Letter from the Chair

I clearly remember attending my first AAS conference in 2005. Six months after losing my sister, I was scared, confused, thirsty for knowledge and ever so emotional. There I met so many people who are near and dear to me today. They welcomed me, reminisced with me and, most of all, inspired me.

On my flight back, I had many thoughts and feelings. As I am sure many of you have experienced, writing was both helpful and healing. So I wrote down my musings from the conference and when back at home, I edited the piece and sent it to Ginny Sparrow.

As you may remember, Ginny was the extraordinary editor of the print newsletter Surviving Suicide, a publication sent to AAS Loss Division members from approximately 1998 through 2007.

Building Community

Seeing my article made me feel a part of this community in the best ways, surrounded by supportive and like-minded folks.

Thus, I am happy to have a part in reviving “Surviving Suicide” in digital form. I hope it will be a place where all of us can share our thoughts, our news, our hopes and fears, while honoring our loved ones and further building our community.

When Susan Futterman asked how she could contribute to the Loss Division, I brought up reviving the newsletter and I am grateful that, with her personal loss experience, her professional expertise and her editorial skills, she agreed to do so.

AAS Survivor of the Year Continues Her Journey Through Grief

By Nina Gutin

Lena Heilmann has been making major contributions to suicide prevention and postvention since losing her sister Danielle to suicide in 2012, and clearly epitomizes the spirit of the AAS Survivor of the Year award, which she received earlier this year.

Recently, I spoke to Lena about her initial reaction to the loss of her sister, her grief journey, and how her loss and love for her sister have helped her to advocate for both suicidal individuals and loss survivors, as well as those who want to support them.
It’s bad enough to lose your loved one to suicide. It’s difficult enough to mourn the person you cared for and held dear during “normal” times. But now? During a pandemic where we are already isolated and stressed and afraid, seeing the world as we knew it upended and unpredictable?

I, too, am a survivor of suicide loss: My first husband, Harry Reiss, a funny, talented and prominent New York City physician, killed himself at the age of 43 on December 16, 1989. At that moment, I was thrust into a world I knew nothing about, dealing with a reality that seemed more like a dream. My husband of 21 years, the man I thought I knew better than anyone else in my life, the man I thought I would grow old with, chose to die without telling me of his decision. Everything we had worked toward together since we met in our senior year in college blew apart in an instant. He left me without a word and no time to say goodbye.

Breaking the Silence

What got me through? Attending survivor support groups organized by The Samaritans of New York City. Meeting, talking, hugging, crying, laughing, sharing with others who had also been there made my loss bearable. The most important action we can take regarding suicide is to break the silence that surrounds it. But now, in this time of Covid, we are defined by silence and separation, by confusion and misinformation. We don’t know what to believe.

My closest friend is Sonia Valle, a survivor of her daughter’s suicide. We met more than 30 years ago in a support meeting and became sisters on our individual journeys to deal with our blame, our guilt, our not understanding and, yes, our loving memories and acceptance of our loss. Tragically, Sonia’s ex-husband died this past September of Covid. He was a devoted and caring parent who, like his daughter, died too young.
Thus, the accumulation of knowledge about suicide bereavement has clarified these two diverging adaptations, marking the progression from often problematic adaptations during early suicide grief to the mentally healthier adaptations associated with posttraumatic growth years after the loss. Future research will need to focus on how some survivors “get stuck” in their grief.

Stigmatization Still

Over the years, the evidence indicates that little change has occurred in stigmatizing these bereaved. In response to avoiding such stigmatization, some suicide bereaved feel inclined to misrepresent a loved one’s suicide, feeling that to do otherwise would dishonor the memory of the deceased.

Several recent studies show that those acting with secrecy about the death, or denying the existence of the suicide, experience poorer mental health than those who openly acknowledge and disclose the death. The above findings set the table for reviewing future accomplishments in the field.

