaine*



Links

<https://www.straitstimes.com/.../breaking-the-silence-on-suic...>

<https://www.facebook.com/TheStraitsTimes/videos/526590021165136/?t=12>

<https://www.limitless.sg/zen-dylan-koh-fund>