

Surviving Suicide Loss, Helping Others

by Terri Kasper, Marketing Communications Director

She had been struggling for a couple of years, shared Dana Szymczak, who is a member of the New Leaf Resources' administrative team. "My sister-in-law had unexplained vertigo. She was constantly dizzy, couldn't drive or work," Dana said. "She went to the Cleveland Clinic, Northwestern and no one could explain her symptoms. She felt depressed, had issues with spending, was afraid to be alone." Dana's sister-in-law had mentioned suicide many times, but refused to admit that her mental health was compromised. She blamed her physical ailments. "One thing I know now," Dana said, "you can't ignore it when someone mentions suicide." Dana's sister-in-law killed herself hours after agreeing to get help for what her family believes now was severe anxiety and major depression.



Terri Kasper (right) and her sister Sofia Collier at their brother's White Sox memorial brick.

"You constantly battle the guilt," Dana shared. "Guilt I feel knowing I knew she was going to do it and not forcing her to get help." Just days earlier, Dana's sister-in-law was stopped by a passerby seconds before running into traffic on a busy highway. After that incident, her family desperately tried to get her help. They watched her around the clock and finally had convinced her to go the hospital the next day. But when she had the opportunity, she snuck away and took her own life.

I can relate to Dana's story. I lost my brother to suicide after years of trying to get him appropriate treatment for what doctors said was major depression. After the first attempt, he promised me and my family that he wouldn't try again. He agreed to attend counseling and said he wanted to get his life back together.

But in hindsight, I don't think he was being honest with us or himself. I think the shame of the demons he battled was too much for him to admit to anyone. He quit going to counseling and didn't take his prescription. Old self-medicating habits kicked-in and he found himself in trouble with the law. But when he started dating and seemed happy for the first time in a long time, we hoped he had turned a corner.

I hadn't talked to my brother in a over a month, when my parents called me late on a cold night in February, almost five years ago. They told me that the police had been called to my brother's house. He had threatened his girlfriend and her son with a gun and was holed up inside not willing to come out. Huddled in our cars outside the home, police negotiated with him to no avail. He chose to end his life that night.

When someone dies by suicide you go through a variety of emotions from anger to despair. It takes

(Over)



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a long time to process what has happened and to work through it. As Dana explained, “it was like I was in a fog for about a year.” You question how a loved one could do this to their family and friends. It seems like such a selfish act. Then you blame yourself for not doing more and start with the “what ifs.” What if I made him get treatment; what if I personally took him to counseling; what if I could have stopped him that night.

Fortunately for my family, we talked through the emotions and kept supporting each other during the grieving process. We sought out resources to help us cope with our loss. We participated in the AFSP’s Out of Darkness Walk raising money for suicide prevention. We also made a donation in memory of my brother to the White Sox Charities and have a memorial brick in front of US Cellular Field. When we attend games we go see the brick and think back on the happier memories.

Dana sought out counseling to help her cope while supporting her in-laws as they dealt with their loss. “Suicide can tear a family apart, especially when members won’t communicate their feelings or seek professional help,” Dana shared. “I would encourage anyone impacted by suicide to get help.”

Dana and I both joined New Leaf Resources shortly after our losses. We felt like it was a Godsend and believe that something good will always come out of something bad. We pray that by encouraging others to get the help and counseling they need, we might just save a life.

Resources for Coping with Suicide Loss

- **The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention**
afsp.org
- **The Compassionate Friends**
compassionatefriends.org
- **Alliance of Hope**
allianceofhope.org
- **Suicide Grief Support Forum**
suicidegrief.com
- **Families for Depression Awareness**
familyaware.org
- **SurvivorsRoad2Healing**
road2healing.com
- **Survivors of Suicide**
survivorsofsuicide.com
- **Out of Darkness Walks**
afsp.org