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If you would like bibliographic information on the studies discussed in this article, please send an email note to feigelw@ncc.edu.
A Suicide-Loss Survivor’s Thoughts — Waiting for the Fog to Clear

By Tracy Oeser

Suicide-loss survivors are often misunderstood. Their world is complex as they navigate between what their lives had previously been and the new normal without their loved ones. The journey holds the questions of what happened, confusion as to where they go next and re-learning everything about their lives. This process often includes “brain fog,” a frequent component of complex grief.

Fourteen years ago, I lost my beautiful daughter to suicide. My grief process has been extremely daunting. Countless articles and studies exist about how complicated grief affects human cognitive processes, and my personal journey has been no exception.

Relearning Life

For many years, the loss of my daughter was profoundly debilitating. It was scary to feel that I was not in control of my mental state. Things that used to be easy became hard – more than just simply forgetting where I put something.

I lost the ability to construct sentences or to think analytically. It was as if everything I had learned before her death had to be relearned. As I voiced in my podcast, Journey Through Your Suicide Loss, it was frightening to be forgetful. I truly thought I was losing my mind. I am a visual person and I couldn’t even see my thoughts in my head nor could I recall an inkling of them. It was as if, each day, I was in some gray space, spaced out and not processing thoughts at all.

I have met many loss survivors who talk about fog or grief brain. Kimberly Starr, author of 457 Days: A Mother’s Journey Along Grief’s Path, said that 119 days after the loss of her son and still trying to work at her job, “Even now I am struggling with remembering things. I can’t always find the words I am looking for. I forget why I go into a room. So, there is no way I could manage people and resources with the fog I am still in. I resigned from the position ….”

In the Midst of Chaos

Brain fog can take years to lift. I don’t know how long it took for me. I know that around the three-year mark, I was recalling things better but not on a consistent basis. I thought the fog had lifted but then someone would remind me of things I had forgotten.

In the midst of this chaos, in an attempt to regain my life, I decided to go back to college and finish my degree. It was a struggle because I had to recall subject matter for my tests. But I learned to take more notes.

Brain fog can be embarrassing. It can cause conflict when a loss survivor goes back to work if their employer doesn’t understand why they can’t perform like they used to. They can also suffer long-term financial hardship if they historically paid their bills on time but now forget when payments are due.

Ultimately, society needs to allow suicide loss survivors some patience and grace. We can’t approach them with the mindset that they are “just” dealing with grief and will quickly get over it or that they aren’t cogitively struggling with their daily lives. It’s not fair to them and impedes their grief recovery.

Tracy Oeser, an AAS loss survivor member, is the CEO of Journey Thru Grief (https://journeythrugrief.com). She hosts the podcast, “Journey Through Your Suicide Loss.” She also holds a BA in psychology and is currently working on an MS in psychology. Tracy was recently named WA State Coordinator for the AAS Impacted Family and Friends: A Voice At The Table support programs. Her 2020 audio podcast, “The Fog,” associated with suicide loss is available at https://anchor.fm/

Upcoming AAS Survivor-Related Events

Wednesday, April 21, 2021

The Power of Postvention (Virtual Preconference)

is essential for anyone who works with loss survivors, The preconference will serve as an introduction for people new to the field and to help deepen the knowledge of those already engaged in postvention work.

Wednesday April 21 – Saturday, April 24, 2021

The 54th Annual American Association of Suicidology (AAS) Conference will take place in person in Orlando, Florida, at the Hilton Orlando Lake Buena Vista Hotel as well as virtually. The conference is an opportunity for everyone—clinicians, researchers, those with lived experience, public health officials and others—to connect, share information and learn about ways in to address rising suicide rates.

Saturday, June 12, 2021

The 33rd Annual Healing After Suicide Loss Conference will be held virtually this year. More information, including content and how to register, will be available at suicidology.org over the coming weeks.
Now I don’t have him to share our daughter’s memory,” she said. “We mourned together over the years, remembering her as only parents can. We were like bookends holding up either side of our daughter’s existence and now one side has collapsed and I am left alone to mourn her by myself.”

