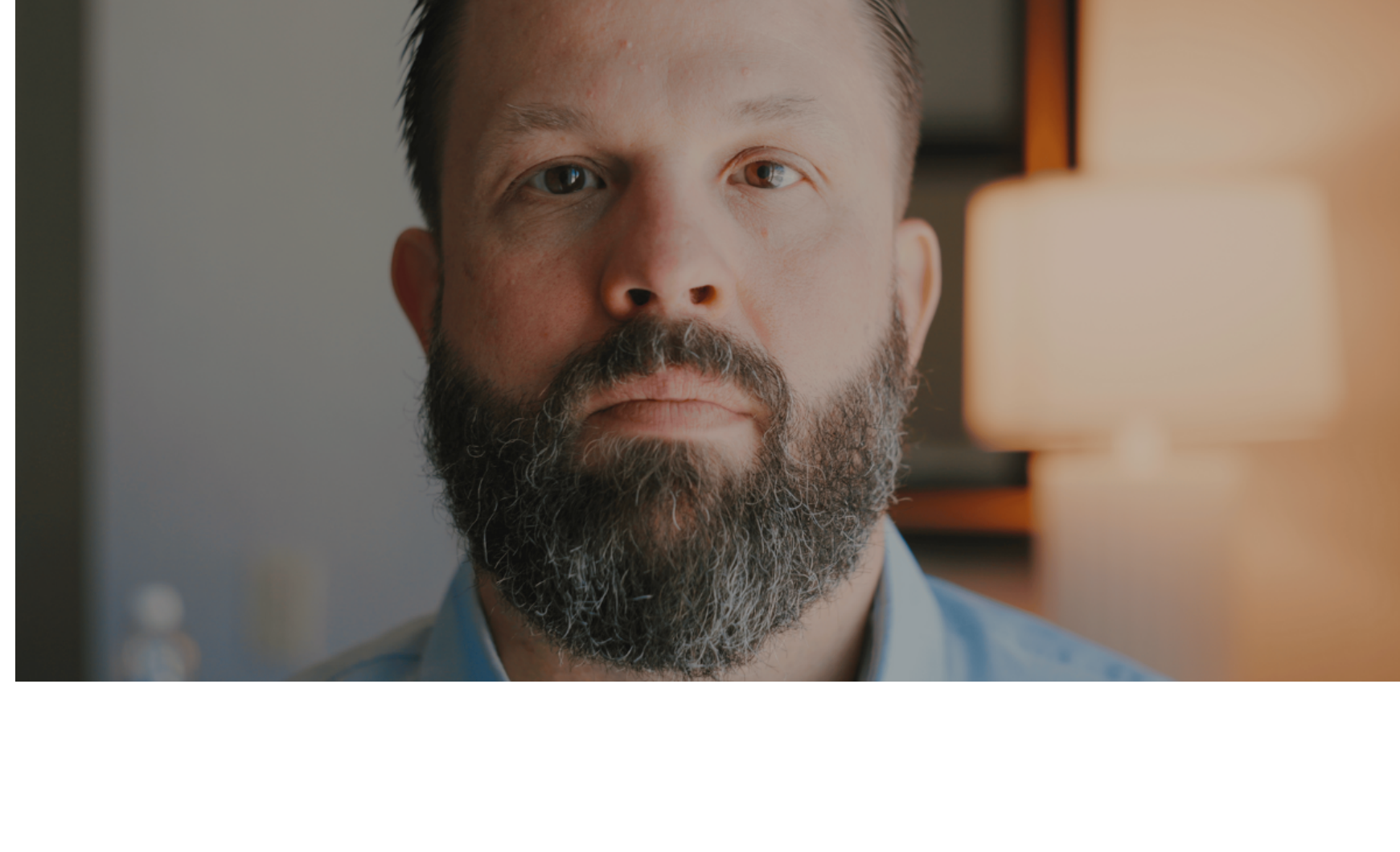


5MIN READ

My Awakening Amidst Tragedy: How My Best Friend's Suicide Became a Catalyst For Personal Growth



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K-12 Education Real Stories

When someone you love dearly dies by suicide, you'll experience a range of emotions as you grieve. Some moments you may feel angry; in other moments, you may feel immeasurable sadness. Some moments you may feel like you can't go on; and in other moments, you may feel a sense of peace and acceptance.

As time passes and the grief continues to unfold, you have some choices to make. Will this loss define you and keep you frozen in time — or will this loss be a call to positive action? Dave, Regional Director of K-12 Partnerships at Care Solace, says he faced those choices when his best friend (also named Dave) took his own life. He talked to Care Solace about choosing to let the loss of his friend become a catalyst for his own personal growth.

Care Solace: Dave, thanks so much for being willing to talk about such a difficult subject with us. You've faced a lot of loss, but you radiate joy. That could not have come easy. Can you tell us a little bit about your friend Dave?

Dave: Sure. We met when we were 19 years old, and we were roommates in college. We were really close, like brothers. As adults, we were each on a mental health journey, and we uplifted and encouraged each other. He and his wife lost one of their twin boys in a freak accident. He was struggling, even a decade afterwards. I thought we were both on a journey to healing. He was trying to figure it out. I was trying to figure it out.

CS: So he was still actively grieving years later?

Dave: Oh, for sure. He'd tried all sorts of alternative therapies to heal. But other dark things were penetrating his soul, too — both in his business life and in his personal life. Life stacked up difficulties, and he lost hope. That's a dangerous place to be.

