

Many parents never get over the guilt of having their children die by their own hands

Surviving suicide

BY JIM GIBSON
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For a month after her 14-year-old son died, Nasima Nastoh would set a place for him at dinner, go to his room in the morning to wake him and once drove him — in reality, his photo — to school.

Her behaviour — or, more precisely, her denial fuelled by devastation — might not seem extreme to any parent who has lost a child. But Hamed Nastoh did not die by accident; he jumped from Surrey's Patullo Bridge.

Nastoh left a five-page suicide note assuring his parents of his love for them. He did not mean to hurt them, he wrote. He then documented a history of homophobic bullying at school, something his parents knew nothing about.

He also wrote that he had left hints he was considering suicide. The hint they missed was the death of a friend by suicide. He had lied to them, he wrote. No friend had died this way.

"Still, at seven years [later], I still feel guilty," Nastoh says in a phone interview. "Why did I miss the signs of suicide?"

That question gnaws at every parent of a teen suicide, according to the University of Victoria's Jennifer White, a published authority on youth suicide.

It's not just why did a parent miss a sign, but also why did the teen choose suicide?

The why-questions never really disappear for parents, White says, but it remains largely unanswerable.

"I don't think any of us can answer it so that it makes sense," says White, with nearly two decades of counselling experience and suicide research behind her.

A child might choose suicide as the only perceived alternative to their anguish. After all, suicide is already "out there" — frequently portrayed in the media — as an available option, she says.

"They don't necessarily want to die, but escape suffering," she says.

For more than 25 years, Victoria loss and trauma counsellor Darrell Pacini has been quoting "suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem" in his practice. That widely used definition is something a teen doesn't always grasp.

Their inability to see past suicide as the only solution is typical of the black-and-white thinking of many teens, White says.

"They're unable to see shades of grey," she says. "They have no sense of hope or that things will get better."

That was something Jude Platzer found when her 15-year-old son Josh was trapped in his depression.

"They don't understand that it isn't forever," says the Vancouver mother. Josh hung himself in 1999.

Teens still lack the life experience that lets them look past the immediate situation, says Steve Silvers, a Victoria Hospice grief counsellor. For example, he says "when you have lost in love before, you [know you] can live through this one."



Grieving parents of teen suicide victims are often plagued by feelings of guilt.

Rob Strubers illustration

Not only do they lack experience, their brains literally are not fully developed, says Pacini, citing research developed over the past five years.

The death of a child by any means is excruciating for a parent, but a child's death by suicide comes with tremendous guilt, White says.

Their tragedy "could be perceived as preventable," says Silvers, not just by the parent but by others. Ultimately, parents blame themselves for not recognizing something was wrong and intervening.

"I feel guilty because I didn't see. I was so blind that this kid was in so much pain (from bullying at school)," says Debbie Lawless in a

phone interview from rural Manitoba. "I wasn't there to carry her pain. I didn't see the pain."

Five years ago, daughter Alicia, 18, hung herself in the family barn. She left a note telling them what wonderful parents they were, but "I can't take the hurt anymore."

Not only do parents question their ability as parents, but they suspect others are thinking "what kind of parent are you?" says White.

When Nastoh ran unsuccessfully in 2005 for school trustee, it got back to her that some were questioning her qualifications by suggesting she couldn't help her own son.

Something similar happened to Platzer when

managing a youth suicide information table at Granville Island.

"Youth suicide? Bad parenting," she overheard someone conclude.

Apart from the weight of blame, there are additional coping problems for parents. In part this comes from "the sense of intentionality" about the act, says Silvers. Simply, their child chose to die by his own hand.

"Your child didn't feel loved enough and love you enough to carry on with life," says Lawless, elaborating on how a parent might feel.

Parents are plagued by the child's emotional and physical pain up to and including the suicide.

For a long time, when Lawless closed her eyes to sleep she pictured Alicia hanging in the barn. Later, she learned Alicia was actually found in a kneeling position.

"It looked like she could stand up and walk away," says Lawless.

But there is no recipe for a parent's recovery. One parent can progress while the other stays withdrawn, Pacini says. Nastoh's husband had trouble working, fights depression and weeps weekly by his son's grave.

"What does help is having the opportunity to make sense of it with other (parents)," White says. "People feel the need to be understood, not judged."

This can come through professional help, but also in support groups. Some can be found on the Internet, particularly helpful for those living far from major centres. Lawless benefited by talking to others online enduring the same harrowing experience (www.parentsosuicide.com).

"You realize you're not crazy; you're going through the same thing," says Lawless.

Last month, she and husband Dwain started a suicide-survivor group in their small rural community after a suicide memorial service for survivors they organized drew 30 people.

Some, according to Silvers, benefit more by being active. They decide to do something to help.

This is what the Lawlesses are starting to do and both Platzer (teensuicideprevention.org) and Nastoh (Hamed Nastoh Anti-Bullying Coalition) have already done.

Both speak at forums. For Nastoh, that's now weekly. The day before the anniversary of her son's death this month, she'll be taking her anti-bullying and suicide prevention message to a Lower Mainland school.

Almost daily, Nastoh cries for her son and tears still come easily to Platzer.

Eventually parents do move on, believes Silvers. But he doubts that any really put their child's suicide behind them. "I think at the end of your life, you could still go over it again."

Numbers to call: *Need Crisis Line*, 386-6323 or 1-866-6323; *Youth line*, 3856-8155
Project Alive: 952-5073
Crisis Line: 1-800-SUICIDE (784-2433)
Life Moves On (local support group): 474-2303

Websites: www.suicideprevention.ca
www.parentsosuicide.com