

SUPPORT *after* SUICIDE



Michael did not arrive home from work. The children were agitated. They were hungry and wanted their dinner. Pam felt they should wait but sensed something was not right.

WHEN she rang his mobile there was no answer. Her husband was always on time and she began to worry. Later that evening Michael's boss found him. He had hanged himself at the factory.

Pam's grief and shock left her paralysed. But she forced herself to keep going. She had to support her three children - Max 19, Sam 17 and Jillian 12. Why didn't he tell her how he was feeling? Why hadn't she seen the signs? If only she had been more attentive. Or was it something she said or did that caused Michael to feel such deep despair?

When Pam first sought help at Support After Suicide, she said she had come because of the children. She was worried the boys might copy their father. But it wasn't just the children who needed help. Pam began to talk about her experience of her husband's death. The boys could see that this made a difference. When she told them the counsellor had offered some sessions for all of them, Sam was not so sure. "We might as well give it a go", said Max.

After two sessions they realised they were all feeling Michael's death in very different ways. They accepted the offer to each see a counsellor individually.

Bereavement following the suicide of a loved one often brings overwhelming pain, guilt and isolation. Those who suffer in this way have few places to go where their pain and distress can be understood. Recognising this as an unmet need, Support after Suicide was begun by Jesuit Social Services in 2004.

This has been an area of bereavement counselling which even many professionals have avoided. The stigma surrounding suicide and the overwhelming pain of the bereaved often results in others feeling ill equipped to provide comfort and support. Those who work with the

suicide bereaved need to understand their own grief and pain. Only then can they sit with and hold another in the raw desolation of losing someone to suicide.

There is one difference between this program and all the others at Jesuit Social Services. Suicide knows no boundaries. It affects all classes of people from all walks of life. Money, status and access to privileges in life are of no consequence when you lose someone to suicide. The clients of Support After Suicide share a sense of isolation. The stigma of suicide leaves the bereaved cut off. So the realisation that you are not alone can be transforming. Angela attended a group session after her mother suicided.

The hardest thing is that I did not tell my mother how much I loved her. I was terrified right up to the minute before I went to the first group; and when we started to say why we were there I began to realise that it did happen to other people and that we were all terrified and struggling with the same things.

Some come to talk just once or twice. Some come for many months and some come and go. Those who come choose their own way of accepting the support offered.

“ Suicide knows no boundaries. ”

