

Address given to a Regional Bereavement Practitioners Discussion Group Gathering on
Living with Trauma and Loss – Helena Wong, 17/8/2013.

The issue surrounding death is very confronting for most people especially the death of a child. It is more so when it relates to the death of a child as a result of overdose. If the cause of death is of natural causes or a disease like cancer, others are very forthcoming with their sympathy. However when the death is an overdose, others find it awkward and do not know how to react and often in their minds, they are quick to judgement of the person who used drugs and their family. Hence the grief is not validated, adding another layer to the grieving process. By allowing me to tell my story you are helping me to heal.

I am a survivor. I am grieving the loss of hopes and dreams for a son that is lost to addiction and overdose. This journey began with the discovery of drug use. The discovery brought shock utter disbelief and most of all fear. From that moment on the trauma began and lasted ten long years. The suffering endured with his struggle with addiction and my struggle along with him has helped me to mature and grow. Grief is unique to each individual and I will not talk about the grief experienced by the other members of the family, as we have each allowed the other space to grieve on their own. Perhaps it is too painful to grieve together as a family because we are reminded that one precious member of our family is no longer with us.

Michael was born in Warrnambool in the south west of Victoria in 1980 and he died in Melbourne on that fateful bushfire day, the 7th February 2009. He was only 28 years old. His life was short lived and yet he had accomplished a lot. He was focussed in whatever he did and was intelligent and hardworking. He had this boyish grin and was always gentle and kind. He attended St.Kevin's College and Melbourne High and obtained a degree in Software Engineering from RMIT University with distinctions in every subject. He played the guitar beautifully and wrote, performed and recorded twenty over songs which we are very fortunate to have in our possession. We can still listen to his voice, however it is painful to do so, knowing that physically he is no longer with us. He had a happy childhood but his later years were troubled with addiction to heroin. What prompted an intelligent young man with so much future to venture into drugs, I do not know. I have no answer. Suffice to say it is the luck of the draw.

Addiction is a brain disease characterized by compulsive behaviours, continued drug use despite of negative consequences and changes in brain structure and function. Addiction does not discriminate against rich or poor, educated or uneducated. It does not discriminate against social classes, saint or sinner. Addiction can strike anyone. This fact I had to learn the hard way. I was naive to think that in bringing up children well, it will protect them from trying drugs.

Throughout the years of struggle, Michael lived at home. He was under the care of doctors, psychiatrist, and counsellors. He had short stint at rehabilitation but the pull of the drug was

too strong. He wanted to stop, I wanted him to stop but to no avail. We were in constant conflict (Mother and Son), me, begging, pleading for him to stop, he, begging, pleading for his drugs, because of the pain of withdrawal. At one point he wanted me to let him die. How could a mother let her child die? I had to save him even though there was so much pain. I was always vigilant to make sure that he would not overdose. Three years before his death, under the advice of various counsellors we succumbed to tough love and asked him to leave home when he befriended an older woman who was also troubled. It was heartbreaking. At the time we thought it was the best move for our own sanity as well as to let him hit rock bottom to save him. Unfortunately for us the rock bottom was death. All thru the years, Michael was gentle, never violent, always soft spoken and all he did was quietly shoot up in his room and sleep. He was always loving and an obedient son. The only unwise decision was to try heroin and it never let him go.

The last three years of his life away from home were the hardest to bear. It was constant turmoil. There were conflicting emotions of being tough, at the same time wanting to help and not let him suffer. The emotional rollercoaster was overwhelming. There was so much stress akin to feelings of helplessness, hopelessness and despondency. There was fear: fear of losing control, fear of death and fear of trouble with the law. I was constantly in fight or flight mode. This constant 24-hour vigilance caused untold damage to the psychic. To this day my body tenses up whenever I hear the siren of the ambulance, and when I see or encounter an addict in the midst of their hanging out for their substance of addiction.