CS: Dave died just a couple of years ago. What was that time like for you?

Dave: September 2021 — exactly 2 years ago. I have no idea how I was managing to function at that time. I felt anger, sadness, and empathy — for him, and for his wife and kids. I felt betrayed. I even felt envious. He was done with his mortal journey and all of its hardships. And I was left behind with this burden of grief.

CS: Envy. You don't hear many talk about that emotion openly after losing someone they love.

Dave: I have to be honest with things I felt. I have to be real, be authentic. I had to face all I was feeling and not sweep any of it under the rug. I refused to let the uncomfortable emotions compound. And of course, grieving the loss of my dear friend intensified other unresolved issues in my heart and mind, reaching all the way back to childhood. It was heavy.

"I have to be honest with things I felt. I have to be real, be authentic. I had to face all I was feeling and not sweep any of it under the rug."

CS: So you said you thought you were both on a journey to healing. Were you blindsided by his suicide?

Dave: We were texting each other just days before — all our usual stuff. What books are you reading? What music are you listening to? There was no indication something was wrong. He wasn't short with me. He wasn't weird with me. He was normal. I went back and read our texts. What did I miss?

Dave was the one who taught me the language I needed to start paying better attention to my own mental health. He was the one who urged me to start doing my inner work.

CS: How did you start doing your own "inner work"?

Dave: I was diving deep — with books. I read Bruce Perry, Brene Brown, Anne Lamott, Bessel van der Kolk, and Mark Manson. Van der Kolk's *The Body Keeps the Score* was one of the best books for me. And Dave and I were really connecting over the topics in these books. Yes, we were close friends. But we were also being forged together in a special way. He was my ride or die. He was my tribe.

I had been trying to live my life independently, without needing anything from anyone, especially another guy. I think a lot of men try to be an island. We have to quit trying to be an island. We need *belonging and connection*. Isolation is destructive.

CS: So while you were sharing this self-discovery journey, now you can see there was something very different about your path than his.

Dave: I was trying to shed things that were holding me back. And he might have been holding on to things that were hurting him. But I haven't lost a child. I haven't experienced what he did in his professional life.

I loved that guy. I still love him and consider him one of the greatest influences in my life. I've come to peace with the fact that he took his own life, and I will not judge him because he decided this life is too overwhelming. Whether I like it or not, he had the right to make that choice.

CS: Taking a stance of non-judgement is so hard, even in much less serious circumstances.

Dave: That took me a while. At first, I could only see suicide as selfish. It profoundly and horribly affects other people's lives. I had to ask questions like, How could you leave me here? Why did you betray me? But now I'm in a very different place with my thinking. He was a free agent, like we all are. He chose his path, like we all get to do. I will not be his critic. That's what love has done in me. I saw the beauty of his soul; I walked with him. The judgment faded.

My personal study and therapy were critical. I started asking other questions, like: How am I feeling inside myself? What's my body telling me? What's my spirit telling me? When you go to therapy, when you practice meditation or yoga, when you do breath work, whatever works for you . . . the whole goal is to center yourself.

CS: What other things changed for you after you lost Dave?

Dave: Well, I changed my career path. I was at a good company, making good money, and doing good things. And I was growing there. But the Universe was talking to me: Dude, you've got to get in front of this mental health stuff. You gotta change your trajectory. Now, I'm working at Care Solace, supporting a mission I feel is critical.

Dave's death isn't something to get over. I'll live with it for the rest of my life. But it's no longer impacting me in such a negative, dark way. I remember the beautiful things this person brought into my life — mentorship, perspective, true friendship.

I've been learning how to enjoy simple things, like sitting on the back porch in the sun for 15 minutes or taking my shoes off in the grass.

CS: Dave's death prompted you to change your career trajectory, and it also fundamentally changed the way you see and experience the world!

Dave: Yes. That was my choice. I'm a free agent. I choose my path. And now I feel I have to choose to be curious. I believe if I stop being curious, I'm standing still. Then I'm not putting one foot in front of the other. So I won't resist. I won't run away. I won't turn back.

One other thing I've learned from this journey: There's 8 billion people on this planet, and there's 8 billion ways to live a life. And I'm not here to tell you how to live your life. I'm just here to tell you this is what's helped me. This loss, as awful as it was, was my rocket ship.

CS: It's important to say that. There are many ways to turn pain into a catalyst for growth.

Dave: If you reflect, if you do the work, if you read books, if you do therapy, if you meditate, answers will eventually come. I just read Tara Brach's book *Radical Acceptance*, and I'm focused on the idea of surrender. But that's how joy worked for me too. I wanted to understand joy. And really, it just literally came to me in meditation. It was clear as day: Joy is the absence of judgment.

CS: That's powerful. And that answer helped you adjust your attitude and relationship to Dave's suicide.

Dave: Yes. And it's helped me with my attitude and relationship to myself. We are self-critical, right? We need more *self-compassion*. Only then can we experience true joy and see how far we've come

If you've lost someone you love to suicide, you don't have to carry the burden of grief alone. We're here to connect you with the right care at just the right time, 24/7/365. Learn more about our services in K-12 schools, municipalities, and employers.

Dave Barger

Regional Director of K-12 Partnerships

Dave has worked in K-12 education for nearly two decades. At Care Solace, Dave is focused on ensuring students, families, and staff get the help they need to move toward healing and recovery. He believes that all of us need to find a path toward self-discovery, self-worth, and belonging. From there comes authenticity, connection, hope, and joy!

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