

Losing my Uncle to Suicide

This submission to the Commonwealth Senate Inquiry into Suicide recollects the memories of my sister and me, ten years following Uncle's suicide.

It is with much hope that by sharing our experience as youths we may contribute to positive change enabled through greater awareness, challenging current understanding, perceptions and services for youths touched by suicide.

On the 2nd of January 2000, my uncle made the permanent decision to rest in peace. He was removed by paramedics from our home, enshrouded in a white sheet.

Ten years passed, and only now, is my family opening up about Uncle's suicide. I called my sister last night and informed her about the Commonwealth Senate Inquiry into Suicide, and of my intention to share our experience of suicide in the family. I asked her if she would help me by sharing her experience of the lead up, death and fall out. For over three hours, my sister and I confessed our feelings and thoughts about Uncle's death, while I noted down disjointed memories of incidents and emotions. It was a huge step up from our last conversation about Uncle, ten years ago, which involved me screaming at my sister "Don't you care?!", as she stood dumbfounded and lost for words. I was, at that time, a 14 year old, struggling emotionally to control my feelings and failing hopelessly to make sense of life and death.

My parents separated when I was five. My mother, sister and I were led by social workers to the nearest women's refuge for families of domestic violence, while Police beat my father with batons, put him in chains and had him taken away. That was my final memory of Dad and the last I ever saw of him. I recently discovered Dad experienced delusions and paranoia in those years believing the Government and many individuals were after him.

Growing up without a father figure was not difficult. I did however; enjoy midnight talks with Uncle whenever he came home drunk. Our front door still shows battle scars from Uncle's wrestling matches with his key during his drunken days. My uncle was a slim, sociable man of 33. He was a master story teller; he had a way of making the most unremarkable stories, sound so fascinating. Truth or tale, I always enjoyed his slurred stories before bed time.

When I was nine, Uncle took me to the local bicycle shop and said I could choose whichever bike I liked. I picked a black pseudo-BMX bike with training wheels, which I promptly removed. I never questioned how he was able to fund the purchase, but, it meant the world to me. Looking back, \$140 in 1994 was a lot of money for a factory worker, just to please me.

For my tenth birthday, Uncle surprised me with a beautiful Eastern Rosella parrot. For a few weeks, I did not realise that parrots needed water, let alone drink. Looking back, it was probably in the best interest of my parrot, that he gave it away.

As a kid, my hobby was collecting coins and rocks. Occasionally, Uncle would ask me if I would trade my notes for his gold coins, to which I yielded happily. It never occurred to me to ask how he came to have so many gold coins.

In late 1999, Mum and Uncle begun to argue more frequently. Mum was never big on jewellery, or perhaps she could not afford to own any. But when her jewellery, heirlooms and cash started to go missing around the house, mum told Sister of her suspicions, and advised us to hide the little money we had. It did not take Uncle long to locate my savings, which I had hid in the toe ends of my socks. Uncle also found Mum's stash of jewellery and money, which she had hid in the pockets of her seldomly-used jackets. Uncle's situation must have become increasingly dire as he made no effort to hide his actions. The coin slot of Sister's tin piggy bank was crudely pried open for the 20 dollar note she had long saved.

Later we found out that Uncle had met a girl. To this day, we still do not know the true nature of their relationship, if there was one to begin with, however evidence points to unrequited love on the part of my Uncle. Uncle never had much luck with relationships despite his sociable personality.

One spring day after school, I found Uncle sick in his room. He asked me to fetch him some water, as he stumbled out into the garden and retching all over the place. It was unlike him to ask my sister to call my mum at work. It was not until Mum and Sister returned from hospital, that my Uncle, in his

reckless, display of love, had purposefully overdosed on the girl's prescription medication, to show that he would die for her.

After that incident everything seemingly returned to normal. Uncle returned to work and was his usual self, but, then something must have happened to him. His life begun to take a turn for the worse. He was constantly miserable, and always on the phone, talking to the girl. While returning home from school one day, my sister caught sight of him walking home. As she described, "he was walking home lifelessly, lost in thought - a guy with no hope, no goals in life, miserable, the face of walking death".

The three months following his first suicide attempt with prescription pills was just, hell. I have lost count of the number of times he had threatened, and tried to take his life during this period. We caught him during his second attempt, standing up on a chair devising a noose with a set of chains. Every night since then, my family would keep watch on him. We would huddle together in the living room, pretending to watch television. Every so often, my sister and I would look under the door to his bedroom for any visible signs of chair legs, a sign of trouble. Our spontaneous intrusions into his room would sometimes catch him looking for accessories to aid his suicide. He was frustrated and annoyed with us, to say the least.

Suicide watch was physically and mentally exhausting. Each day as the night bore on we had to make the decision to leave him and retire to bed. At school, I could not stay awake due to a lack of sleep. I felt sorry for my sister who was just beginning her HSC year. Suicide watch took a toll on my family, and slowly, we felt the reigns progressively slip against his unending attempts to bring an end to his hurt.

