

Teen Suicide: A First-Person Message for Parents

by Barbara Barisonek, Survivor Mom



From the Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide

I was not one of those parents who was unaware of her child's emotional distress. My son, Duke, a 21-year-old senior at college, complained that he "just didn't feel like himself" and didn't know what to do to feel better. He asked for my help. I knew that he was dealing with something that was beyond my skills as a parent, but I didn't know exactly what was happening to him.

I reached out to our family doctor. He referred Duke to a local psychiatrist who saw him for two sessions. I accompanied him to the first and my husband, Duke's dad, accompanied him to the second. At the end of each session, we were brought into the office with the psychiatrist and Duke. We felt we were actively engaged in helping Duke by our presence and support. However, we were not educated about depression and did not know that we could be facing a "fatal" illness. Depression, to me at the time, was a way of describing feeling very sad -- not knowing what to do about decisions that needed to be made by a person entering adulthood.

Duke wanted very much to return to college to finish the semester. With the psychiatrist's guidance, we decided to support Duke's request to return to school. I spoke with Duke's college dean and shared the information that I had at the time and asked for names of local services. I found an off-campus counseling center with a 24-hour hotline. It seemed like just the right thing.

Unfortunately, time was not on Duke's side. He had two appointments at the center. He was prescribed a medication for depression and was to continue with therapy. However, before any of these treatment recommendations could be implemented, Duke took his life.

I wish I could tell you why Duke died, or that I know getting appropriate mental health treatment sooner would have saved his life, but I can't.

What I can tell you, though, is that I wish I had been better informed about the nature of depression. My understanding that it meant "feeling sad" wasn't even close! I had no idea of the despair and hopelessness that color depressed days and nights or the desire to die to escape the pain. At that time, I was unaware of the physical and biological components of depression. Accompanying Duke to his visits in New Jersey wasn't enough. I wish I had known how to be more proactive with the professionals seeing Duke. Perhaps we would have been told that Duke was having suicidal thoughts. I wish I knew how important an

educated support system of family and friends could be. Duke had many people who loved him, but none of us was educated on the details of what he was dealing with.

As parents, we discuss many topics with our children -- sex, drugs, drinking, and more -- in an attempt to guide them. Never did I hear that suicide was the 2nd leading cause of death for college students. It is a threat, and that threat is now at the doorsteps of our high schools and grade schools. It is not an issue limited to celebrities -- we just hear about those people more often. It is not limited to the "dysfunctional family." It is affecting the average family every day.

My message to you is simple: Learn about depression and suicide. Read. Ask questions. Check out the internet for as much current, evidenced-based information as you can. Educate yourself **and** your child! It just may be the most valuable information you ever need to know!