

A Devastating Loss

The Supper Club is a club that none of us ever wanted to join. Losing a child to drug/alcohol overdose is a complicated and lifelong grief. It is a stigmatised death in our society where there continues to be judgement and ignorance around addiction.

The Supper Club has provided friendship, validation and a freedom to share during the last nine years since Sam's death. This sharing diminishes our sense of isolation and guilt (at least for two hours per month). It provides us with an opportunity to talk about taboo areas without judgement and gives us the opportunity to talk about issues that we frequently confront such as how to respond to questions such as 'how many children do you have? We also provide and share our difficulties and strategies re coping with anniversaries, birthdays, Christmas and significant family get together's.

A common theme that comes up is the high level of guilt, remorse, self-blame and regret that we all have. We accept that as parents this will never leave us. Just as many parents enjoy the success and achievements of their children, we harbour a deep sadness that we could not keep our children alive.

One of the complications that accompanies the death of a child through overdose is that most of us experienced many years of disenfranchised grief before confronting the final loss. My experience was 10 years of hyper vigilance watching my beautiful boy playing 'Russian roulette' with the needle. He also did many good things during this time re family, relationships and career building, but for me it is all overshadowed by the trauma. Having a child struggle with an addiction puts a great strain on the bond between parent/child. It also negatively impacts on other family relationships. How can a parent be truly present for other's when the most pressing issue that never leaves you is the constant fear for your child? The 10 years (prior to Sam's death) impacted on my relationships within the family, friends and workmates. The dilemma and isolation of not wanting to tell people and hoping that Sam would recover while also protecting his privacy. The risk that he would be judged by others. Feeling judged when you do disclose and thereby failing to protect his privacy. The sudden self-inflicted nature of the death violently severs the bond without any hope of repair to the relationship.

There is so little research about identifying the needs of parents who have lost a child through drug/alcohol overdose. There are also very few professionals who have expertise in this area and who we can get support from. The high levels of PTSD that effect this group. Over the years I have witnessed Sam being resuscitated by paramedics. There was no opportunity to recover from these traumatic incidents as there was always the likelihood that another incident was imminent.

At times I have heard friends, family and work colleagues talk about 'druggies' in a derogatory manner. When we are feeling so vulnerable and isolated this language from those who should know better is sure to silence us.

I personally have a deep sadness and profound regret that I did not support Sam without judgement. This was due to my ignorance about addiction. My fear and hyper vigilance impacted on our relationship and I would desperately go through his things, invade his privacy, all in a futile attempt

to try and save him. If I was to give advice to a parent struggling with a child with an addiction, I would say that addiction is an illness, and your child needs your love and support, not judgement. Then if the worst does happen, at least you will be thankful that you were there for them.

The best thing about the Supper Club is being with others like myself. The thing that provides me with some healing is having a friendship with these really decent, good people who are continuing to do their best to overcome and cope with our shared lifelong loss.