

The Forgotten Survivors

When Ingrid’s daughter died by suicide she couldn’t imagine the trauma that would face her. Today the Guardian exclusively reveals the impact of suicide bereavement after the Health Select Committee recommended new measures of after-care for families left behind

Luke Hastings

Michelle was 28 years-old. Her mother Ingrid von Hunnius says she was “bright and intelligent” after graduating with a master’s degree in Biochemistry.

Ingrid recalls the night they stayed up until the early hours of the morning partying before Michelle left for a trip abroad to work in India.

She then points to a photograph of Michelle on the mantelpiece. Ingrid’s next words are heartbreaking: “Six months later, she was dead.”

Michelle died by suicide after overdosing on pills prescribed to treat her depression when she returned home from India.

It was then that Ingrid’s “hugely traumatic” experience began.

“I don’t know how to describe it, it’s not just one emotion. It’s shock. It’s sheer terror. It’s indescribable.

“The pain was intense, severe and all-consuming. It’s tsunamis of grief.

“It felt like somebody had hit me in the solar plexus. It stunned me really. You go beside yourself. You’ve never really experienced anything like it. I think you get put onto the baseline of survival,” she says.

Ingrid explains she felt isolated and lost in society, depressed by the stigma that faces those who are bereaved by suicide.

“I find that with the general public or with friends I can’t fully express myself because she’s still part of me. I don’t bring her up because people don’t talk about bereavement by suicide,” she says.

With no postvention support, Ingrid was then left feeling suicidal.

“I had this sense that I was walking around this dark hole and I could just slip into it. One day it occurred to me that if I took a lot of tablets I could get into that dark hole, because I thought Michelle was in there,” she says.

Now, the Health Select Committee has recommended new after-care measures for those like Ingrid – the forgotten survivors of suicide.

This follows the committee’s four-month inquiry into suicide prevention. The committee’s interim report, released in December, suggests more primary and secondary support for the families left behind after suicide.

The report says those bereaved by suicide are “not entitled to any support” or a family liaison officer, which would be standard practice in many other causes of death.

The full report will be released at the end of this month with complete details of the support the committee recommends.

Labour MP Ben Bradshaw was part of the inquiry and says those bereaved by suicide are “left to fend for themselves”.

“We (the Health Select Committee) feel very strongly that there’s not enough support for families. There’s not a consistent enough approach across the country in the way that families are helped and supported,” he says.

The committee’s MPs aren’t alone in feeling there’s not enough support. According to an exclusive Guardian survey a resounding 97% of people don’t think families bereaved by suicide are given enough help.

The committee’s report called suicide rates “unacceptable” and the Samaritans say a person takes their own life every 90 minutes in the UK.

After suicide, the Office for National Statistics found that between six and ten ‘survivors’ are left behind, meaning up to 61,000 people are bereaved by suicide every year.

Those loved ones are three times more likely to take their own lives, according to the Centre for Suicide Prevention.

Mara Grunau is the Executive Director at the centre, which is based in Canada. They have the largest



A painting of Michelle, given to Ingrid by her daughter’s schoolfriend. It sits on the wall in their family home. Photograph: Luke Hastings



Ingrid displays a selection of Michelle’s favourite toys next to a framed painting of her. Photograph: Luke Hastings



Left: Mara Grunau, Executive Director at the Centre for Suicide Prevention. Middle: Halani Foulsham as a child with her mother, who died by suicide in 2014. Right: Shirley Smith, a bereaved mother and founder of ‘If U Care Share’. Photographs: Centre for Suicide Prevention, Halani Foulsham, ‘If U Care Share’.

collection of suicide research in the world.

She explains there’s “no grief like suicide grief” and says that “postvention is critical prevention”.

Mara also says research from the centre confirms those bereaved by suicide feel “shunned,” leaving their grief “un-dealt with”.

‘It’s not just one emotion. It’s shock. It’s sheer terror’

The Guardian survey reveals over three-quarters of people believe there’s a stigma around suicide bereavement in the UK.

Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide (SOBS) say that the insensitive use of language adds to that stigma.

According to the Guardian survey, 60% of the general public would say a person ‘committed suicide’ – even though the term ‘died by suicide’ is recommended.

SOBS play a significant part in many survivor’s lives, including Ingrid. After being unable to find any suicide postvention support, Ingrid teamed up with the charity to start her own support group in Bournemouth.

Ingrid calls the group a “family”. However, she believes there’s even a stigma around attending a support group for suicide bereavement.

“A group is like someone touching your hand, it pulls you out of that dark hole, but the stigma around it stops you putting out that hand,” she explains.

Ingrid says that her own children even believe it’s “bizarre and sick” that she runs the group.

