

Not knowing is more scary than knowing

Eleanor Turner

Eleanor Turner was just ten when her father took his own life. Her parents were separated, but Eleanor still saw her dad every weekend, until he became ill with the depression that led to his suicide. She wanted to write about her own experience because she hopes it might help other bereaved children and young people and those supporting them.

My name is Eleanor and I am 12. I am in secondary school now and I really enjoy it. I have lots of friends both in and outside of school. When I had just turned ten, my dad took his own life, having been ill with depression for about a year and a half. I want to tell my story because I hope it will help people understand what it feels like to be a child who has lost someone close to them.

My mum and dad split up when I was small – about two – and because of that I didn't see my dad as often as most other people would see their dads. However, my dad and I were very close. I used to go to his house every weekend until he got ill. I would go there on a Saturday and come home on Sunday. My dad was really kind to me and everyone else and never got cross, and I loved the time I spent with him. He was quite sensible and serious sometimes, but he always had a good sense of humour. He didn't go out much – he never went out with his mates to the pub – and he wasn't very outgoing. He was very patient, and he would spend hours playing with me, playing the games that I wanted to play.

When my dad got ill I could sense it almost straight away, even though he didn't tell anyone at first. He seemed different – quieter than he already was. And when he did play with me, he didn't seem quite as engaged as he usually was. I didn't know it was depression until my mum explained it to me. I was sort of unconsciously aware of his changed behaviour and, because I picked this up, I wasn't as keen to go to his house. Also, as his illness got worse, he couldn't look after me as well as he could before, and so he sometimes came and stayed at our house instead. When he did this, he and mum would talk together a lot of the time about him and what was going to be done to help him. This meant that he wouldn't spend as much time with me, and when he did play with me upstairs, I wouldn't feel as comfortable being with him as I used to feel.

When my dad died I was completely shocked. I had no idea that depression could lead to this. It was only two weeks after my tenth birthday, which made it even harder to deal with. He hadn't come to my party because he was too ill. Instead, we all went out for a meal – my mum, dad, granny and granddad and I. But he didn't really say much at the meal – he wasn't as engaged as he would have been normally.

I found out that my dad had died when I came home from an after-school club on the day that his body was found. My mum didn't want to come into school to pick me up because she knew that as soon as I saw her face I would know that something was terribly wrong, and she didn't want to have to tell me at school. Instead, one of my teachers dropped me off at my house, and that's when I found out.

Some of my family were already at my house, helping my mum to cope with what had happened, and giving her support to tell me about it. When my mum did tell me about what had happened, she told me all that I wanted to know. At first she only told me that he had died, and then asked me if I wanted to know anything else in more detail. I couldn't understand how he could just have died, and at first thought he must have had an accident. My mum explained that he had killed himself because of his depression. Later that evening I asked her how he had died, and she told me that he'd hanged himself. Although this was difficult to hear, it was better to know than to imagine something worse.

Who and how to tell

The next few weeks were hard. It will always be hard, but that was the time when it was hardest. I was in primary school at the time, which was good because I knew everybody and I knew my way around. I was in year five, mixed with people in year six. The night I found out about my dad, I went round to my friend's house, and we told her family what had happened, so one person knew at school the next day. My mum and I asked my teacher if she could tell the class about my dad while I was out of the room, and she did. This meant that everyone knew and I didn't have to cope with telling people individually.

However it also meant that nobody talked to me about it, probably because they were afraid of upsetting me. But I think I would have found it helpful to talk about it. In those few weeks I also became very anxious if I was separated from my mum. I worried that something would happen to her and I would be left on my own. Whenever the head teacher wanted to speak to me alone, I thought he was going to tell me something bad had happened to my mum. I have always thought since then that not knowing is more scary than knowing.

Six weeks after my dad died, I went into year six. I was with different people, so no one apart from my friends knew about what had happened. Again, my mum and I asked the teacher if they would tell the class about it. It was a different teacher and they found it hard to tell anyone about it, and in the end I had to tell people myself. This



Eleanor – 'I hope my story will help people understand'

was difficult at first, but over time I found it easier, having to tell more and more people, and now I find I actually want to tell people. I think I want to because sometimes my feelings get all mixed up inside me, and I think talking helps me to sort them out and realise what I am actually feeling.

I found the transition to secondary school tricky, and again suffered anxieties about being away from my mum. I didn't really start to settle down and make friends until the Christmas break. Now, looking back, I think the reason I found transition so difficult was because it was such a big change, and I'd had to deal with such an enormous change only a year before.

Working with feelings

About six months ago I went to a Winston's Wish overnight camp. Winston's Wish is a charity that specialises in supporting bereaved children. The camp was specifically for children who have been bereaved by suicide, which was very useful because everyone was in the same situation as me, and we were all working together on being in the same situation. We got to do all sorts of different fun activities in which we told people our story and what we felt about what had happened. For example, we wrote our feelings down in different colours on a big piece of paper, then went outside and hung the paper up on the wall, and threw clay at our difficult feelings to get rid of them. We generally just had a good time while being serious

Commentary

This is a wonderfully helpful account of Eleanor's experience of being bereaved by suicide. It very much stands on its own, and needs little commentary, but there are a few things that are particularly noteworthy. Notice how her mother tells her all that she wanted to know. Eleanor clearly felt able to ask questions, and was given honest answers. She is very clear that she would prefer to know than to imagine something worse: 'Not knowing is more scary than knowing.' Deciding how to tell school friends can create difficulties. In Eleanor's case, telling her friends the first time was carefully planned, and done in a way that meant Eleanor did not have to tell people individually. This worked for Eleanor, although she does helpfully point out that it did mean her school mates then didn't talk to her about it. Maybe telling classmates about what has happened could also include helping them think about what they might say to the bereaved young person. There are no 'manuals' on the experience of being bereaved by suicide; everyone is different. However, the book *Beyond the Rough Rock: Supporting a Child who has been Bereaved Through Suicide*, by Julie Stokes and Diana Crossley (available from www.winstonswish.org.uk), is an excellent source of ideas. Other children bereaved by suicide may have different needs to Eleanor, but we can learn so much from what helped her.

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simultaneously. I found it very useful to work with my feelings in a different way than just thinking. I also made lots of friends, which was good because, as well as talking to everyone else, I had someone to talk to who would be there for me if I needed it, and I would be there for them as well. I really enjoyed the camp, and I think it helped me a lot.

I hope that my story will help people understand more what it is like to be a bereaved child. I made a PowerPoint presentation about my story that has been used in training sessions for teachers dealing with bereaved children. I think this has helped lots of adults to understand what is needed from a child's perspective. I think that, in a way, going through this bereavement will help me in the future and, because of what I have been through, I can help other young people cope with a similar situation.

I try to look forward in life but I still talk about my story to people if they want to know anything. I will always remember my dad. He will always be a part of my life even if he is not here to witness it, and I will never forget any of the things he has done for me. ■