

Paul Elderkin's story

SURVIVING THE LOSS OF A LOVED ONE, AND
THE MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES, WE AS A
SOCIETY, FACE.



TOGETHER

When someone dies by suicide there are many consequences for the survivors. The one story we'll never fully understand is the story of the person who took their life. This is my story, as a survivor of losing a loved one to suicide.

On the 2nd December 2019, I lost my partner – someone I wanted to see experience all the joys in life, someone who had so much to live for. The traumatic experience has been a rollercoaster of guilt, pain, sadness, and, overall, having feelings within my heart and mind that want to send me deep into depression. Losing someone without being able to say goodbye, without fully understanding what was going on, is something I've had to come to terms with, and it has not been easy. Losing someone who still had so much life to live for herself causes a lot of pain.

It is not easy. Days when it's difficult to find the strength to get up off the floor do happen. Days when you don't want to talk to anyone seem to be every other day. Days when you don't want to face life. Even days when you think about ways out. Sleepless nights. Struggling to close your eyes because of the trauma. Not being able to sleep by yourself. Spending time alone doing the simplest of activities you would normally do (even taking a shower) all become challenging and scary. You long to be able to find peace with your emotions, and to feel the slightest glimmer of normality in life.

Laylah

Laylah's life to an outsider would have looked like she had all that a person could need – at the surface level. The good job, an apartment by the beach, opportunities in life, friends, supportive family, and a regularly exercised mind and body. She was truly remarkable; the type of person who, at the drop of a hat, would be there for her friends. She

freely gave her time to volunteer for charities that worked with vulnerable children. She would spend large parts of her time advocating to right the wrongs in this world, to bring balance to all that is unbalanced. Her passion to be connected with all that was around her was inspiring for any by-passers. It created a sense of excitement for those who were able to share time with her.

Being Laylah's partner gave me this feeling of luck, a deep connection of unconditional love, that will last a lifetime. I was filled with excitement knowing that the future would involve many random adventures; it would hold happiness in places that could otherwise leave a feeling of unhappiness. A story to be written that would have involved deep love, deep connection, travel, combining our passions in trying to help others, learning new skills and laughing together when we made mistakes while we learnt.

What I miss most and hurts me the most in all the above is that Laylah herself will not get to experience any of this, and she will not know what it's like to grow old with someone. To face all the challenges with a partner by her side. To live her life to the fullest and overcome any obstacles that stood in her way. Just knowing that brings sadness to my heart, and overwhelming emotions that I am still to understand. It creates a deep feeling of pain knowing that I will not be able to hold hands as we walk down the street, fall asleep next to someone I cherished, or to witness her beautiful smile on a daily basis.



PHOTO BY PAUL WITH LAYLAH

Shattered

Throughout the highs and lows in our lives, losing someone suddenly and tragically just cannot be planned for, and it can send us into a downward spiral. We as humans are so rarely equipped for or taught the skills on how to deal with the emotions and pain that we each go through in our own, unique ways after such an experience. These types of experiences change your perspective on life, whether or not you're aware of the mental health challenges out there, or the struggles that individuals go through each day. And whether that be your own challenges, someone else's challenges or the challenges faced by a survivor who has lost a loved one. Losing someone suddenly makes everything a whole lot more real, and you quickly realise how many people are affected by poor mental health and are vulnerable around you.

Outside the professional support that's available, yet which is sometimes extremely hard to access and subject to long waiting periods, we have each other. How can you help? Create an open environment for those around you to talk. Be there to just listen if it is needed. Lend a smile to a stranger for a day. Radiate positive energy to those you come into contact with. Say hello and compliment a friend who you haven't spoken to in

a while, maybe even a colleague or someone you bump into. Tell your family and friends that you love and appreciate them daily.

All these little things – plus your own examples that are uniquely important to you – can help those dealing with mental health challenges and those who are surviving the loss of a loved one. Acting together builds strength – strength that a vulnerable person may need to lean on any given day.

Making sense

A lot of us will have been, in some way, connected to someone taking their own lives because of the damaging effects of mental illness.

As a survivor of losing a loved one, it is very real, it is life shattering, and your heart breaks and aches. There is no way for it to heal, it can only scar. You can't make sense of your emotions. All you can hope for ... well, you hope that you will be able to find hope again. Family and friends are the ones that help give you strength, that help you take baby steps towards finding hope and a new normality.

Each day, around the world, people are taking their own lives because they see no way out, they have a moment where they do not see light at the end of the tunnel. They convince themselves, against all evidence, that their loved ones are better off without them. Their pain is just too much.

We as family, friends and strangers can help, whether that be supporting someone who is battling with mental health or supporting a survivor; whether that's a survivor of attempted suicide or a survivor of suicide loss. We can be there for each other. We can try our best to help those vulnerable around us. It is at any given moment – during those darkest of hours for someone that is suffering – that our messages, calls, smiles, and love can help.

None of us are alone. If you're struggling, please reach out for help, your challenges are our challenges. You're not a burden, you're perfect, you're love, and you're life: a life this world wants to celebrate while you're here with us. A life that means so much to those around you that any of your loved ones would do anything to keep you here.

An analogy for hope

In basketball, each team has their own star player, and in your own life you are the star player. A team will build support around their star player so that, together, they can be a strong unit and therefore effective in numerous ways. A basketball season is long, with many challenges and changes in direction, just like life. The star player (you) can have off-days, and get tired and even worn out over time, both mentally and physically. Without the help and support of their team, the star will gradually fade, dimmer and dimmer. Each team member brings something special to the team and helps the star maintain its brightness.

We are all born as stars; we all have unrealised potential to achieve the highest level of happiness and our own version of success and love. Whether you're suffering from your own mental health challenges, know someone who is, or are the survivor of a lost one, please seek a team of people that can support you and your loved ones and help maintain the brightness of our stars. You're not alone, and the stronger the team we have, the more likely we can all live in this world in a happier and healthier way.

Keeping with the basketball analogy, create your own starting five support group! As an example – and if you're unsure about what types of support are out there or who is willing to help; remember, we will each have our own ways of building a team – the team I have built to help support me includes a psychotherapist, a counsellor, and a member of

staff from a charity called the *If U Care Share Foundation*, who has been through a similar experience of losing a loved one suddenly. Also, coming back to England to be with my family, speaking to close friends and old friends in both Australia and England, and being open with those who I have placed around me, telling them exactly how I'm feeling, has been one of the most important parts of my journey.

However hard it is – and it can be hard to get out of bed each morning to face the day – I also push myself to be proactive. Whether that's in basketball, the gym, taking up French lessons, reading (I found reading *Any Ordinary Day* by Leigh Sales helpful), working on self-development, or building and maintaining healthy habits. Keeping with basketball analogy and my example of building a team around me, I have also built five habits into my day which are small and measurable. For example, I will reward myself for getting out of bed in the morning, making my bed, taking a shower, eating a healthy breakfast, and writing a gratitude journal. This has been one of the most beneficial aspects on my journey to recovery. It has helped me to feel a sense of achievement. This feeling has enabled me to feel a bit more positive when working through my challenges. It has all helped me move forward, step by step, day by day, in my own way. Find activities that are important to you and can help you take those small steps. Invest in yourself!

Let's create an open environment where mental health has no stigma. We all go through similar challenges in life; it is our openness that will make it an acceptable topic to talk about and create opportunities for people to feel comfortable to talk, and this can only move us forward into the future in a healthier direction. Let's be there for each other!

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