

SUICIDE IN MODERN IRELAND
NEW DIMENSIONS, NEW RESPONSES

Advocacy & The Aftermath
Saturday Afternoon 13 November

"MY STORY"

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In the Chair: Ciara O'Connor – Console: Bereaved by Suicide Foundation
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In 1981, my eldest son was 24yrs old. He was a lovely young man. I know every mother says that but in his case it really was true. He was very much the elder brother, always looking out for his brothers and sister. He had been married for three and a half years to a lovely gentle girl and they had a two and a half year old daughter and were expecting another baby in the summer of '82. Why then did he, who so loved life and had so much to live for end his own life. There were no warning signs.

The affect of this tragic event on our family was devastating. Each of us felt it in our own individual way, I suppose if each of us was asked to tell their own story they would all be different. This is my story.

I felt that my world had ended. I had four other children and I knew I should be supporting them but I felt so desolate I couldn't take on their grief as well as my own. I tried but I couldn't do them justice and of course my son's wife needed my support. After all, my son had left her with a little daughter and expecting another baby on her own. How was I ever going to deal with all this hurt and sadness.

The immediate result of this was that nobody in the family spoke about it in our home. I know now that that wasn't the way to deal with this situation but at that time nobody spoke about suicide, if it was spoken of at all it was in hushed tones with a wink and a nudge. I on the other hand could talk of nothing else, maybe I felt that if I spoke about it enough I would somehow make sense of it. Perhaps because I was so vocal about what had happened to us I heard about other people who felt as I did, many of them told stories of being pregnant when their husbands took their own lives. There was no support of any kind 24 years ago for anyone bereaved by suicide. The law of the land helped to promote the stigma attached to suicide by keeping it within the criminal code.

This was something that needed to be changed so I started to campaign to change this law, which was not only cruel but could not be enforced. This law was changed in 1993 after a lot of hard work by a lot of people all around the country.

In 1983 two years after my son's suicide when everyone else seemed to be have got themselves back to what seemed like normality I fell apart. I had a complete mental breakdown and I spent eight weeks in a Psychiatric Unit. This I attribute in part to a G.P. who never listened to (or even asked) how I felt. When he did ask I told him I felt like "walking into the river" he said that it was only to be expected. Two evenings later I was taken into the hospital in an ambulance, which had been alerted by a passer-by who thought I was in danger of drowning. I don't know if I was in the river or not, I do know that there were kind people who were concerned enough about someone they didn't even know to call an ambulance and probably saved my life. I have never gone to sleep any night since without saying a prayer for them.

My time in hospital was an education for me. After the first two weeks I was only aware of a voice talking constantly it took several days to realise that the voice was my own. What I talked about I have no idea. As my recovery progressed (without any medication but with a deep relaxation therapy) I noticed that many of the patients who went home were back in a few days. This scared me I asked the doctor if I was going to keep coming back but he assured me that I wouldn't. I wasn't so sure.

My illness must have been very hard on my family. They were very supportive. My daughter in law came in to see me every day and when it was time to go home she brought me to her G.P. and helped me to join his list. Since then I have not looked back. I have to say that my daughter in law has really done a wonderful job bringing up my two grandchildren. They would be a credit to both their parents. They have become two responsible young adults that any parents would be proud of. As their grandmother I am very proud of them and of their mother.

In 1998 my youngest son, then 25 years old was diagnosed with cancer. He had never been ill except for childhood illnesses and he had gone to the doctor with a pain in his back so this diagnosis was difficult to deal with. My G.P. Guided me through this crisis because he listened. Watching him deal with his illness and having the opportunity to let us tell him how much we loved him really helped us to at last deal with his brother's death. We felt that we were saying goodbye to both of them.

I feel it is important to point out that the doctor I joined when I came out of hospital worked in a group practice; I feel that may have helped a great deal in allocating time for patients. I don't know why my son died, I'll probably never know but I do know that those who are left behind when someone ends their own life need the support of all those around them.