

Preface

- This is my perspective & experience
- This is not a directive
- This may or may not resonate with you

MY BACKPACK – by Ellen Hagey

I remember hearing someone describe the grief from a suicide loss as a 100-pound backpack that is suddenly dropped on your shoulders. It brings you to your knees. It takes your breath away and makes it hard to do anything – even simple things that were effortless before. It exhausts you, and it won't budge even though you desperately try to get it off your back.

Six years ago when my husband killed himself, I crumbled under the weight of my backpack.

It was heavy with so many things. Sorrow because I would never spend time with my husband again. Disappointment because I couldn't make any new memories with him. Dismay because I would witness the unfolding of our children's lives alone. Rejection because I felt abandoned. Guilt because I hadn't prevented his death. Frustration because I couldn't find answers to the questions that played on a continuous daily loop in my head. Fear because I didn't know how to live without him. Resentment because suicide spews an unrelenting stigma on those who pursue it and on those left behind.

For the first two years after his death, I was desperate for answers and guidance. I saw a therapist to talk in a safe place. I attended a support group to listen to and share with people who knew the depth of despair and sense of upheaval that I was experiencing. I read books and watched videos about suicide and loss to discover the normality of my intense and unrelenting emotions. I wrote short essays to capture and quiet my nagging thoughts. I talked openly about suicide to counter the stigma that others so easily assign. And I pulled over to the shoulder many times on my way home to just yell. In short, those first two years were all about expressing, one way or another, my emotions, and seeking help from wherever I could.

In searching for answers and remedies in those two years I found neither. I didn't have clear answers to my nagging questions and I didn't have an easy remedy to make everything better. Instead what I found was that the process of searching for answers and adjusting to my new reality was more important than the objectives.

I changed my mindset. Rather than being haunted by questions I couldn't answer, I started charting a new path, a pro-active path.

My daily mantras became:

- No more casualties from his suicide
- Get your feelings out – they demand your respect and attention
- Do not be the sad widow

- Learn to keep company with your grief because it is part of you
- You have the right to live a full life – not a qualified one
- If you don't have what you love, then love what you have

This mindset does not ignore or minimize what has happened. It's what I needed to accept his death and to create a meaningful life without him.

My husband's death created a hole in my life that I cannot fill. And I don't want to. That hole is him, it's his new place in my life. His death is as intertwined with my life as his life was. By embracing the hole and letting it be, I have given myself permission to find joy elsewhere. I'm not talking about finding another partner. I'm talking about finding joy in all aspects of life.

Drawing joy from other sources didn't happen right away and it didn't happen quickly. I had to work at understanding what was in my backpack, day after day, month after month. As Hope Edelman writes in her book, *The After Grief*, "Growth after loss doesn't come from sitting around and waiting for growth to arrive. It's an active, effortful process of revisiting and reframing our memories, and creating new stories for ourselves moving forward. Meaning isn't something we stumble upon. It's something we make."

People far wiser than me have captured succinctly this journey we're on. Robert Frost wrote, "The only way out is through". Rumi wrote, "Life is a balance of holding on and letting go." It's up to each of us to decide what we hold on to and what we let go of, in order to find joy again.

By seeking support, learning about grief and suicide, expressing emotions, and adopting a new mindset, I have lightened my backpack. And while I have been able to let go of some of the things in my backpack, I will never let go of the backpack itself. I hold on to it because it's part of my life, it's part of my husband, and it's part of the life we shared.

I cannot promise that you will feel joy again. It is absolutely possible but it is up to you. It's up to you to decide what stays in your backpack.

Thank you.

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