

I LOST MY FRIEND TO SUICIDE – I CANNOT REMAIN SILENT

By Joy Watson



Photo: Pixabay

The call came two weeks ago as I reached for the kettle to make my morning cup of coffee. A friend had taken her life.

My friend had waited for her family to go to the beach before hanging herself in the bathroom. There were no signs that she was not coping – none at all.

Through lockdown, she had put on a brave face and pretended that all was well, while her world was caving in on her. She left behind a bereft family and friends, none of whom had answers to why her life had become so unbearable. There was no note, no explanation, no reaching out for help – just many unanswered questions.

Her death triggered a dark time in my life when, in the course of 2019 and the beginning of 2020, a close family member, who suffers from chronic depression, tried to commit suicide on four occasions. I remember driving her to hospital, the route etched in my mind, and yet not knowing which turn to take or even how to drive the car and breathe at the same time. On the last of these occasions, I had a panic attack so debilitating that I was of no use at all.

Lockdown has been hard on all of us. There is no one who has not been affected.

We have all suffered loss in one way or another – whether it has been through death, the loss of a livelihood, the loss of being able to do the things we took for granted, the loss of the ability to reach out and touch someone, the loss of living without fear.

The pandemic has reinforced the fact that many of us live in perpetual fear, with increased levels of anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress syndrome and burnout.

We have had to dig deep to sustain our emotional and psychological wellbeing. But for many, the sense of feeling trapped has unleashed a mental health crisis.

We see this all around us, in the language people are using.

In our conversations, we are more likely to use words like “worry”, “afraid” and “stress”. We see the anxiety etched into people’s faces as they try to be brave and manage as best they can in impossible circumstances.

For those of us with a tendency to socially withdraw, enforced social isolation has meant that we have withdrawn even deeper into ourselves.

For those of us who want to hide our feelings, fears and anxieties, we have become more adept at keeping our secrets.

And while there is a time and place for holding our cards close to our chests, it’s important to know when to take the step to break the silence – to know that keeping our secrets could negatively affect our health and wellbeing.

The South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) estimates about [20% of the population](#) will develop a depressive disorder during their lifetime. Roughly two-thirds will not get the help they need.

There is a symbiotic relationship between the mind and the body; between physical and emotional pain.

Those with depression will often seek medical assistance for the associated [physical effects](#) such as headaches, insomnia, gastro-intestinal problems, joint pain and psychomotor changes. It takes looking beneath the surface to find that these might be physical manifestations of psychological and emotional distress.

The physical toll of being psychologically unwell can negatively affect one’s ability to function at work, with one’s family and in social circles. Often, the associated trauma exacerbates a sense of not ‘belonging.’ Over time, and if left untreated, the strain can result in a spiralling downwards, a sense of cognitive unravelling. At times, suicide is not necessarily a decision taken or a choice made, but a journey towards self-annihilation and extinction in response to all-encompassing pain.

Living with chronic depression can make you feel exhausted; that there is no hope, that you are worthless and that you have no control. The magnitude of living in this frame of mind for a sustained period of time can be debilitating. Especially so for those who are afraid of the stigma associated with mental health issues.

And this is exactly why we need to break the silence. There should be no stigma. Conditions such as chronic depression are health challenges in the same way that other medical conditions are health challenges.

In South Africa, one in 10 deaths among teenagers are the result of suicide. SADAG reports that non-suicidal injuries, like cutting, are more common than people realise.

While there are different reasons for engaging in acts of self-harm, many of those who have difficulty in expressing their feelings verbally, use it as an outlet. For some, it is a way of numbing a pain that is omnipotent and all-encompassing – focusing it on a physical place, like cuts on the arm.

In the months after my family member first tried to take her life, I plummeted into the depths of the underworld. An electric current of anxiety coursed through every cell in my body. This anxiety skyrocketed from when I was first diagnosed 15 years ago.

I would focus on my breathing and talk myself into a state of calm, only to have the rollercoaster of panic attacks strike the moment I traversed the slippery slope back to mindfulness.

I would go to bed meditating, telling myself that all would be well. I would wait for sleep as evasive as trying to catch the stars. Eventually, I would give in and take the sleeping pill prescribed by a doctor.

I would wake up in the middle of the night in a sweat, terrified, catching my breath. I would get up and tiptoe around the house, making sure that everyone was in their beds. Alive.

These are not things that I talked about.

My friend's suicide has shown me I am done with keeping secrets that are better off shared. My name is Joy Watson and I have generalised anxiety disorder. **DM/ML**