

Dara's Story...

My mother hanged herself in the basement of my house. I was 15. This is singly the most significant event in my life. From that day on, I learned never to accept 20/20 vision only in hindsight. My acuity for social dynamics became sharper, my appreciation for my family and friends became richer, and my appetite for learning life's meaning in all of its complexity grew stronger. I was determined to train myself to have perfect vision in the present day. Although I didn't know it at the time, I lived under the consequences of the stigma surrounding my mother's death. The survival for my family and me was my only priority

My two older sisters were away at school then, leaving only my father, younger sister, and myself to fend off feelings of grief-stricken emptiness. Every night, dinnertime would invariably come, and the three of us ate in silence. We managed as best we could. I learned to marinate chicken before starting my homework and on weekends, I cooked in bulk, so as to have leftovers for the rest of the week. Still though, fear carried the day, and I'm not sure who I was more afraid for: my little sister, or my father. My sister was still in elementary school, and the smallest one in her sixth grade class. She had once used my mother as a shield in our sibling rivalries, but now she relied on her "enemy" for support. My father's age quickly accelerated. He lost

40 pounds overnight, his hair grew white, and he often wondered aloud if he could survive long enough to pay for our college tuitions. My life had crumbled at home, but I survived by holding onto what I did have. I depended on my family for motivation and strength amidst the tears and held onto my academics steadfastly to provide myself a world of "normalcy".

I was accepted to the Program of Liberal Medical Education at Brown University. By May 1999, I had received a dual degree in East Asian Studies and Biology. It would seem that my confidence in academic achievement was relatively secure at this point, however, no one knew of my depression. I was unaware of it myself, and when I entered medical school, things started to fall apart.

At Brown Medical School, the integration of my academic and personal lives hit closer to home. I was privileged to learn everything about the human body from its most basic genetic components to looking at cells under the microscope to dissecting its gross anatomy. I studied the mind and body in its healthy state and learned the consequences of when an imbalance or trauma was inflicted on that living system. I learned a great amount from reading textbooks; however, I was faced with the unforeseen challenge of trying to dissociate the human aspect from the objectivity of science. I quietly mourned for my mother while I dissected

cranial nerves in my cadaver's skull, held back the tears when I learned about psychiatric disorders, and trained myself to quickly gain composure when patients told me of losses they endured. I empathized with them, but could not reveal I knew of their pain.

By the middle of my third year, I realized I was not ready to become a doctor when I had not yet fully grasped the effect of my mother's death on my life. My unresolved bereavement may have influenced my personal development and accounted for potentials yet unfulfilled. Self-perception of my experiences was my oppression. I did not feel safe expressing my personal losses. I was afraid of the judgment that would be passed onto my family and me. I still feared the stigma attached to my mother's death.

I began my bereavement therapy devoting my energies to reclaiming my own general welfare. By working on my own mental health, I eventually became strong enough to work with The Samaritans of Rhode Island, now helping others understand suicide. I realize that my loss was only exacerbated by my silence. I was raised to accept the old adage, "Time heals all wounds" and I was told to continue to lead a "normal life" despite a hidden past. However, nearly 12 years later, I realized that I could not find closure to her death without first accepting that this was a traumatic

experience that had invariably altered the course of my life. Only by confronting the anger and guilt that envelope the stigma of suicide, could I inch closer to finding this “normalcy.”

Suicide is a dirty virus whose secret aftermath is tormenting, relentless, and unforgiving. It does not discriminate against any age, race, educational, or socio-economic state. Depression, and its most serious consequence, suicide, can be prevented by promoting awareness and by reducing the stigma surrounding mental illness. Ironically, the road to prevention and healing is simply by bringing attention to it. It is the shame of suicide that promotes its wrath.

It may not seem like things will get better now, maybe for a long time. This is an event that will significantly impact your life. It is unfair. But there are people who want to help you. As I write this personal story, I hope to convey to you as a fellow teen survivor that life can continue to be appreciated and meaningful for those who still survive.

*Dara Huang
Brown Medical School
Class of 2004*

Coping With Pressure

Many people experience feelings of depression when faced with the pressures of life. Being successful means learning to cope with stress and difficulty. The traits below are typically shared by people who experience success in their lives:

- Able to Handle Challenges
- Flexible
- High Self Esteem
- Realistic Expectations
- Acknowledges Feelings
- Accepts Responsibility
- Asks For Help When Needed

How do you relate to the list? Where can you learn these traits for success? By staying in school, by finding a mentor, through community service, by participating in sports, clubs, after school programs and religious youth groups, and at after-school or summer jobs.

Share your feelings with someone you trust. Share your feelings with a Samaritan.

Need to talk?

Call a friend at the Samaritans!

Crisis Hotline/Listening Line:

(401)272-4044

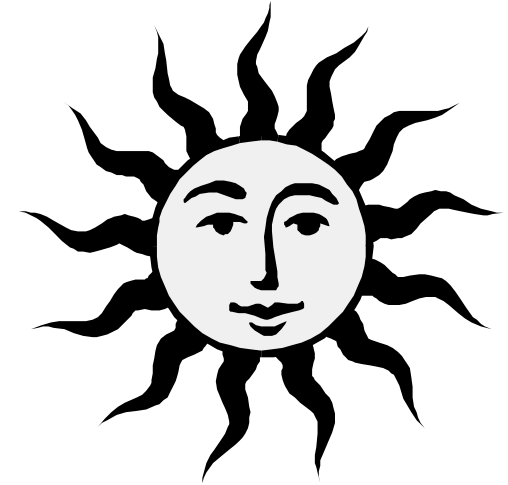
1-800- 365-4044

Free and Confidential

(Available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, depending on the availability of volunteers within a 24-hour period)

If someone is at immediate risk of suicide, please call 911 directly.

If you are the survivor of a parent's or caregiver's suicide...



...you are not alone.

The Samaritans, Inc.
Rhode Island's Suicide Prevention
Resource Center

www.samaritansri.org