Stigma isn’t the only issue with support groups, as SOBS groups only run once a month, which can be a problem for many who need more help.

Halani Foulsham had to wait 30 days to attend a group after “having a bomb dropped on her life” when her mother died by suicide in 2014.

Following the Health Select Committee report, Halani says she’s concerned that even if there’s more support available in the future, it “won’t mean much” if people don’t know it exists. She says this is a big problem in her experiences with current services.

Ingrid and Halani are not alone in trying to make a difference to postvention, which currently fails bereaved families.

Shirley Smith lost her “normal, bright and witty” 19-year-old son Daniel to suicide in 2005.

She believes the new report is a “huge step” in bringing suicide postvention into the forefront of the political spectrum. However, she’s wary that the report could be “just noise”.

Following the death of her son, she founded the charity ‘If U Care Share’ alongside her children who were left “devastated”.

The Health Select Committee mentioned Shirley’s Durham-based foundation in their report, as they’ve pioneered a new system in England to help those who are bereaved by suicide.

Working closely with Durham Police and the local health trust, they provide a 48-hour service to the survivors left behind after a suicide in the area, helping them with everything from emotional support to how to deal with the coroner’s inquest.

Since it started in September 2014, the service has helped 94 people to get through the aftermath of their tragedy.

Shirley believes her charity’s system is “critical” for those who have lost a loved one through suicide and says it should be funded nationwide.



Main image: Ingrid von Hunnius holding a framed photograph of her daughter Michelle, who died by suicide eight years ago. Photograph: Luke Hastings

How the media added to my grief

Just months after the suicide of her husband, Lin picked up a national newspaper to find family photos lifted from her Facebook profile.

“I was devastated. There were photos of my children,” Lin says.

The pictures, which sit along the windowsill of her conservatory, were alongside an article about her husband Ray’s death. The article claimed pension cuts by the government in 2012 were a major cause of his suicide.

Lin says that “definitely” added to her grief. “That made it much worse,” she says.

Read Lin’s full story online at: www.theforgottensurvivors.wordpress.com.



Lin says her husband’s death left her and her family devastated. Photograph: Luke Hastings

Explore online



You can learn more about suicide bereavement online by viewing additional content from this Guardian investigation at: [Buzz. Bournemouth.ac.uk/2017/01/interactive-content](http://www.buzz.bournemouth.ac.uk/2017/01/interactive-content).

Watch – Video interviews from Matrych suicide sanctuary in London, where the director and a volunteer speak exclusively to the Guardian about suicide prevention.

Listen – An exclusive interview with suicide attempt survivor Jonny Benjamin, who tells his incredible story.

Interactive content – Find out more about suicide through an interactive timeline, galleries and an interactive infographic.

Blog – Find more content, including exclusive interviews, news, statistics and updates from how the Guardian carried out this investigation at: www.theforgottensurvivors.wordpress.com.

Survey – You can also view the full results from the Guardian’s exclusive survey online.

Need help?

If you’ve been bereaved by suicide or are feeling suicidal and you think you may need help, call:

**SAMARITANS**

116 123

**SURVIVORS OF
BEREAVEMENT
BY SUICIDE**

0300 111
5065



Left: Labour MP Kevan Jones speaking to an audience about his own depression in 2015. Photograph: Flickr Creative Commons
Right: Paul Scates, who survived a suicide attempt. Photograph: Paul Scates



Liberal Democrat MP Norman Lamb addressing a crowd at the NHS Confederation in 2014. Photograph: Flickr Creative Commons

Parliamentary Group for Suicide Prevention and says he’s concerned about the current lack of suicide postvention support.

However, he’s worried further funding will be unlikely due to economical restrictions.

Suicide attempt survivor Paul Scates thinks it’s “pathetic” that the government use austerity as an excuse for not providing suicide postvention support.

Paul attempted to take his own life at the age of 17 and is now a mental health expert, working alongside the NHS supporting people who suffer with mental health conditions, including those bereaved by suicide.

Paul believes we are “letting people down” when they are “left with nothing” and adds that it “doesn’t cost much” to team those affected by suicide bereavement up with experts like himself.

He also thinks the new report is “vague” and is concerned it will simply be “lip service”.

For now, the families left behind after suicide will have to wait and see if the government will accept the recommendations made by the Health Select Committee. Four years ago, the same committee released a similar report. However, critics including Halani Foulsham and Shirley Smith said it resulted in very little being done.

Perhaps now the tide is turning. As well as the Health Select Committee’s inquiry into suicide, Public Health England recently released their guide to providing local services to those bereaved by suicide and Theresa May said the government will tackle suicide last week.

We will find out soon if the government will take action and more after-care will be provided for the forgotten survivors of suicide.