Healing Through Connection

Sonia describes losing a loved one to suicide and to COVID as like someone dying alone behind a closed door. “They are isolated when they die, as are you,” she says, “That is why it is essential to find a support group, even if it has to be online. There is a community of people out there who are in similar situations. By connecting, we begin to heal.”

Dr. Donna Barnes, a certified grief specialist and survivor of her son’s suicide, has also become a close and trusted friend over the years. As with Sonia, she and I have bonded in ways that I could never have imagined. In this time of COVID, Donna now conducts her survivor of suicide loss groups online at (www.dhbwellnessllc.com).

I have had the privilege of attending some of these groups to offer my “writing as healing” exercises. I admire and care for everyone I have met during Donna’s healing Zoom sessions as I saw how they made the heroic effort to break through their seclusion to speak about their terrible loss.

Unexpected Advantages

“I have found unexpected advantages to our online support sessions,” Donna commented. “Literally, we are all on the same page and there is a closeness in that we can see each other’s faces. We are also more at ease in our own homes, what I call a ‘distant comfort.’ Especially during this pandemic, we must learn to concentrate on the positive experiences we shared with our loved ones as we try to heal the good memories.”

Donna encourages all survivors of suicide loss to check out AAS’s resources (www.suicidology.org/resources/support-groups), noting “It is lifesaving to find the support group that fits your needs, especially during these confusing and unpredictable times.”

In the many years since my husband killed himself, I have had the privilege to meet thousands of other survivors of suicide loss from throughout the country and the world. Each person I speak with helps me with my own understanding and eases my own pain.

Honoring the Legacy

I have learned that survivors are resilient, dedicated to honoring their loved one’s legacy, and passionate about helping others as a way to ensure that their loved one’s death was not in vain. Whether in person or online, we are all in this together and we

Carla Fine is the author of the book No Time to Say Goodbye: Surviving the Suicide of a Loved One and co-author of Touched by Suicide: Hope and Healing After Loss with Michael Myers, MD. She also conducts workshops on writing as a path to healing. Carla lost her husband, Harry Reiss, MD, to suicide after 21 years of marriage. She can be reached at www.carlafine.com.

Letter from the Chair

Continued from p. 1

I hope you enjoy this newsletter. I hope it will be a place where many diverse voices and experiences can be found. I hope it will give you ideas, inspiration and, most of all, a sense of connection.

Generous, Compassionate, Creative

We can cover issues important to us such as grieving in the time of COVID; we can hear about each other’s news and events; and we can learn about the latest research in suicide bereavement. We can highlight our accomplishments and lean on one another’s strengths.

In my experience, suicide loss survivors are a generous, compassionate and creative group who can thrive with the right community. So again, I hope this newsletter serves to connect you to one another and to the family that is AAS.

Finally, I have been honored to serve as the Loss Division Chair for the last three years. As my term comes to a close, I am so pleased to hand over the reins to WyKisha McKinney, WyKisha, who lost her brother to suicide, works with the Texas Health Human Services Commission to implement the Zero Suicide framework in mental health agencies across the state.

Best,

Vanessa McGann, PhD
AAS Loss Division Chair
**AAS Survivor of the Year**

*Continued from page 1*

Danielle was Lena’s younger sister and only sibling. When she died, Lena was “shattered,” with no idea of what surviving her loss would look like. She was devastated not only by the pain of the loss, but also by the loss of part of her fundamental identity: a sister.

**Small Steps**

Lena began her journey through grief with small steps. Since she couldn’t “imagine a future,” she told herself that once she’d survived one week, she could survive another, then two weeks at a time then three. She constantly created narratives to try to understand how this loss could have happened and “tested” them to see if they resonated. She hoped that, by doing so, she also could restore her identity. However, she couldn’t avoid the horror and despair when she ultimately understood that, despite all of her efforts, she could not make Danielle “not be dead.”

