

When Love is Not Enough

(By Trent Watford, Nathan's Father)

It is a societal illusion that suicide is rare. It is not. Certainly the mental illnesses most closely tied to suicide are not rare. They are common conditions, and, unlike cancer and heart disease, they disproportionately affect and kill the young.

Night Falls Fast by Kay Redfield Jamison

That quote sums up what we have learned through the tragic loss of our son Nathan to suicide at age 20. We would give everything we own to get Nathan back; however we can't, but we can try to help other parents and individuals avoid this tragedy. This article is our attempt to accomplish that goal. This is our story and the lessons we have learned.

Nathan's Story

If you watched the slide show of Nathan's life shown at the funeral home, you would have seen a cute little boy who grew up into a healthy young man. He was on the quiet side and had normal adolescent struggles. He was inquisitive and bright, but not fond of studying. Nathan took the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) test in his senior year of high school and found that he qualified for the Navy's nuclear program, which seemed like a good route to a high paying career without college. After completing his nuclear training at the top of his class, he was assigned to a submarine based in Guam. Two days after arriving, he called to give us his new phone number. Two days later, we received a call that there was a problem and he was unaccounted for. The next morning my wife saw two uniformed Navy officers coming to our front door and our world was turned upside down.

A slide show of the next portion of our life would show pictures of our once-healthy son in a Navy uniform lying in a casket, a flag-draped coffin in a cemetery, and the broken sod and flowers that cover a freshly dug grave. That day we started a long journey to understand how this tragedy could happen. We are still on that journey, but I am sharing some of what we have learned with the hope that it will help you as a parent or individual.

We tried hard to give our children a caring, Christian home. We loved them, just as you love your children, and would give anything for them. My wife, Lyn, illustrated that love by facing death after giving birth to Nathan, undergoing four surgeries and a month's stay in critical care at the University of Michigan hospital. As parents we homeschooled our children, taught them the Bible, and took them to church. During adolescence when Nathan began pulling away from us, I worked hard at connecting with him through guy things that he was interested in doing and built a good relationship with him.

We were not perfect parents, but we tried hard to show our love to him. However, his death has shown us that sometimes love is not enough. We believe there is an ingredient missing in the rearing of children today.

When we got that initial phone call from Guam, we were told that Nathan had been found by the base security patrol outside his barracks drinking alcohol under age. They took him to a security office, checked him out, and took him to his squadron office for observation. Nathan left the office without permission and drove off the base. Later the Navy found out that he checked into a hotel and took his own life by hanging.

Just before he left for Guam, Nathan had spent his 30-day leave with us. During that time, we flew to California for a week and spent time in San Francisco and Monterey Bay. We had no indication before he left that there was any problem, and his friends have told us the same thing. So we are faced with the questions: How is this tragedy possible? How could he take his own life?

Here is a portion of a note that he left in the hotel room. What do you think was going on in his life?

“There is no other way. I was just waiting for the right time. This is what I wanted.”

Perhaps you would agree with the conclusion we have come to. It appears that he had struggled with some kind of pain for a while; it is very likely that it was depression. The indication is that he had considered ending his life previously and the events of that night, along with the consequences he felt he faced, caused him to believe ending his life was the only solution. We keep asking ourselves how our son could come to the point of thinking that death was more desirable than life.

If we showed you a series of pictures of Nathan from when he was a baby until he was 20 years old you would see a cute little boy with smiles and happiness in his younger years, but in the high school pictures and beyond you would see that something changes--the smile goes away. We don't know what the cause was; at the time we thought it was the typical behavior often seen in adolescence. Nathan went to counselors with us to see if we could work through the issues with the rules that he didn't like. But we were always told, “He's a good kid, lighten up.” No one mentioned nor did it occur to us that it could be something deeper or something in his mind that was not working properly.

We have spent many hours in thought and prayer trying to grasp the fact that our son, the boy in the pictures, is actually gone; that what he was struggling with was so difficult and painful that he could see no other solution. One phrase from his note haunts us, “There is no other way.” There was and is another way for people in his situation. It is too late to help Nathan see that, but we can try to help others. If someone who knew what we know now had shared that information with Nathan or with us, as his parents, maybe, just maybe, he would still be with us. This is what I would say to our son if he was reading this.

“Nathan, there is another way.”

Lessons Learned

You may be thinking, “I am really sorry about your son, but I am not sure this topic applies to me or my family.” When we started reading about depression and suicide we were shocked to find out how widespread this problem is. Here are a few of the statistics we’d like for you to consider:

Suicide is the 3rd leading killer of teenagers.

Suicide is the 2nd leading killer of college age young people.

One out of ten young people has considered suicide and most of them have made a plan.

