

But I Didn't Say Goodbye: Helping Children and Families After a Suicide
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Chapter 10
Six Months Later

I may sound brave by writing my story. When I think back to the day my dad killed himself, I was scared, shocked, terrified actually. It's been six months since my dad died. Around the time of his death, I didn't understand everything that was going on. I didn't know whether or not we were still a family. Mom assured me that we were even though Dad was dead. It felt weird and uncomfortable without him in the house and in my life.

I like to wear Dad's T-shirt and baseball cap. It feels good wearing stuff that belonged to him. I have the letter I wrote to him after he died. I let Mom and Grandma read the letter. All three of us talked about it. Grandma told me stories about when Dad was a little boy. She gave me a photo album with pictures of him as a kid. It was great to see him and my uncles as little boys hanging out and having fun. Grandma told me I looked like my dad in one of the pictures—that was pretty cool. That's the one I took out of the album. I keep it on my desk in my room. I like spending time looking at the album and all of the pictures of my dad.

I visited my Uncle Sammy's house a few times since Dad died. Uncle Sammy put away all the pictures that had Dad in them. He won't go to the cemetery. Mom told me he's coping by not looking at the photos or visiting Dad's grave. I know that my dad will never be completely gone. He's dead, but I still feel connected to him.

On my birthday, Mom gave me a telescope. On the card she wrote, Love, Mom and Dad. I know he's in heaven, but seeing the word, *Dad*, on the card made me feel close to him. Knowing that he's in heaven helps me deal with it. Sometimes I actually feel like he's in some of the same places I am. I know that sounds strange, but I feel like he's watching over me whenever I need him—like a special guardian angel.

A few times, I dreamed about Dad and the way things were when he was alive. Sometimes, it feels so real. Mom says he comes to me in my dreams as a sign—a special way of communicating with me.

Going back to school wasn't that big of a deal. The first day back at school, I couldn't stop wondering if my friends were talking about me. I had trouble focusing. My teachers helped me. No one at school said anything stupid. Two friends said they were sorry my dad died.

I missed my dad at different shows and events at school. Mom and Uncle Sammy came to every event. That helped make things a little easier. Even though my dad wasn't there, I think he somehow knows I won awards and did well in

plays. He's proud of me. If I get a good grade, win a game, or just want to tell my dad something, I tell him.

I pray looking out of my window at night and once I'm finished talking to God, I save time for Dad. Sometimes, in the morning when I run for the bus, I look up at the sky and talk to Dad. If anyone heard me they would think I was having a real conversation. I also talk to his picture. He can hear me. It feels good, like a relief, so why not talk to him? Grandpa once said to me, "When your dad starts answering you back, then you got issues. Until then, keep talking."

Mom went to a bereavement counselor, Lori Beth, to talk about Dad. She then brought me and Debbie to meet her. Sometimes I would see her by myself. Debbie and I also went to a children's bereavement support group. The first time my family went to see Lori Beth, we sat down on a huge leather couch. Before she could say a word, Mom said, "Lori Beth, this is so hard. I just want to make sure my kids are okay."

"I'll be okay, Mom," I said.

"Me too, Mommy!" Debbie exclaimed.

Mom looked at me and Debbie and said, "I'm really sad Daddy died. I just need to let all my feelings out. I couldn't get through this without you both." Mom explained to Lori Beth how having us around always makes her happy. "They are my pride and joy."

Lori Beth smiled saying, "I can see your children bring you comfort. You have been through a difficult time."

Mom told her what happened to Dad. She was kind to Mom. I liked her right away. She reminded me of a teacher because she wanted to teach us and at the same time listen to us. She asked Mom about the day Dad died. She explained that grief counseling was about support and education. We talked about when we would meet and the purpose of those meetings. She told us what to expect each time we met. Whatever we talked about would be confidential. Sessions with her were like becoming a member of a different kind of club . . . one where every member had experienced a death of someone in their life. She told us there would be rules to our sessions. She made the state laws for her profession and practice understandable, even for Debbie. She would have to tell officials if we ever wanted to hurt ourselves or anyone else. I was glad she didn't ask me questions about Dad's suicide right away. It was hard to talk about. Lori Beth would ask me about school, my favorite sports, music, and my assemblies. She and Deb talked about Deb's favorite colors and toys.

The best part about the counseling was that I didn't have to answer every question. I could answer the questions I felt most comfortable answering. Before I knew it, I was telling her all about him and what happened. I even made a collage. I cut out pictures of things from magazines that reminded me of Dad. I glued them

to a large piece of paper. I found a picture of a wooden desk, a coffee cup, a donut and a fishing pole. I also found a picture of a baseball cap, a sports car, a TV, and Chinese food. After each meeting, I would go home with a project. Each project made me feel close to my dad. I missed him a lot.

One time, Lori Beth had a cool idea. She wanted me to draw a picture of a time machine. I could go back to any time when Dad was alive and pick a day that I'd spent with him. "Lori Beth, I just read a book where someone discovered a hologram projector chip."

"What's that?"

