

REFLECTING ON SURVIVORS - Today is World Suicide Prevention day. A year ago at this time I would have been already cycling up into Elk Park on a 135 mile journey to raise awareness and wrestle with my ongoing grief. But after last year's ride, my body simply said no to another one. According to 'statistics', for every suicide, there are six survivors. If you cared deeply for someone and have struggled to understand and deal with their death, you are termed to be a survivor. I've learned a few things about grief and surviving a suicide and one of those is the 'statistics' are greatly underestimated. Regardless, each loved one who leaves us too soon because of depression and suicide forever and in a life changing way impacts those left behind. Losing a loved one to suicide creates all kinds of added complications. There is almost always guilt because we think we should have been able to do or see something that would have made a difference. There is always a stigma associated with depression and suicide. We've made great strides in Montana since my son died but there is much work to do. Some, for whatever reason, feel the need to judge and find fault and that only enhances the stigma. I don't understand this. We don't judge people with other illnesses, why would we judge people with depression or their family? People say insensitive things, mostly in an effort to comfort. I could give you a list that would really raise your eyebrows. There is anger for some. Why would that person do this to me? Didn't they know we couldn't live without them? There is also anger towards God. That was a big one for me and one I still wrestle with sometimes. Some of us slip into our own depression and are at risk for self-destructive behavior. We can't imagine the next 20, 30, or more years without our loved one and are unable to wrap our minds around their death. There is blame. Many good families are irrevocably broken after a suicide. And there is acceptance. I woke up every single night for a year between 2-4 am with a 'holy crap, what just happened to my life' feeling. I still do that but thank goodness it is not every single night. The point of acceptance is different for everyone. Grief itself is very individualized. It depends on whether we are a parent, spouse, sibling, etc. and it is tied to the special relationship we had with our loved one and it is tied to our individual makeup. In my experience, grief is not a process that you can turn off after a year but rather a journey. It's a life journey. It ebbs and flows. We backslide at times and then just move forward again. When people ask how we are doing, early on many of us learn to lie and just say 'doing fine'. Hopefully, we get to a point where we can say those words honestly and with conviction. I believe we can. There can be joy again for survivors. We need to hold our heads up high and forge ahead to live life. Nothing will ever change the tragedy we experienced but we can mold the trajectory of the rest of our time here. Our loved one would have wanted that for us. The wound never completely heals but it can become manageable. We are forever changed because our loved one died, but we are also forever changed because they LIVED. I think this is crucial to remember. My folks recently celebrated a 60th anniversary and my task was to put together a slide show of their lives and family. Looking through old pictures and witnessing this huge milestone for my folks definitely gave me pause and time to reflect. Even though it's been more than 3 ½ years now since Jacob's death to suicide, his absence at this celebration was palpable. At the same time, his presence was also there and felt in everyone that joined in the celebration. My hope for survivors on this day is to find that joy where you can carry your loved one with you. My hope for those suffering is that you know how important you are to your family and friends. You have an important role to play in life, so please reach out for help.

~Bill Wheeler