In the United States, one in ten children and adolescents suffer from mental illness severe enough to cause some level of impairment. (Burns, et al., 1995; Shaffer, et al., 1996)

Before Nathan’s death we were probably like some of you, thinking that mental illness, depression, and suicide are things that affect some people but not something that we should be concerned about. Our experience, the books we have read, the videos we have watched, and the people we have met have convinced us of the error of our thinking.

As parents, we took rearing our children very seriously. We read books, listened to sermons and Sunday school lessons, and attended parenting and homeschool seminars. Now we realize that we never heard anything about helping children with mental health issues or educating them about it. This is the serious missing ingredient in rearing children. All the love you can give a child may not be enough to solve a problem with the mind.

Mental Health Issues

Problems in how the brain functions mixed with other circumstances cause problems that are as real and serious as the most challenging health problem. It is one of the most serious health problems. The challenge is that it is not viewed that way; people hide it, and so we don’t really know how widespread it is. People attach a stigma to mental illness that also discourages people from facing it and getting help.

How can we rear children and not prepare them to face such a common and serious problem? Consider this analogy. Imagine sending your child on a mission's trip to a country whose drinking water may be unsafe and drinking it would result in a 10% chance of contracting a disease that if, not treated, could be fatal. Would you give them information about the symptom and treatment for that disease?

Parents are not prepared to help their children face illnesses in their minds that result in a variety of problems including anxiety disorders, eating disorders, depression, anti-social behavior, drug and alcohol abuse, and possibly suicide. This is not only real to me because of Nathan’s death, but also because of my own experience. I was always a timid child, and in high school I struggled with

worry, which then worsened during college. In my twenties I often found myself facing intense episodes of anxiety. Other than talking to my wife, I kept it pretty much to myself. Reluctant to seek counseling or help, I have now taken that step since Nathan's death. Had I received more help in high school, it may have spared me a lot of agony.

Suggestions

Here are some suggestions based on what we have learned, but I give them with a note of caution. The issues I have described are incredibly complex, and I am not a professional trained in this area. If you feel that you or your children have a need, I strongly suggest that you seek competent professional assistance. Whatever you do, don't ignore your concerns.

Relationship with God

We need to be careful to not to make two opposite errors when considering mental health issues. One is to think that it is only a spiritual problem and requires more prayer, Bible reading, etc. The other is to think that it is only a medical problem and requires pills and therapy. As with all challenges in life, we ought to be humbled and moved to seek God's help and grace. Solutions to these kinds of problems will require God's help as well as assistance from man.

In my struggles I have found that prayer and seeking God are incredibly helpful. As you read these suggestions, remember that a person also needs God, his Word, and faith in Jesus Christ.

Parents

Gather as much information as possible about your family history as it relates to mental health, as you do with other health problems. This should include your own experiences with mental health issues.

Educate yourself and your children about the following topics:

How the brain functions to produce thoughts and emotions

How the brain can have disorders in how it works

How these disorders can be dealt with successfully

Use material that is visual and interactive. This material should be appropriate for different ages, as sex education books are, and given multiple times as your children are growing up.

Have regular mental health checkups for your children. Children should understand that just as family doctors examine you to determine if there is an physical illness that requires treatment, trained counselors or psychologists can ask questions and consider other symptoms to determine if the brain is functioning properly.

Actively treat any problems that surface. Don't underestimate or dismiss things that you notice. Trust your intuitions and resist thinking it is a phase your child is going through. Assume that any concerns you have are just the tip of the iceberg.

Individuals

Many adults have undiagnosed problems or are hesitant to deal with problems they know about. Adults of all ages must take these matters seriously. If you have concerns related to your mind and how it functions, don't ignore them or hide them. Take action.

Find out about your family history. Educate yourself about mental health. Get professional assistance.

Conclusion

During his team's last regular season basketball game in Fennville, Michigan, Wes Leonard, an outstanding athlete, scored the game-winning point in overtime to preserve an undefeated season. Minutes later he collapsed and died. It was later discovered that he had an enlarged heart. Had he not played basketball he may have lived. His condition could have been hereditary or caused by the flu. It is believed that if he had been given more extensive heart tests his condition may have been discovered. He could have been given treatment or kept from playing such strenuous sports. Would there have been a stigma for him getting his heart checked or from not playing? Probably not.

Nathan went into a rigorous training program, the most difficult in the Navy and excelled. He was assigned to serve on a submarine, something very few of us would want to do. He unexpectedly died just prior to starting his submarine duty. It is now suspected that he was suffering from a psychiatric disorder. Had he not joined the Navy nuclear program he may not have faced the stressful situation that led to the end of his life. Had we been aware of his condition he could have been treated and may not have been able to serve in the nuclear program. Would there have been a stigma attached to him getting checked and treated for depression? Probably.

Should there be? NO! But he would still be alive.

Shower love on your children and use all the parenting tools and information you can. But remember that love is not always enough to solve issues related to mental health. We cannot change the outcome for these two young men, but you have the opportunity to do something to help your children or yourself.