

You're Not Alone

A mental health and suicide prevention blog for the construction industry



A Father's Grief

by Bob Swanson

September is suicide awareness month, but every day should be suicide awareness day. Are you aware that today nearly 3,900 Americans will survive a suicide attempt and every 11 minutes an American will die by suicide? Canada has similar numbers. Not only is this a crisis that preceded the current pandemic, it is a crisis in the construction industry. There are more suicide deaths in construction than any other industry.

The impact of a suicide death is far different than any other death. As regular readers are aware, I'm a suicide loss survivor. Our oldest son died by suicide in 2009, and I continue to live with that impact. Every day since March 13, 2009 is a suicide loss day for our family.

I have lost two parents and a brother to physical illnesses, and those losses have been far different. Let me explain. Full acceptance eventually comes after a death due to a physical illness, because the impact on the person's ability to continue functioning was measurable. Furthermore, after those end of life situations we were surrounded with continued compassion and support.

A suicide death, however, is different. The uncertainty, the why, and the guilt lingers. What could have been done to help our son? Feelings of shame also linger. Then there is always the uncertain reaction when a new acquaintance asks, "tell me about your family." I will usually respond that we have four adult children and ten grandchildren at first. If the conversation continues and prompts the question, "what do your children do," my response will include that one of our children is deceased. If I'm asked what happened, I then respond that our oldest son died by suicide. Often that ends, or abruptly changes, the conversation. That, however, does not happen if I say that my mother died from pancreatic cancer. The net result is a renewal of shame and guilt about our son's death.

Because of my guilt and shame, it took me an extensive period to tell anyone other than family members or close friends that our oldest son died by suicide. It also took me a great deal of prayer to unload much of my guilt and shame and be guided to what I am doing today.

Each time that I speak and write about mental illness and suicide prevention, I confront my pain in losing our son to devastating illnesses of the brain, but it continues to be part of my healing. I am encouraged that our industry is acknowledging that there is a crisis and that bold steps are being taken to open the dialogue about mental illness and suicide prevention along with providing more resources for support of those in need.

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In basic first aid training, most of us learned what to do if someone was bleeding or having difficulty breathing. In the same manner, we need to learn what to do if someone is having a mental crisis. It is often difficult, however, to detect the symptoms of a mental crisis; but suicide is preventable.

Terminology is also especially important. Our son did not *commit* suicide or want to die; he wanted his horrible pain to end. The illnesses of his brain removed all hope. By saying someone “committed suicide,” the blame and shame for our family and all suicide loss survivors continues. By saying that our son died by suicide, the diseases that he lived with are blamed, and there is compassion instead of blame and shame.

I am grateful for the work that so many are doing to change the culture of the construction industry. We need to take care of ourselves, our employees and each other, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.



About the Author - Bob Swanson

Bob Swanson is the past president of Swanson & Youngdale and the first Chairman of FCA International. He tragically lost his son Michael to suicide on March 13, 2009 at the age of 33. Bob now focuses his efforts on creating awareness of the impact of mental health and suicide in the construction industry.