I would often walk into his room and sit next to him on his bed. I was exhausted, but compared to Uncle, he was already dead. As a 14 year old, I did not know the right words to say. School does not teach you to prepare for things like this. But all I could say to my uncle then was how much I loved him, and to beg for him to stop. Life was worth living and although he did not see it, things would get better. I never went as far to imply his actions were selfish, but looking back I stupidly said, I hope that you will want to see me grow up, finish school and find myself a job.

One evening we were slow to check under his door way, the sighting of 4 rubber stoppers was absolutely chilling and all 3 of us burst through the door to find Uncle standing on the chair looking defeated. He was leaning out from the top of the chair, deadly noose in one hand just about ready to leave us.

Uncle ended up in Cumberland's Psychiatric Hospital for 3 weeks. It is terrible to say this; however I had never felt such relief as in those 3 weeks. To lie down at night without fear felt selfish. Mum visited Uncle often while he was there, I dropped by also, and he appeared healthy and more positive. He mentioned he felt out of place and wanted out. We were convinced he was still unwell and we knew he could be very cunning when he played his cards well. He had soon managed to convince the psychologists he was sufficiently well to be released despite our objections. It felt as though his staged recovery was being applauded and rewarded - when in reality it was a death sentence waiting to happen, under our watch. After another incident at home involving a knife being held above his head, we cleared the house of all pointed objects. Anything which could be used to terminate life such as chains, glass bottles, electrical cords and knives were hidden under my bed away from death's hands.

My neighbourhood during this period was not particularly pleasant also with successful and attempted break-ins. For some time I slept with wooden and metal poles under my pillow, one gripped in each hand and another down my chest to protect my heart should another break in occur. Admittedly the possibility of my Uncle harming me to get his way shamefully played in my mind before sleep. I do not know whether my dreams were more terrifying or being awake anticipating Uncle's next move.

The turn of the millennium should have been something to look forward to but not under these circumstances. On New Year's Day Mum said she needed to visit a family friend for a few hours to talk things through, Sister and I stayed at our neighbour's apartment 75m from home. At 6.30pm we were due to return home with Mum, I could have run back home in under 30 seconds, but I did not. Mum's family friends encouraged us to stay over at their place for just one night, to take time out and rest. Reluctantly we yielded. As the car passed by our home, I sat in silence and could not bring it upon myself to look homeward. The guilt I felt at that moment, I will never forget. I know my feelings were not alone.

Mum called home at 11.30pm and there was no answer. That night my mother, sister and I lay down in dead silence, thoughts to ourselves. I think that after a while, when one has become so highly charged

with emotion, exhaustion and stress - you numb to everything around you. Stricken with fear in the longest night of our lives, I checked the time compulsively hoping for day break to come so I could see Uncle again.

In the early hours not long after midnight, I jolted awake and a tingling sensation passed through me. I knew Uncle had acted.

I put on a brave face in the morning as we were driven home bound. At the time there was no easy conversation to be had with Mum and Sister. Inside my head I reassured myself that everything would be just fine and I am sure they shared the same sentiment. We pulled up in front of our home and I scanned for any hint of life. The door to our garden was left slightly open, which was unusual. It left me with hope that Uncle had been out in the garden early this morning where he often enjoyed a smoke, we never left it open overnight. As we entered the house I counted my first mini breath of relief, the house looked fine and there was no sign of disturbance or of Uncle. My sister ran upstairs needing to use the bathroom while Mum went to the kitchen. I walked over reluctantly to the front of Uncle's bedroom knowing not all quarters were accounted for. His door was closed. I knew I had to be the one to open his door. This was not something I could leave to Mum or my sister, I had to step up. I half hoped that my sister, the stone in our family had not zipped off to the bathroom to leave this all to me. I am not sure if there is anything in life which can prepare you for this moment - I opened the door.

The memory and images which followed replayed and burned in my mind, frame by frame over the next 12 months, they would completely occupy my mind whenever I would pause in thought for 5 seconds.

The second door which led into Uncle's bedroom was left open, from where I stood 4 meters away - Uncle hung from the ceiling.

The world stopped and I froze in those few seconds, I screamed out to Mum in horror who immediately returned my cry as she ran from the kitchen overwhelmed with fear. Mum stopped where I froze, turned and looked down the corridor at the sight of her baby brother hung by the neck, from the ceiling. I will never forget the moment Mum ran with open arms toward her little brother. Mum wailed as she clutched his legs trying to single-handedly lift him up. My sister darted down and desperately tried to raise him up. I watched as Mum looked up into her brother's eyes and asked him why he did it. There was no response. My sister was first to realise he was no longer with us. Curiously she reached up with her hand and poked a blue object protruding from my Uncle's mouth – little did she realise it was his tongue.

