

Embracing Life After Loss

Losing a child is the worst grief.

When Olwen Schubert's 21-year-old son Chris died by suicide in June 1991, she threw herself into her work to manage the grief and sense of loss she was overcome by daily.

Surviving on very little sleep and suffering a loss of appetite, Ms Schubert went through the motions of life, helping to launch a new online venture at her workplace and giving those she passed the impression she was ok.

"Everyone thought I was coping, but I wasn't," she said. "Then, four years down the track, I hit a wall."

Over the past two decades, Ms Schubert has worked with The Compassionate Friends group and StandBy Response Service to build a strong support network for those who have experienced the loss of a loved one, as well as founding the non-profit support group SOBS - Support of the Bereaved by Suicide.

SOBS offers friendship, awareness, and education for those bereaved by suicide, as well as promoting suicide prevention and providing a crisis intervention hotline. The group currently has eight consistent members, all of whom are working through different stages of grief.

Describing her son as her "soul mate," Ms Schubert said it took her "eight years to become a survivor".

"I think if I wasn't a strong person, I would have had a complete breakdown," she said. "For someone who has lost a child, you don't get over a death; you work through it."

While Ms Schubert said it may sound bizarre, she has found that sharing her story and talking about Chris with her friends has helped the healing process.

"The support of friends and family is very important," Ms Schubert said. "A lot of people don't have that. I know it is really uncomfortable for people, particularly when you've lost a child. But I do think support groups really help you and you feel you're not the only one going through the tragedy."

While Ms Schubert said everyone reacts differently to the death of a loved one, the grieving process and journey to becoming whole again were made up of a series of little steps. From the first time you smile, to the first time you are able to greet someone warmly and genuinely feel happy to see them. The experiences, she said, are different for everyone.

"He had a wicked sense of humour, my son, and I like to laugh," she said. "The first time you find yourself laughing, you think, my son is dead, and here I am laughing."

Like Ms Schubert, Susan Kemp, who lost her husband Des five years ago to cancer, said an important part of moving forward and working through the grief was making sure you remained social and interacted with your support network.

While Ms Kemp didn't join a formal support group, she said she was blessed to have a strong friendship group and tight-knit family on side.

“People keep you up and busy,” Ms Kemp said. Over time she said she found moving from day-to-day easier if she had something planned for the next morning.

“If you don’t, you just won’t get out of bed,” she said. “If you’ve already made arrangements with someone to walk the dog or go to lunch, you have a reason to get out of bed.”

While Ms Kemp said she had begun coping with the healing process, it wasn’t until she adopted her little dog Missy, three years after her husband’s death, that her life began to feel whole again.

“She filled that piece of my heart,” she said. “When you lose someone that close, it feels like you’ve been kicked in the belly. Literally. It feels like you have a dull ache. As soon as I got Missy, I started feeling whole.”

Since Missy entered her life, Ms Kemp has met many new friends, known as the dog walkers, who gather for lunches and social events along with their dogs. While Ms Kemp said things haven’t felt ‘normal’ since Des’s death, she said each day brought new improvements.

“I do still have times when I just cry. We were big ballroom dancers and when they play things on Dancing With The Stars, some of the music and the dances that go with it are some of the ones we have done, and I am just so sorry we don’t have that still. We were so in love. We did four or five cruises and people always asked us if we were on our honeymoon. We’d just always be holding hands, cuddling. True love. You’re lucky if you find it.”

For information, help, or support with any of life’s issues, call Lifeline on 13 11 14 or the Support of the Bereaved by Suicide helpline on 0401 311 468.

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Susan Kemp found her adopted dog Missy helped fill the void in her life after her husband's death.

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