

“I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN”

By Eric Bergh

My younger brother killed himself on May 2, 1997 at the age of 41. Chris was living with my mother in Vermont at the time. I have been a Licensed Psychologist since 1983. For decades I have examined suicidality on almost a daily basis, trying to ascertain the true level of potential lethality, trying to assess the best response, attempting to juggle safety needs and clinical data with the rights, dignity, and desires of clients. These are tough calls; psychologists still do not have a great “how to manual”, but I got pretty good at making them over the years.

So, when my mother called me after finding Chris in his bedroom, and said to me “Well, Eric, he finally did it; Chris killed himself”, why was I so shocked and surprised? After all, I knew Chris was an alcoholic who had two 30 day inpatient stays at Hazelden. I knew he had self-esteem challenges for many years, that there was much insecurity and deep sensitivity underneath his manly bluster and defensiveness. I certainly suspected there was an underlying depression. In fact, Chris had what I call “the trifecta of suicide potential”- depression and all its rampant toll of psychological pain, alcoholism to add to the fuel of that pain, and a large gun collection that allowed for easy access to lethal means.

So....shouldn't I of all people with these supposed well developed and fairly acute clinical skills seen the handwriting on the wall? Most of us survivors get to do the guilty walk for a while for one reason or another. Don't I have some pretty strong credentials to stay mired in self-blame? So, yes, I did that guilt trip for a while (along with plenty of other feelings...we all know what they are).

But, the answer to the “should have” question is actually “no” for a couple of reasons. The first is that depression and suicide is way bigger than any of us. Dr. Dan Reidenberg often talks about the fact that what we do understand about suicide is only the tip of a very large submerged iceberg. Thus, to think that anyone has the knowledge or ability to foresee and prevent a suicide is just hubris plain and simple. The second reason is that love can really make us blind- not just love but belief in our loved one's resilience, our compassion for them, our continued hopes. And after all, so many of our memories and experiences with a loved one we have lost are the opposite of their current despair; in Chris' case...the gentle man who protected animals, who had a reverence for nature, who made us laugh with his over the top Elvis imitations, who loved ski jumping, who was devoted and loyal to his family. When we know someone so personally and deeply and for so long, how can anyone, even a psychologist, “have known”. We live with them and love them; we don't assess them.

For all of those out there who still think they “should have known” it is time to step off that relentless treadmill of irrational guilt. Acknowledge it when it is present and then move on. Guilt is stagnant. Grief is hard work, but it provides much room for growth and compassion and connection with others.

At the end of his blessing “For the Family and Friends of a Suicide”, John O'Donohue writes the following:

“May your loss become a sanctuary where new presence will dwell to refine and enrich the rest of your life with courage and compassion. And may your lost loved one enter into the beauty of eternal tranquility, in that place where there is no more sorrow or separation or mourning or tears”.

This is where we all need to be....