

In My Shoes: Honoring son who died by suicide is not the end of my story

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BY ANNE MOSS ROGERS Special correspondent

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Never in my wildest dreams did I think I would be the mother of a child who died by suicide. My 20-year-old son, Charles, suffered from depression, anxiety and ultimately a heroin addiction. He took his own life June 5, 2015.

I can't suffer his suicide in silence. Many who have lost a child, spouse, sibling or parent to suicide speak about it in hushed tones, as if it's a dirty word. I understand why. But I think it's time we honor our loved ones who suffered by saying it out loud with no stigma or shame attached. It is only a conversation killer if you let it be.

Those who have died by suicide suffered in ways we cannot imagine, and they deserve remembrance, too.

Charles was funny, affectionate, talented, charismatic and popular. He was hypersocial and hated being alone in his room. Now I know why. He was afraid of what he might do to himself. He also cared very deeply about others and ironically saved a young man at a New York boarding school from taking his own life.

Why didn't Charles ask for help? A complicated question.

I have had the privilege of getting an inside view of Charles' inner pain and struggles in his rap diary — most of which I never got to see until after he died. It's in those pages that the pain stains every letter and I can start to understand the "why." His lyrics are soulful, naked, insightful, disturbing and many times rebellious. But undeniably brilliant. Clearly, it was hard for him to choose to live every day. I am so sorry my love for him couldn't fix his pain.

I watched a video recently of North Carolina State students who attempted suicide and survived. One young woman said, "You're worried that if you tell them (your family) how you feel that they'll see all this ugliness, this darkness, and this weakness inside you."

I think this is why many sufferers don't reach out. A lack of understanding and the uncomfortable nature of mental illness make people turn away because we think it's ugly and we don't want to go there. Those of us who have struggled to keep a child with mental illness stable know this agony. The lack of conversation has resulted in few resources and a lot of misunderstanding.

Our kids with mental health problems are the most vulnerable to drug abuse and addiction. Sufferers often reach for something to make them feel better. Ultimately, Charles became addicted to snorting heroin. No one starts out with a goal to become a heroin addict. It just happens, and one day you can't live without it. Then the thing that once brought ecstasy becomes a demon that just needs to be fed.

Detox, rehab and a sober house didn't keep Charles on track. Just one more hit got him temporarily sent away from the sober house and back into detox. He saw a friend at detox and sadly they waltzed out together.

The next two weeks were a nightmare. We didn't know where he was. Communication was spotty. Surely he would hit rock bottom and ask for help. He did ask for money, and we refused. Hardest "no" ever. We had decided we would support recovery, not a drug habit. He did hit rock bottom. Only his bottom wasn't what we had planned or expected. While going through withdrawal from heroin and Xanax (drug dealers mix the two for a super-intense high), Charles sank into a deep depression and hanged himself.

I talked about our journey with Charles' mental illness in this column two years ago, which had nearly 2,000 shares and 200 comments at the time. In those comments were your stories, which made me feel less alone.

Absolutely no one can possibly understand how hard it is to raise a child with a mental illness until you've walked in those shoes. Those of us who do know that constant fear of getting the worst call of your life. But I no longer worry about that call because I have already gotten it.

Now I'm obviously in a different place — not one I wanted to ever be in, but I am here and I have to allow myself to move forward and learn to find joy without guilt. I am not ashamed of how Charles died, and I am proud to have been his mother. But I can't let this be the end of my story.

I will keep talking even though you might not want to hear me.

I will honor his smile, his sweet thoughtful nature, his heartfelt skinny hugs and his memory by talking, educating and giving back. And finally, I will let Charles' words guide me, "As dark as my life's like, I can still smile at the bright side and see the silver lining even when it's nighttime."

How can you help? By talking about depression and suicide. That's the conversation that can save lives.

Anne Moss Rogers is on the board of Beacon Tree Foundation; advocates for youth mental health; is VP of sponsorship at AMA Richmond; and is co-owner/creative director at Impression Marketing, a local digital marketing firm.