When death finally came, there was shock disbelief calmness numbness and intense pain. This pain is akin to your heart being physically torn apart. At the coroners to view his lifeless body, my first words to my son was, "peace at last". Finally the peace of mind that had eluded him for all the years of his addiction, he now had. The irony is that he had to die to achieve this peace. Such is the horror of addiction. Not only is the body affected, the mind and the spirit of the person is affected too. The craving never leaves and if it is not the craving then it is the pain of the withdrawal that stops them from giving up. The addict is never left in peace till they give up or die.

I felt a sense of relief that death had brought the struggle to an end. At the same time there was intense guilt and pain. The rational mind says we have done everything we possibly know how to, the emotional mind felt the guilt and the regrets. Perhaps I have failed my child failed to protect him. As long as there was life, there was hope. That hope was forever shattered with his death. Immediately after the news of the death I relived the days the hours before the death over and over again in my mind, trying to make sense of what has occurred. There were countless tears, then calm, then tears yo-yoing between calm and tears. There were lots of questions as to whether it was accidental or suicide. Always wondering whether one had done enough to save one's child.

This journey of grief is one of loneliness and isolation for fear of judgement and prejudice from others. After the formalities of the funeral one is left to grieve alone. Reality sets in and the guilt and shame and regrets begin to surface. There is a reticence to share because of shame and stigma attached to drug use and addiction. Negative sentiments about addiction put an extra burden on the grieving process. Comments like “they deserve to die, after all they are druggies!” make it seem like their deaths are deserved and the grief is not validated. I found it hard to talk about his death, I was ashamed of the way he died. My middle class upbringing had not armed me with the knowledge of dealing with addiction let alone the death of a child to it. I had a lot of lessons to learn. I had once been judgemental in my attitude to drug abuse thru lack of education and knowledge of addiction and now I have been touched by it. I was under the illusion that my family was too good to be affected by addiction. How little did I know? How naive and uneducated I was in this area.

Now I am looking for others who have experienced what I have been through to share and to heal. Counsellors were available to guide me through my grief. But I needed more. I needed to talk to people who fully understand my pain. I found it in the Supper Club and Grasp. Both these groups provide an avenue for sharing without judgement. Sharing lifts the burden and giving voice to our stories will help provide insight and educate on addiction and the trauma and impact it has on the addicts and their families that suffer along with them. Perhaps if more speak up we may in time remove the stigma and shame attached.

“The infinite value of each human being nullifies presumption, prejudice and judgement on those who use drugs.” – anon. My life has changed on so many levels. Many of the beliefs I have held before, have changed through growth. At times I feel a sense of failure because I failed to protect my son from drugs and ultimately his death. At other times I feel I have endured and grown in maturity. Judgement from others be it real or perceived causes untold stress and trauma. Michael’s story has taught me to be less judgemental more open and tolerant of differences and more compassionate. Life is short and unexpected so I have learnt to embrace the present and be grateful for all experiences, good or bad for they bring growth. I am no longer ashamed of my son’s illness, I have learnt much about addiction, much too late to help my son. For this I am so very sorry and sad. I wish to say to other parents, focus on the positives in your child and not just the addiction; make every moment memorable for your time with them may be short. I am not hiding behind silence anymore.

I am reaching out. Gandhi said, “Live as if you are to die tomorrow and learn as if you are to live forever.” It is never too late to learn and to change our beliefs. The Supper Club in Melbourne and Grasp in the United States of America are support groups that provide a place for sharing and acknowledging our grief. There is no need for shame. We can heal and move ahead. In time, we may understand addiction better, reduce the stigma and help find better treatment options. So many of our children are affected by alcohol and drugs, do not let them be a statistic. They are not good or bad, they are afflicted by this insidious disease

called addiction. Help them by making the issue public and reach out for more funding and research into this issue. We the survivors are hurting and overwhelmed by this disease that rob the people affected, of their physical and mental health but most of all their spirit. The addicts live out of touch with reality and find it hard to get back in touch with the real person they once were before the drugs alter their brain landscape and changed them. As parents, we are always questioning whether we have done enough and we wish we had the knowledge to deal with the issue better.