

Let's talk about the "S" word

■ Cite as: *CMAJ* 2020 October 19;192:E1272-3. doi: 10.1503/cmaj.201302

It was a snowy day in November. I was a second-year medical student trying to find my way around a small rural hospital in Northern Ontario as part of a month-long placement. I had on my best “yeah-I-know-what-I’m-doing” face as I tried to learn everything I could about a patient in intensive care while also trying to find the preceptor I was supposed to be with for the day, when a colleague found me and told me my mom had called the hospital looking for me. I hadn’t been checking my phone and now it displayed numerous missed calls and messages. My heart sank into the pit of my stomach. I called my mom who told me to get to the hospital in our home city an hour and a half away.

“Why?” I asked. She was tight-lipped and only said, “It’s dad, just get here as fast as you can.” I’ve always been persistent. I pressed on and eventually she said, “He’s dead.” I let out a scream that I’m sure was heard across the ward and surprised even myself. I ran away from the scene I had just made only to collapse in a staircase crying, my colleague crying beside me. I was whisked from one hospital to another to say my goodbyes to someone so special who was already gone because of suicide.

The aftermath of this event showed the beautiful sense of community at my medical school. My classmates sent messages and gifts, some donated to organizations supporting mental health, others made meals and baked goods, and many showed up to my dad’s celebration of life (a party so packed it filled an Italian event hall with a twisting tail of people lined up out the door). My classmates have continued to check in on me, support me and be a source of strength on our journey through medical education. An alumnus physician took the time to meet with me, despite it being after a long week-



In loving memory of Todd Warren (May 31, 1966–Nov. 16, 2018).

end on-call, so we could bond over the mutual experience of suddenly losing our dads. That conversation and her willingness to go out of her way for me meant a lot. I feel fortunate to be a part of a community that not only provides me with the space to talk about my dad and what happened but values these conversations.

That was the beautiful part of my experience, but I was still left with the

painful part. I was trying to make sense of something that just didn’t make sense. How could someone I love so deeply leave me feeling so broken? How could someone who had so much going for him not see what everyone else could? He was a well-respected respiratory therapist only a few years away from retirement, a loving husband of over 25 years, a supportive father, a beloved son and brother, a skilled



The author with her father when she started medical school.

tradesman, an avid outdoorsman and, to top it all off, he was a good-looking guy. I think most who looked at his life thought he had everything going for him.

At times my body felt like it weighed a thousand pounds as if I had cement coursing through my veins. The emotions you experience after losing someone to suicide are unlike any other loss. I felt angry that he left me ... I resented his selfishness for leaving us. Then, just a moment later, I would be guilt-ridden for blaming someone who must have been in a terribly dark place from which he saw no way out. I felt like an imposter for preaching at his celebration of life that “His brain had malfunctioned as suddenly and as massively as a heart attack.” My rational brain knew this had to be true, but my emotional brain refused to accept it.

I have come to accept that the pain may never completely go away, but I have also learned that the cliché “time heals all

wounds” has some truth to it. I like the analogy of the wave. At first, you’re in the middle of the ocean, in the middle of a storm, with waves of grief crashing over you and you are just sputtering, treading water, gasping for air. The waves change over time. They come less often. Or maybe they aren’t as big. And eventually both of those things are true. I still get the odd wave, and sometimes it even feels like a big one, but I let it wash over me cathartically. Because I know it will pass ... it always does. As the grief and pain have become more manageable, the disconnect between the rational and emotional parts of my brain seems to have dissipated. Perhaps when the pain is so deep and so raw, our thought processes are hijacked by a multitude of competing intense emotions and it becomes inherently more difficult to process things rationally.

This experience changed me ... and I think it was for the better. I am devastated

that I will never get to see my dad again; I miss him terribly and grieve for the memories we didn’t get to make. However, I learned so much about myself and the people around me in the aftermath.

Resiliency is something we talk about more often in medicine nowadays, but it felt like an abstract concept when my dad died; something I liked to think I had but couldn’t know for sure. Now I understand resiliency. The strength I’ve found is now fuel propelling me toward my goals. I aspire to live my life according to a motto my dad used to preach, “life is 10% what happens to you and 90% how you react to it.”

I have come to appreciate the community of people that surround me more than they will ever know. To have people in your life who you know you can rely on no matter what, where or when is something I will never take for granted. My perspective on the day-to-day happenings of my life has changed; I can more easily identify the “small stuff” I ought not to sweat over, and I more deeply cherish life’s simple pleasures. Most importantly, the extent of my empathy for others, the very thing that led me to medicine in the first place, has grown. I’m hopeful that these experiences will enable me to be a more compassionate care provider. I hope that in sharing my journey, I can provide comfort or support to someone bereaved by suicide; encourage others to support a friend, colleague or acquaintance who has lost a loved one to mental illness; and contribute to a narrative that may lead to suicide no longer being some shameful secret.

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This article has been peer reviewed.