

Remember, Remember...

Some events are so incredibly difficult to endure that they demand every single iota of concentration and strength available. Sometimes I felt that that last iota was being drawn from the tips of my toe nails. After the event it is difficult to say what actually happened – so intense is the concentration and summoning of strength to go on.

Some events however will never be erased from my mind.

My mind was racing with adrenalin. Silence filled the car. We were driving calmly towards the hospital late at night. My thoughts were frantically speeding, 'faster, faster' while an outward calm enveloped us all. Our 13-year-old son sat in the back seat. My mind was grappling with: what could I possibly say? What did he need to hear? Surely some reassurance could be given, some comfort.

But what?

Into the thick silence I nudged the words "I can't imagine the incredible pain that you must be in to do that Tim"

Affirmation.

Affirm his pain.

Silence.

The words settled.

"I'm guessing that you feel trapped, that there really is no end to it."

The silence hummed with my wife's and my contemplation. I felt the deadness of thought from our son. I wanted him to know that we saw him where he was. I also wanted to give him some hope.

"Your pain will continue for a while yet, but one day it will be a lot easier."

A stifled sob sounded from the back seat, and then another. Tim asked for the tissues. Then his hand crept onto my shoulder and remained there. My wife covered it with hers and thus they remained – tightly clasped until we reached the hospital.

During the course of the next three years Tim continued to suffer from depression and 'chronic suicide ideation'. In 'parent language' that meant that somehow we had to convince Tim to

stay with us in this world on a daily basis. Every single day we battled with Tim to show him that he did have a place in this society, that he did have something to offer, that life could be enjoyable one day, and that the struggle was worthwhile. While we were fighting with and for Tim, we were accompanying him to visits with GPs, psychologists and psychiatrists. We were sitting next to him listening as he answered questions with information that shocked us. That his little sister (then 10 years old) had interrupted his first suicide attempt and had kept it secret - for six months... that Tim thought about killing himself on a regular basis and would jump off the jetty where we lived at low tide hoping to end things... We were stunned at the original thought that had gone into his plans. Alongside these shocks were horrifying actions of self harm. I was aware that Tim had great difficulty coping with *himself* and that he needed parents for stability and strength. I couldn't show the howling mess that I felt inside.

Our family unit became tight and brittle.

Home was no longer a pleasant place to be. It was strained and tense. It was dominated by sadness, worry, fear, hopelessness, desperation, inadequacy (as parents), guilt and confusion. We all felt nauseous most of the time. My wife had difficulty keeping her mind on task to prepare a meal, and if she did succeed, no-one wanted to eat. Family members spent increasingly larger amounts of time in their own rooms. No-one had any news to share anymore; our whole life was centred on keeping Tim alive. The school rang us enquiring about the 11-year-old: she was crying a lot at school and even she – our usually bouncy joyful child, was tense and teary.

We bought a TV. We had never had a TV as a family. We had put a high value on family life and conversing, reading, playing games, music and sharing one another's company. This had all disappeared and so we decided it was time to enter TV!! We not only bought a TV but we bought every funny DVD that we came across. We watched *Notting Hill*, *Two Weeks' Notice*, the *BBC Coupling* series, *The Vicar of Dibley* series, five *Billy Connolly* DVDs, and so on. We sat in front of the TV to eat our meals (a real break from our ideals of the past!) and we spent nearly all of our time together watching comedy TV. As we sat cuddled together we rarely laughed, but the TV comedy generated a more positive energy than we had experienced for some time. The 11-year-old wanted continuous cuddles. She snuggled in and just wanted holding and loving. Tim too wanted frequent intense cuddles. (That broke my heart to have this tall lad clinging to me as if I were the last hope...)

Then we bought a 'laughing bag'. We placed it in the lounge room and agreed as a family that every time any of us walked in or out of the we had to squeeze the bag. It felt strange at first, but the silly sound of bag laughing did help lift our mood.



room
that

We celebrated! We celebrated any tiny positive step. We celebrated that Tim had remained at school for an entire hour. We celebrated that Tim had come into a shop to buy some clothes (my wife pre-arranged with the store manager that she would arrive at the least busy time and that he would serve us with his undivided attention). We set up a celebration board with Tim and showed his accomplishments. His uncle (a pilot) flew in and 'collected' Tim to take him back to his family for a couple of days. We put a photo of Tim boarding the plane on the celebration board. Tim had to have an MRI. We put a photo of that on the board. We kept in front of Tim's face things that he had accomplished. We kept reminding him that he was achieving and moving forward.

We 'went into bat' for Tim. When we took him to family events we prepared the host in advance by saying 'this will be really difficult for Tim to attend. We may leave after 30 minutes. If this is the case we would appreciate it if you would celebrate the fact that we have all managed to visit together for an entire 30 minutes rather than expressing disappointment at our early leaving.' Of course we had mixed responses, and some responses resulted in our non-attendance as a family.

Repeated lack of understanding of Tim's mental illness eroded at the entire family's strength and confidence. My wife spoke about the situation on State radio and we established a support group for parents of adolescents. At the first meeting we held, my wife and I experienced a huge sense of relief. We were not alone and we were 'normal'. At that meeting and all the others that followed, we discovered other parents in isolation, other parents lacking in any support or understanding from those around them, deserted by 'friends' and judged harshly as a parent by relatives. The situations of those of us at the meetings were so similar we were amazed to discover the repetition of the stories. The parent support group became our monthly 'normaliser' and 'reassurer'.

We became very isolated, apart from others we met along the 'mental health' pathway. At times the sense of isolation was so desolate and friendless that we decided we must document those who were supports to us. When the days were tough and we couldn't think of a soul who understood or cared where we were, we could refer to our list that we had put together in a



more positive moment. My wife created a bowl out of clay and the family moulded the hands of people who have supported Tim and also us as a family to fit into the bowl. This was placed in a stand -made by Tim, so that we could remind ourselves that we are not alone.

Tim is 17 now – still with us, though still battling daily. We have been saddened to realise that understanding in the general community and even amongst so called 'experts' is extremely limited. We sought assistance from professionals feeling inadequate ourselves. We discovered that in many situations we had far more understanding and insight

than the professionals consulted, and that as parents we know a lot more than we gave ourselves credit for. Our greatest supports and strategies were those of each other. Our strength and defence came from insulating ourselves from the harsh judgements and criticisms of an ignorant community. Sometimes we just need to trust our own insights and realise that the greatest expert regarding any of our children is ourselves – the parents!

[Name changed]