

To those who have lost a loved one to suicide,

Death by suicide is heartbreaking, confusing, and tragic. I want to share with you something that I learned while working in the outpatient mental health hospital. When we lost a patient to suicide, the whole treatment team would meet to debrief the crisis. We all— therapists, doctors and nurses shared our feelings of helplessness and grief. We wanted to know what we could have done, if this was anyone's fault, had we failed? We were the PROFESSIONALS and we could not prevent every death by suicide.

The most valuable information I received during a debriefing was from a psychiatrist who said that when an organ in the body fails to work properly, we refer to that as an organ failure. Organ failure as a cause of death makes sense to everyone— especially when the organ is a heart, lungs, liver ..etc.. People accept organ failure as a cause of death and understand it as a medical event, without personal failure or judgement. Organ failure is part of the life cycle and understanding the cause of death helps facilitate healing.

But when the organ that failed to work properly is the human brain, society does not always understand as clearly. The ultimate function of the brain is to sustain life through an internal, automatic drive to survive. When the brain fails to perform that survival function — the psychiatrist reminded us that the cause of death is actually organ failure. Medicine does not yet have a cure for the numerous neurological and psychiatric conditions that ultimately result in death by suicide. Neuroscience is decades behind treatment for the brain compared to cardiac care and cancer treatment.

Losing a loved one is painful enough but losing a loved one to death by suicide is a more complicated pain. Healing is possible when we accept organ failure as the cause of death, without blame or judgement. My wish for you and your family is that you find peace in the memories you share and that you reach out to support each other at this difficult time. May the information shared in this writing become one small step toward healing discussions, learning to cope, and embracing your grief effectively.