

## **The Forgotten Grievers (Those from whom it was hidden) By Margaret Doust<sup>1</sup>**

I've talked about the difficulties in sharing with others the details about our loved one's death. Imagine not being told the truth about the death of a loved one, imagine finding out it much later that it was a suicide.

Deceit in any form is a harsh and painful wound, having it inflicted by those closest to us makes it worse. To be treated so unfairly would feel like a punishment, they are also robbed of a part of themselves and their lives that might have been. If our worthiness to know the truth has been denied us, and the life we have lived without the truth cannot be changed. Then whatever the current situation we find ourselves in is a direct result of that deceit.

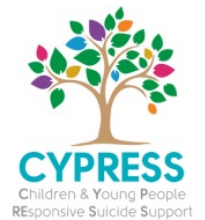
We know the devastation brought at the time of the death and how a suicide carries such a multitude of painful aspects. If we have been deceived and left unaware that a loved one died in this manner we would not have the chance to face and process the extra trauma attached to their death.

The discovery of being lied to would be an enormous wound in itself, and the means by which the truth is discovered could be as damaging as the fact itself. As I have not lived through this myself I can only try to talk about what it would be like and don't assume any right to say I know how one would feel. I do think these people who have been "trapped" in a secret should have the chance to be heard, and offered understanding and explanations.

Why would people hold back the truth? The reasons would probably stem from the original stigmas of suicide. Fear could certainly be a strong contributing factor. Fear of hurting someone close to them, especially children, or fear of being blamed for the death. The fear that others might blame themselves for the death, the list could go on and on. At the time of a suicide we are all treading on unknown ground, we are full of emotions, and our reactions to these emotions can be way out of whack. We certainly don't want to believe the truth ourselves.

Perhaps that is one way the secret begins. By trying to "hide" the suicide from ourselves, escape as it were, from the pain and mayhem of the truth. We might tell others the death was from another cause so as to save ourselves, as well as them, from more pain by having to explain even more the details of this very painful loss.

I know how it feels to explain the circumstances of a suicide to those closest to us. Telling my parents about their granddaughter was terribly painful for me, knowing I was torturing them with every word. It broke my heart all over again. I was able to



hold off from telling my grandchildren in any definitive way due to their young age. It is very difficult to handle.

I tried including their mum in conversation, making comparisons from her childhood and telling funny stories about her and kept the door open for them to ask me anything about her, including how she died.

When still very young, at age three, I told my grandson that mummy's body didn't work anymore, and he was satisfied with that for a while. Later on he asked what had stopped it from working and I told him that our bodies need lots of things to keep working, especially our blood. I told him that mummy's blood could not pump in her heart anymore and without it we cannot live. I placed his hand on his chest for him to feel the beat of his heart.

He followed up with the more and more questions, usually when I was driving the car, in the middle of merging in high speed traffic or trying to navigate my way somewhere using the street directory.

His understanding at this time is that his mummy was in a lot of pain. That she had been to the doctor and got medicine but still felt very sick. That she didn't think she would ever get better, she tried and tried but every day she felt worse. She was so tired that she slept most of the time and didn't feel like doing anything. He knows she couldn't look after him and his brother because of her illness and this made her even sadder. She didn't want to worry me or her dad and tried to keep going because she loved her little boys very much.

He knows that it was a big sadness that was hurting her and she could not stand the pain any longer. He knows she stopped herself from breathing and that she used a rope to do this. He also knows that if she had told me and her dad about how bad she felt we could have helped her. And he knows that he can always tell us how he is feeling and it won't hurt us, and we can help him. He knows that if she had known it would be okay to tell us she would have never left.

The explanation is not over for me and as the questions grow I hope my answers give him the understanding he deserves. I felt the main thing for me was to keep telling the truth in a language understandable to the child, and to keep on leading up to the absolute truth by the time of adulthood.

For those who have not heard any explanation and perhaps never will what can they do to work through the tangled vines of secrets and lies?

Issues of trust, whether in the past or newly unearthed, would have a great impact on how these survivors lived or will live their lives. Many of the questions are the same

as for the knowing. Did this person suicide because of them, something they did or said. Should they have seen this coming at the time? Was the deceit a form of protection because of their tender age or situation, would knowing the “reasons” make it feel any less of a betrayal?

As time goes by it gets harder to stop perpetuating a lie, the truth becomes buried. I suppose thoughts of telling the secret weigh heavily on the keepers mind. They would want to protect themselves in more ways than one. Not only would it be painful to the one betrayed, the keeper would have to live with causing more misery, perhaps this is what makes it unthinkable. It’s a very sad catch 22 situation.

Other areas of concern in not telling the truth can be of great detriment to the ones who are kept in the dark, especially if they are a blood relative. Because many of those who take their lives have suffered some form of mental illness, there is a strong likelihood of other family members being pre-disposed to the same symptoms.

Knowing the truth about a suicide can help to prevent others from taking the same path. I mentioned earlier that we can take a closer look at how the deceased dealt with life’s problems and use this information to better steer our own life in a more positive direction.

I hope that speaking out for these innocent, forgotten and silent grievers may bring them hope and some understanding. There is help for the grievers of the secret, they can be enabled to journey through to a happier life, and that is my wish for them all.

It has been my honour to be involved with group work with clients who have been bereaved by suicide. To witness the intense depth of empathy shared by these clients is to see humanity at its very best. What would bring me great joy would be to see “forgotten grievers” forming a group to give and receive the best source of understanding and support of all, to be with others who have walked in your shoes.

So if you or someone you know is “stuck” in this dreadful secret I urge you to reach out. I wish it was not the truth but I believe there are many, many people in the same situation. As has happened with other grievers, if you begin to reach out, then you open the doors for all of the others, and together you can work toward a new understanding of yourselves and your place in the world.

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