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Opinion

I will not get another holiday season with my child — cherish yours

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William Brown / Op-Art

By [Theresa Bujnoch](#)

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One of my favorite sketches on “Saturday Night Live” is a fake rap video depicting college girls coming home for holiday break and doing “what they want” because their parents miss them so much “they’re going to treat us like queens.” The faux rappers then proceed to treat their adoring parents like hired help and make fun of their very long Wi-Fi passwords.

I laugh because I recognize myself, of course, in the mom who lets her daughter pretend she’s napping on the couch when it comes time to do dishes. In fact, I looked forward to doing it again when my daughter’s college campus finally reopened this fall.

But my 20-year-old didn’t come home for break. She died from suicide in September, one of the leading causes of death among young people in the United States.

“Between 2007 and 2018, suicide rates among youth ages 10-24 in the U.S. increased by 57%” according to [The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory](#), released this summer. The report also cited early estimates that suggest there were “more than 6,600 deaths by suicide among the 10-24 age group in 2020.”

So I am writing, not about my pain, which is immense, or my guilt, which is endless, but to suggest that while waiting hand and foot on your beloved child when they’re home to visit maybe look a little closer.

My psychiatrist was quick to tell me after my daughter’s death that despite all of the public emphasis on suicide prevention, it’s almost impossible to predict who will succeed. She said my constantly replaying and judging myself for what I could have or should have done is my brain’s way of trying to make order and does no good.

But that doesn’t stop me from Googling [the signs](#) I might have missed.

Was she isolated? She went to college out of state and because of COVID-19 her classes were online since the spring of 2020. She had few friends she wanted to keep up with from high school, and while we saw her most every day, she was an only child.

She died in September, about a week before classes started.

Did she smoke weed? She was 20 years old and living in Seattle, so yes. Ditto for drinking. But we now wonder if the use of psychedelic mushrooms, a [growing trend](#) now, could have influenced her. Though I'd skimmed a couple of stories about it — and argued with her that their use was recommended *under the supervision of a psychiatrist*— I was too ignorant to know they could, especially if mixed with marijuana, lead to a psychotic episode. Since my daughter's body was not recovered, we'll never know for sure if they were involved in her death.

Were we bad parents? It's OK to ask; I wonder all the time if people think it. We certainly weren't perfect, and some would say she was spoiled as an only child. But we weren't abusive, or divorced, or drug-addicted, or absent — not that any of those situations would be to blame anyway. We are extremely boring types who liked spending time with her.

Was she depressed? Yes. She had been seeing a therapist since the onset of an eating disorder when she was 16. Her therapist said, after her death, that she had not seen any worrisome signs. In fact, she'd been on “an upswing.” And there was no history of past suicidal attempts.

My daughter saw a psychiatrist, too, who frustratingly gave her medication for ADHD but not for depression. We walk a fine line as a parents in urging our adult child to see someone, while also respecting their privacy. But now I wish I'd have pushed more for her to see someone better, or at least more responsive. On the day before my daughter died, her phone records show she attempted to call her psychiatrist's office six times, with no callbacks recorded.

And here's what else I saw, playing it all back, over and over ...

My argumentative daughter had become less so, which I construed as her becoming more mature.

And she'd nod and answer sometimes with what seemed like vacant responses. Again, I noticed, but attributed it to her tuning me out, or to her learned behavior from her summer job as a restaurant hostess.

As my friends remind me, they only show you what they want to show you, and you can't be with them 24/7.

But there are more things I wish I'd known. For instance, I knew about “13 Reasons Why,” the Netflix series about a teen's suicide and had discussed it with my daughter. But I didn't know about

the existence of easy-to-find websites that actually advocate suicide and offer information on methods, as reported by [The New York Times](#) this month.

At my daughter's funeral at least six other parents expressed concern over the well-being of their own children, children close in age to mine. And all but one involved young women.

And that is frighteningly in keeping with recent reporting from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The CDC found that Emergency Department visits in the U.S. for suspected suicide attempts in February and March of this year were 51% higher among girls aged 12-17 years compared to the same period in 2019. Among boys in that age group, visits increased by almost 4%.

But I don't mention this to parents of other girls and young women, especially not this time of year, when I know they really just want to enjoy their daughters and treat them like queens. After all, that's what I'd be doing.

But if you can, even though it might upset the mood, consider asking how your child is *really* doing. I pray it will be all for naught.

Theresa Bujnoch is a writer who lives in Seattle.