She started therapy to help her deal with the trauma of the loss, but ultimately found that the greatest support for her healing came from talking with other survivors; initially, with two longer-term survivors who gave her faith that her loss was survivable as well as in online support groups. The shared voices of survivors not only validated Lena’s grief, but helped her to feel less alone.

Shortly after her loss, Lena finished her PhD in German studies and obtained a college teaching position. But she found that this career left no space for her continuing grief, and that, despite her successful teaching position, she still didn’t know “who [she] was.”

**Switching Gears**

So, in 2016, Lena switched gears. She discovered and started to explore opportunities within the field of suicidology. She started out by volunteering for the Suicide Prevention Coalition of Colorado (SPCC), educating herself about both pre- and postvention, and then volunteered with the AFSP, eventually becoming a Healing Conversations peer volunteer. She also became a Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) trainer. In order to better support the organizations with which she’d become involved, she went back to school and obtained a master’s degree in nonprofit management, as she continued to learn and volunteer.

In 2018, Lena became the youth suicide prevention coordinator at the Office of Suicide Prevention in Colorado. She particularly appreciated that the organization defined youth as 10-24, since Danielle was 24 when she took her life. Lena was able to transform her understanding of “what Danielle would have needed” into meaningful work with Colorado youth.

Since then, Lena has coordinated school-based services for pre- and postvention, has written articles and has presented frequently on social media and at conferences. She has also taken on a new role as the Office of Suicide Prevention’s strategies manager.

In 2019, she published *Still With Us: Voices of Sibling Suicide Loss Survivors* as a way to honor Danielle and to support other survivors. This wonderful book features more than 20 sibling survivors telling their stories of grief, support and strength through the first decade of grief and beyond.

Throughout all of her work, Lena has been a passionate advocate for integrating the lens of social justice, equity and inclusion into the field of suicidology, and did a magnificent job of doing so while serving as the 2020 AAS conference chair.

In summary, Lena has transformed the grief and pain of her sister’s loss into a wide array of services that benefit not only suicidal individuals and survivors, but all of those involved in the field of suicidology. Upon learning that she had received the 2021 Survivor of the Year, Lena expressed surprise, gratitude and hope that the work she does in Danielle’s name can continue to be meaningful to her and to those she works with.

**A Life Cut Short**

*In the Early Morning Hours*

The following short essay, courtesy of William Feigelman, was written by Hope Slovin, Jason’s former spouse. Hope has been an active member of Dr. Feigelman’s monthly Long Island Survivors of Suicide Support Group (USOS.ORG) for the last five years, joining shortly after his death. She wrote this essay a few months ago.

In the early morning hours of January 3, 2016, Jason completed suicide. Ending his life, potential, dreams, aspirations and opportunity to see his son grow up. Jason’s life was cut tragically short at 43 years old.

If only he had been forthcoming with his therapists, doctors, family, friends … ME.

If only he had been honest about his drug use.

If only he knew how much he was loved, needed, wanted and cherished.

If only I called him that night, like I said I would.

If only.

Nothing has been the same since losing Jason. Raising a child grieving the death of his father to suicide is nothing anyone can prepare for. There are moments when Ari remembers Jason fondly and others when he is angry his dad didn’t get the help he needed. I anticipate our son will grapple with this complex loss his entire life.

When Jason died, my heart shattered. I continue to struggle with debilitating guilt and grief. Five years later, I am just beginning to forgive myself and, more importantly, forgive Jason for leaving all of us.

This past year was an incredibly difficult year for everyone. I wonder how Jason—a sonogram technician and healthcare worker—would have coped during this precarious time. I often wonder what life would be like if Jason were still with us. I am not deluded into thinking things would have been easy: Jason was difficult and co-parenting at times was very challenging and stressful.

I wish I really grasped how sick Jason was. I would have done anything. We all would have.

If only.

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**Have a Point to Make?**

Care to comment? Interested in submitting an article for *Surviving Suicide Loss*? If so, please email us at newsletter@suicidology.org