"It's a chip that allows people with computers to get images from the past and project them anywhere they wanted for a short period."

"Alex, that's cool."

Can I change your assignment?"

"Sure."

"I want to imagine that I'm using a hologram projector chip that's been hooked up to my laptop."

"Wow, Alex. I wish they really had chips like that."

"I keep thinking about the morning my dad died. If I had a hologram projector chip, it would bring me back in time to the morning he died. This time, I would be late. I would miss the bus. I would make up a story."

"Alex, would you like to tell me about your story?"

"I don't know. I would just make up a story."

"Can you give me an idea about your story?"

"I would tell Mom and Dad that I had a headache. I would stay home."

"Okay," Lori Beth said.

"I would sit at the table. I would tell Dad how much I needed him."

"Needed him?"

"Oh yeah. I would ask him to help me study. I would ask him to help me practice for my assembly. I wouldn't leave him alone."

"Uh-huh."

"Whether I talked about baseball or my rock collection, I would do everything I could to let him know I loved him—that I needed him."

"Do you think that by staying by his side all day, you could have prevented his death?" Lori Beth asked.

"Everyone in my family told me there was nothing I could do even if I was home with him. I just think I could have saved him."

"It sounds like you blame yourself."

"I should have known he was going to kill himself."

"Alex, it must be hard feeling like you could have done something."

“Yeah, I could have stopped him. I just didn't know he was going to do it.”

“Even though you didn't know, it seems like you feel guilty about not knowing.”

“Lori Beth, if I knew, I would have stopped him from killing himself. I loved him so much. I made a mistake.”

“I get what you're saying. I think it was your dad that made the mistake. Sometimes no matter what we do, when people want to end their lives, nothing will stop them. That doesn't mean people can't prevent a suicide. They can, especially when they get the person professional help.”

“My dad was going to a doctor for help. Dad had a gun. He used it instead of calling his doctor.”

“So, would you say that he was thinking clearly?”

“No way!”

“Why do you think he killed himself?”

“I don't know why my dad's dead. I don't know why he would kill himself.”

“Do you have any guesses about why?”

“He was depressed. My mom said his brain chemicals were not working right.”

“In reality you had no idea your dad was going to die of suicide. You got on the school bus.”

“Yeah, I left him at home and he killed himself.”

“Was your intention to go to school or to leave your father so he could end his life?”

“To go to school. I wish I had a projector chip that would allow me to go back in time. I just feel like I could have stopped him and I didn't.”

“It must be hard for you to feel that way.”

“I let him down.”

“Tell me about how you let him down.”

“I went to school instead of staying home. Don't you get it?”

“I get it. Are you angry with yourself for not staying home?”

“Yeah, I should have stayed home.”

“Your feelings are important to me. It's okay to be angry.”

“I should never have gone to school that day, Lori Beth.”

“You're a child. Children go to school.”

“I didn't do the right thing. If I was home he wouldn't have killed himself.”

“Was that your job? Did someone tell you that you were supposed to stay home from school?”

“No . . .”

“Was your mom home with him?”

“Yeah. My mom should have saved him. I loved him so much. My mom should have saved him,” I yelled, as I began banging my fist on the table.

“Are you trying to let me know you're angry with your mom for not saving your dad?”

“Yeah. It was her fault.”

“Did she know he was going to kill himself that day?”

“No. She didn't know.”

“Hmm,” Lori Beth thought out loud.

“Maybe, I let her down because I didn't know. I should have known.”

“How should you have known?”

“I don't know. I'm so mixed up.”

“This must feel confusing.”

“Yeah, I guess. I don't know.”

“What do you know?”

“I know I'm mad because my dad died. I know I miss him. I know I'm sad. It hurts so much.”

“And I know you loved your Dad.”

Barely able to speak I mumbled, “And . . . I know he loved me back.”

Alex shared his story with you. When you are ready, you can share your story with an adult. Here are some questions and activities to explore . . .

Let's Identify Your Thoughts and Feelings

- What kinds of thoughts are going through your mind right now?
- What did Chapter 10 make you think about?
- How long has it been since your person died?
- Have you avoided doing something that reminds you of the person who died?
- Do you still feel connected to the person who died? If so, describe how you still feel connected.
- If you have had any problems at school, with your friends or family since your loss, what were the problems?
- Did you ever wish for something and regret it later? What was it?
- If you were magically granted three wishes, what would you wish?
- If you could go back in time to be with the person who died, which day would you choose?
- What made you chose this particular day?
- What questions do you still have about what happened?

- Are you doing anything now that would make the person who died proud of you?
- Create a memory box out of a shoe box, coffee can, or plastic storage container. Decorate your memory box with ribbon, wrapping paper, sparkle glue, buttons, pictures from magazines, and crayons. Write your loved one's name on the box and fill it with things that remind you of him or her. You can fill it with things like photos, jewelry, vacation souvenirs, or ticket stubs.
- Make a collage. First get a piece of oak tag or large sheet of paper. Cut out pictures from magazines of things that remind you of the person who died. Place some glue on the back of each picture and place them on the oak tag or paper.

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