We moved quickly still believing it was not too late to save Uncle, I grabbed a pair of scissors and began to cut at the noose, stopping halfway through the electrical wire as I realised I had not checked the power. I continued to cut the cable and his cold, stiff body fell into the arms of Mum and Sister. We lay him on his bed, his legs were suspended stiff, straight off the bed - unknown to Sister and me at the time rigor mortis had set in. The smell of death filled the air. From memory my sister and I checked for his heart beat, it just felt like the right thing to do.

We sat in shock for a few minutes, as Mum eventually came to the realisation he was gone. Sister went outside to call an Ambulance and Mum also left the room. My memory is poor here however I said a farewell to Uncle and also asked why he did it. I became uncomfortable and unnerved sitting beside him, his eyes were still slightly open, his tongue twisted out to the side and I started to worry he would suddenly awaken and sit up. I left the room.

The Ambulance and Police came shortly after and inspected the scene. It was clear to them immediately he had long passed away. Mum, Sister and I sat down as we were being questioned by Police. We were asked why we had interfered by cutting Uncle down. We said he was hung by the ceiling; we cut him down so we could save him. I think he understood. As I stood around the living room after being questioned, I heard the paramedics laughing inside his bedroom. Perhaps they keep sane in their jobs by being disconnected, I recall being confused and angry.

After some time, Uncle left home, carried out enshrouded in a white sheet.

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I had horrific nightmares for years after my Uncle's passing. Many nightmares involved the memory of opening the door time and time again. Other dreams had me violently defending my home and family against intruders in ways morally foreign to me. Each day over the next few years, the memory of opening the door replayed in my head whenever I did not keep my mind occupied. My concentration

and memory lapsed; I lost my sense of humour and bottled my rage every time someone made a joke about mental illness, suicide or even death. I often found myself in online chat rooms and virtual worlds, keeping an eye out for severely depressed individuals in the hopes that I could save a life for failing to save Uncle.

My biggest concern following Uncle's passing was the welfare of Mum and Sister. I was extremely concerned Mum may have also considered taking her own life triggering a chain family suicide. For months I stood outside Mum's bedroom to check that she was breathing before going to bed.

The image of a noose bound tightly around Uncle's neck with his eyes open and tongue protruding became part of me. For several months, every person I faced, I imagined them with a noose around their neck, with their eyes open and tongue protruding. I walked around intentionally with my head down, and looked away when speaking with people including family. I felt a terrible presence in Uncle's bedroom and could only walk out of the room backwards in case Uncle appeared disapprovingly. Sister would run or skip out of the room pretending Uncle's bedroom did not bother her.

My relationships with friends were affected but I could not describe how. My close friends knew about my experiences, but even then they preferred not to talk about the incident believing it would make me sad. The contrary was in fact true, I needed to speak with someone who I trusted and could open up to. Someone strong emotionally who would not break down or offer me solutions - I just needed an ear and never got it.

My sister kept to herself and showed no visible emotions. It made me question whether she cared and for my sanity I needed to know she did. Nearly 10 years on she opened up to me while writing this submission. She mentions in the year that followed, she was fine during the day knowing she had to be composed around Mum. At night, going to sleep she shivered under her quilts, frightened. She experienced dreams filled with sadness and guilt, for the times she treated him bad and not respecting him as an adult while she had a grudge. My sister also experienced dreams of finding him hung and cutting him down. When she thinks of the good things he has done she would cry at night.

Mum's grief took a toll on her health. The grief caused her sinus pain when breathing through her nose and caused stress related headaches for years. She visited many doctors until one finally realised her health issues were attributed to grief. Now days Mum is doing fine and still thinks of her little brother. I believe that in Asian culture, a family member experiencing death by suicide was considered bad luck to associate with. Our home was considered unlucky and only one person in the first year had visited, making it only to our front door. We were often told to move however being in a publicly commissioned home with little income left us with little choice. Instead we painted our walls over in baby blue and purchased white curtains to allow as much natural sunlight in which did help to lift the mood. Whilst my family are not very traditional, the stigma associated to suicide is hard to shake and the lack of support from family and friends did not help.

Sister and I both wonder what raced through Uncle's mind in his final moments. I like to think strangulation induced instant death, the reality being his struggle may have lasted several minutes or longer. When he kicked the chair out from below him, did he have any regrets? We will never know however his agonizing struggle was evident in his final rest position – his arm locked at the elbow, his hand raised at his neck where the noose fastened its deadly hold.

As a family, we never spoke about any of the details and only expressed our sorrow for dear Uncle. I have not spoken with Mum regarding this submission; it is not something I would want her to relive. I can confidently say we are all doing well 10 years on; we have each rebuilt our lives and remain positive. I believe I am a stronger person and am more engaged and positive than ever in making a difference.

I believe others out there can relate to my family's experience and can also understand why my sister and I had not discussed our feelings and thoughts for almost 10 years. I believe through observation also that just about everyone I have met in life would not be equipped to deal with a friend, family member or colleague severely depressed or suicidal. That is not to say I do not have hope, I am positive through the right channel, timely engagement and resources we can better support those in need.

Thank you for reading.