

FORUM SPEECH

My name is Kerri McMillan and I am a victim of suicide

I can stand here and deliver you all of the horrible statistics - but the most important one to me is that of the, on average, 8 people that died from suicide on just one day, May 12 2011, the most devastating for me and our friends and family was that one of them was my beautiful son.

My son, Sam, was 9 days away from his 21st birthday. A birthday he had been planning AND looking forward to. A birthday he should have made.

I'd like to say I'm here to give you answers, clues, signs to look for - but I can't. I don't have them. God knows I wish I did. Maybe Sam would be alive.

After Sam died, I became obsessed with finding answers. I googled, researched and studied - websites, books, you name it. Every piece of literature I found started with the lead line -"Dealing with Anxiety and Depression" but I couldn't find anything that helped me understand why I had NO idea I should have been dealing with it. That I should have known.

We were a strong family, a family that talked and shared (in fact sometimes Sam and his wicked sense of humour meant that he shared things that I didn't need to know!) But we DID talk; he wasn't isolated or alone; he was TOTALLY loved and supported.

This wasn't meant to happen to us.

I'm one of the local kinder teachers, for heaven's sake! We are blessed to live in a community where we have very few degrees of separation. Pretty much everyone in Mt Martha knew of me or my kids - we were living the dream!

So this DEFINITELY wasn't meant to happen to us!

But why not??

God, I was so arrogant!

You see this shitty 'thing' isn't terribly selective - it will take anyone. It doesn't discriminate. It sneaks into your life without you even realizing it's there. It messes with your mind and, makes you believe, with every fibre of your being, that the world, your world, is better off without you.

Sam - my Sam, my hilarious, loving, crude and rude, protective, no nonsense, caring and loyal, dedicated and completely adorable Sam, would NEVER have done this to us.

At his best, which was most days, he would have done ANYTHING to protect us from his death, anything to save me from being the one to find his body. But my completely adorable Sam wasn't there on May 12. A sad, lost, broken version had taken over; probably temporarily but unfortunately long enough for him to believe the lie - that the world would be better off without him. It's NOT!

Sam had been through some tough stuff in the year leading up to his death.

He had broken up with the girl he believed was the love of his life

He had broken his leg and was frustratingly off work and incapacitated for a week.

He had crashed his car and was looking at the financial implications of replacing it.

These are all fairly commonplace occurrences and I'm sure most of you have dealt with one or more of them in your time.

AND to complete the cliché - I have been a single mother since Sam's brother Jake was a baby and Sam a pre schooler. (By the way - I was a single parent but I was a bloody good one)

SO - why is my son dead and we are alive?

I'm not for a second suggesting that Sam was weak and couldn't handle these setbacks. In fact, Sam was one of the strongest kids I know, both physically and, I believed, emotionally - but I was wrong.

Again, don't get me wrong - Sam had an amazing strength. I found out after he died that he had been suffering for a while. Too long.

He had the incredible strength to keep it from his brother and I. He loved us so much; he wanted to protect us from his battle. He was literally fighting for his life and yet his biggest fight was the one involving keeping it all from us.

Hindsight is an amazing thing. Sam left us a note.

If such a thing can be said - it was a beautiful note- but I remember telling some of Sam's friends that it existed if they felt they needed to read it. To my horror, I soon realised that at least one of his good mates knew it existed.

I was beyond angry- how could they know and not have told me!

But what I've come to realise is that his friends were helping him protect me and thought they were helping. They weren't equipped with the necessary skills to truly help.

When Sam felt "it" overwhelming him I would get a "hey mum, I'm staying at Bills tonight" and they would take him out for a beer and tell him it would be ok.

Again, I've come to realise that we possibly need to focus a little less on talking about suicide prevention and start talking about early recognition of depression and anxiety. That perhaps we also need to remember that it's great to ask your friends if they're ok but we need to teach our kids the necessary skills to get help. We do first aid courses for our bodies. If our child hurts themselves we administer whatever care is needed until we can get them proper, more professional help. Maybe it's time we looked at mental health first aid.

We need to put money into programs that help our kids talk about the real stuff, that help them with the business of growing up in a safe protected environment, that get to them BEFORE the big problems kick in - the ones that could kill you.

Maybe we need to teach lessons on recognising signs and getting help; that it's not disloyal to seek help for someone you're worried about. We need to learn to focus on wellness and wellbeing, on how to deal with the influx of 'stuff' that comes with growing up in an age of social media, on dealing with all the crap that may be your mind and body letting you down.

But having said that, this alone is never going to work unless the help we teach them to seek, is AVAILABLE. So we need to put more resources into ensuring that there isn't a 3 week wait to see a counsellor; that any resources that aid mental wellbeing is easily and readily AND financially available.

I feel like I've let you down. I feel like I should be able to stand up here and give you definitive bullet points on all of the clear signs you just need to memorise and then you'll be guaranteed to be able to keep your friends and family safe.

But the simple truth is until we get the aforementioned funding, until we make discussions about making mental health a priority, in fact when these conversations are as common place around our dinner tables as our conversations about sport, until we start taking this issue seriously, until we find some answers then

My name is Kerri McMillan and I, my two sons, my parents, all of our family and friends and YOU are all victims of suicide.