The Cultural Uniqueness of Grieving after Suicide

At the IASP Postvention Seminar, Killarney, September 2007, we met in small groups to discuss where Postvention is and where it must go. This discussion followed a plenary presentation by Jerry Reed of The Suicide Prevention Action Network, USA where he explained the Faces of Suicide Quilts we display in the United States.

These quilts are used to bring a picture and a personal story to suicide. They are then displayed at national, regional and local events. The purpose of the quilts is to give people a sense of the personal stories behind the people lost to suicide. I have never questioned the validity of this as it is something we do here in the United States. My sister Denise’s photo is on three quilts and I have personally been involved in the creation of two such quilts. I have always thought that the quilts helped people to understand the devastation of suicide.

During the discussion, the question was raised:

Are the quilts protective or Infectious?

We have never evaluated the quilts (unfortunately, something typical to many Postvention activities).

The answer came through a series of people speaking and it revealed itself eventually – while the woman who raised the issue came from a smaller European country (population wise) and her thought had been that people might easily recognize the faces on the quilts in a country, the bigger picture of this issue is that it is ultimately about culture.

I live in New Mexico, a culturally diverse state mostly made up of a mixture of people with Native American, Hispanic, and other diverse backgrounds. For several years, I traveled the state presenting on suicide. My cohort and I worked with the Federal Indian Health Service and found ourselves presenting workshops for various Pueblo Indian groups. What many people do not realize is how unique each of these groups is. What one person or group believed was not necessarily what the other believed. We had to immerse ourselves into the community to learn lessons of how suicide was viewed and how they mourned a suicide death.

Those cultural differences affect how people grieve and they affect how I might help them with their grief. We cannot tell the entire world to attend a support group when there are cultures that would not support such an endeavor. We need to think about the individual needs of those cultures and offer them a myriad of ways to help that are culturally appropriate.

What I learned was not just a lesson for New Mexico or even just the United States – it is something we need to learn worldwide. As we continue to move forward to help survivors cope, we need to take into consideration where they come from, what they believe, and what they are. This is by all means not an easy task, but definitely not insurmountable. It is well worth the effort to break the legacy of suicide in families worldwide.

We need your help to do this.

Let us know what is going on in your country or region in regard to culture and grieving after a suicide.

We need survivor stories from around the world for this newsletter. We need to know how people grieve in different places and how we can use those experiences to help others. Our job is to bring these stories and experiences back to you so that we can all learn how to better help survivors. But we cannot do it without hearing from you.

Michelle Linn-Gust
Co-Chair,
IASP Postvention Task Force

To contribute an article or information to this newsletter, please contact either Sean McCarthy or Michelle Linn-Gust (contact details are on back page)
World Suicide Survivor Group Directory

One of the objectives laid down during the Postvention Task Force meeting in Killarney was that we seek to expand the current European Directory of Support Services for people bereaved through suicide.

It is our ambition to have as many links as possible to the IASP web site from across the globe.

If your country has developed a database of support groups, why not have them listed on the IASP web site?

If you have a link to your country’s listing, please forward it via email to: sean.mccarthy@hse.ie.

12th European Symposium on Suicide and Suicidal Behaviour
28th–30th August 2008
Glasgow

The deadline for submission of abstracts for possible inclusion in the programme as Oral, Poster, Round Table, Symposia or workshop presentation is approaching. The final date for these is the 3rd March 2008.

As there is no plenary session dedicated to Postvention, we would call on all of you interested in the field of Postvention to submit abstracts of your work for inclusion in the programme.

It is only by participation in the conference programme that we can raise the profile of Postvention, its importance and relevance

Web: www.esssb12.org
A Mother's Story from China

Zhang Fan

Translated from Chinese by Yang Ron

On September 8th, 2003, my daughter, Yang Yu Qing, a graduate student at a leading university in Shanghai jumped off the 23rd floor of a school building. She was 23 years old and my only child. She had suffered from depression for six years.

As a young child, Yang Yu Qing was bright and diligent. As she grew older, she was conscientious, responsible and respectful of us, her parents. From my point of view, she was a strong girl. However, upon high school graduation she experienced a major set back. She had earned the right to admission to a top Beijing University without taking the mandatory national university entrance exam because she was so bright and at the top of her class. However, she was unfairly denied entrance because the high school gave her position to another student. The last minute discovery that she needed to sit for the exam was severe blow to her.

But by her persistence and hard work, she took the high-pressure exam and attained the top score from all the students in her province, assuring her admission to one of the nations most prestigious universities. However, by error her admission letter was delayed for several weeks so she was extremely worried because most other students had already received their acceptance letters.

These unexpected problems precipitated her first depression so she did not feel any sense of accomplishment when she finally received her acceptance letter to this top university.

My daughter lived at the university in Shanghai for 6 years, 700 kilometres from home. Her life was one of unbearable pain and psychic torture. She suffered from major depression and she suffered alone.

Because of the intense social and cultural discrimination against those with mental illness in China, we kept the truth of her illness a secret from others. Even her Psychiatrist, one of the best at a leading hospital, advised us not to inform the school authorities about her mental illness because of concern that she would be suspended from school.

My daughter’s own feelings of shame and inferiority left her isolated. Instructors, university staff and her classmates kept their distance from this quiet, lonely girl who was unable to open up to others; but she desperately needed their comfort and support.

My daughter has gone away, taking with her all my hope, glory and dreams and leaving me with regret and sorrow. Under the grief-stricken burden of “those with white-hair sending off those with black-hair,” (this is a common saying in Chinese; in China long ago, it was a wide held opinion that parents over the age of 70 or 80 should die before their adult children; today that saying is used to capture the anguish of parents losing an adult child to death) my husband and I were thrown into the bottomless gulf of guilt and have driven ourselves from our once sweet, warm home to strange cities and crowds.

Only with the aid of Beijing Suicide Research and Prevention Centre can I now stand up and tell my daughter’s story to anyone who is willing to listen.

As a mother surviving suicide, I want to tell the whole world that my daughter was not weak but ill. I want to tell those college students who suffer from depression that suicide is not a way out, but it is a way to slash their mothers hearts. I want to tell families that feeling shame for our children’s mental illnesses may prevent them from getting essential support and help from those around them. I want to tell all the institutions and relevant authorities that work needs to be done to tear down the barriers between those in need and those who can offer help. I want to tell all people in society that people with depression are a part of us; only if each of us reaches our hands to them, can their lives be saved.

Once after I delivered a speech in a university, a student came up to me and embraced me in her arms. She told me in tears that she was experiencing the same pain and desperation as my daughter had and was contemplating suicide as a way out. Fortunately, my speech changed her mind.

At the very moment she told me this I felt as though I was in my daughter’s arms and it felt wonderfully warm.....
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Upcoming Events:

April 16–19, 2008:
American Association of Suicidology - 41st Annual Convention and 20th Healing Conference,
Boston, USA.
www.suicidology.org

August 27–30, 2008:
12th European Symposium on Suicide and Suicidal Behaviour,
Glasgow, Scotland.
www.esssb12.org

November 1–4, 2008:
3rd Asia Pacific Regional Conference of Suicide Prevention,
Hong Kong
http://csrp.hku.hk/iasp2008/