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**Life Without My Brother:  
A Family's Communication After Suicide**

All it takes for a life to be changed is one person: for me, that person is my brother. Pulling hair, stealing dinner, and leaving chores to the other were just some of the silly things my brother and I did with the intention of sparking some anger in our sibling. I even remember us putting vaseline under each other's door handles just to cause an inconvenience at bed time. From finishing our family dinner with a fight, always attending the other's sporting events, and sitting on our bedroom floors playing cards, my brother Jake grew up as my best friend, confidant, and protector. There's a lot I don't know about Jake, a lot I've forgotten, a lot I've allowed to slip through the cracks in my memory. The one thing I always knew, never doubted, was how deeply he loved me. About seven years ago I lost Jake when he took his own life.

Suicide is not an easy death to discuss, communicate, or grieve. The community of those grieving the loss of those who died by suicide is bigger than you may think, and there is so much grief and guilt in the minds of those individuals. Mental health awareness is slowly being more normalized in our society today, but a group in the community is often forgotten: those grieving the loss of their loved ones to mental illness. Grief takes over your mind and your life, and if you let it, it can control you in the most powerful ways. It is a mental battle to grieve especially when you feel like you could have done something to stop it. After losing my brother to suicide, I learned a lot about living with grief, maintaining communication and relationships with those still living, and how to survive when you feel like you are falling.

On September 24, 2016, my brother had his first panic attack. Jake had always been happy. He was the kind of guy to ensure others were always smiling and laughing. He spent his time learning impressions and cracking jokes. He was just an upbeat kid. Despite his diagnoses

of ADHD and of manageable anxiety and depression, Jake was fine. That September changed everything. His first panic attack appeared to ignite a flame. They became a daily occurrence, they became his life, and therefore by association, they became mine.

Jake's battle with mental health was relatively short. It was three months that I watched my brother slip away. Three months that my life, my parents' lives, revolved around making him get better, begging him to stay, and shutting down the small voice in my head that told me my life would never be the same again. During this time, my family tried everything. Any form of therapy you could think of, my brother tried. Days were spent taking care of Jake, coaxing him to go to school, then bringing him to therapy or a medication check up. Nights that weren't filled with panic attacks were spent researching new treatments. Almost every night, my dad would sit with my brother to talk him out of panic while my mom held me in her bed telling me everything would be okay, everything would be fine. The air in my house was buzzing with hope and help. We wanted Jake to get better and sacrificed everything to do so.

On December 14, 2016, a day when the sky was blue and the air was filled with the crisp and cold that December brings, I left for school, like normal. As I was opening the door, yelling to my family that I loved them, I turned and looked at my mom at the top of the stairs. She wished me a good day and told me my brother was going to make it to school that day, something that at that time was a rare occurrence. I felt immense pride for my brother and his accomplishment, yet still, I didn't fully understand why school was so hard for him. I didn't understand, I couldn't understand. We had less than a week before winter break. At my middle school, I was in the counselor's office talking with my friends about a volunteer group we were excited to start when my principal came into the room asking everyone to leave. I began to gather my belongings before the principal stopped me from leaving. I had a phone call. I was the

reason everyone needed to leave. My mom was on the other line frantically explaining that Jake had attempted suicide at the local high school that morning and my best friend's mom could come pick me up. Relief washed over me. No one was dead. An attempt meant alive. Without properly understanding the severity of the situation, I declined the ride home and remained at school the rest of the day, avoiding my lunch, and avoiding the gnawing feeling that the situation was worse than I believed.

Because of the lockdown ordered by the school, there were many questions asked by families, students, and members of the community. A mass email was sent out in the afternoon, and by the end of the day, the entire county had heard the news. I was getting countless texts and social media messages, so I shut down my phone, and with that, my mind. Jake was taken to the hospital that day, where he would spend three days on life support. He then passed peacefully and accomplished one final task: donating his organs, allowing him to save the lives of many others after the loss of his own.

Jake's death was not easy for me. The one person I thought I was guaranteed to have with me for the entirety of my life was gone. I lost my brother, my future children's only uncle, my parents' only son, and my best friend. My head began to spiral. What if I hadn't sent him away that one day he tried to walk me home from school? What if I had just pushed a little bit more to convince him I needed him? What if? Everything felt like my fault. I was a thirteen-year-old girl whose life had permanently changed, and I was just too young, naive, and ignorant to fully learn why.

A sibling relationship is different from any other relationship in your life. Strangely enough, a quote that I feel perfectly sums up what it meant for me to lose a sibling, comes from a funeral home:

When your brother or sister dies, you grieve not only the death of your sibling but the death of your friend, your rival, your confidant and your role and place in the family picture as well. Gone, too, is the opportunity to change the relationship in any way. If there were fences to mend, words to be shared, or memories yet to be created, the finality of death eliminates your ability to make those changes, and that additional pain may intensify your grief. (Edward Lynch)

You grow up in the same house, with the same parents and family, and then one day, you never share a roof again. It is so difficult to lose the person who has been there your entire life, who you are tied to by blood, birth, and family, and who you always knew you'd be closer with as you grew up. I said goodbye to my brother and goodbye to the relationship we would have had if I just had the time to grow up. Jake was ready to be my best friend, the brother I needed. But to me, he was still an annoying older brother. There are so many things I would have done to just have a few more years. There are so many regrets I had and what ifs I thought of, but I had to move forward and take my life as it was now: a life without my brother.

I spent the majority of my time hiding my sadness from those around me. I missed my brother dearly, but I was also so angry at him. Many people call suicide a "selfish death," implying suicide is a decision people make with intentions of leaving all those who cared for them in utter despair. They also use this term because, as stated by Shauna Springer in an article titled "What People Really Mean When They Say Suicide is Selfish," "The sudden, obliterating grief that some survivors of loss feel can put them at risk themselves for suicide. Survivors of suicide commonly tell me that they feel abandoned or betrayed in the aftermath of a suicide." Suicide feels personal. You give your love to another and fight to show them you care, yet still

they choose the afterlife; they choose to leave. It hurts, and it left me wondering why I wasn't enough. Why could I not be enough for my brother to stay? Didn't he see I needed him?

I needed a place to let out my feelings and learn about Jake's mind. So I started therapy. I have been fortunate enough to grow up with the luxury of opportunity. I was lucky enough to have parents who were supportive of therapy and had even been attending their own personal therapy sessions for years. We were also lucky to be able to afford the care we needed when we needed it. I was given the tools I needed to get better. Days following Jake's death, my parents had calls out to multiple therapists. They were in the depths of their own grief, but their priority was me and ensuring I was able to have a space to grieve my brother that didn't make me feel like I was making my parents sad. I had my first therapy session within the first month of losing my brother.

Over time, therapy helped me realize that suicide was not selfish in the way people described. Jake was in pain. His pain at the time of his death was so intense and so intricate, the only thing that felt like it could relieve it was death. He was hurting, and he was not in a place where he could take care of himself. But he also was smart enough to see the changes his battle brought to our family. I practically lived at my best friend's house during those three months. I slept over unexpectedly at least twice a week. My parents took off work and spent everything they could on doctor's appointments. For us, it was worth it. We loved Jake with everything we had, and we would do whatever was needed to ensure Jake was safe, happy, and healthy. But in Jake's eyes, he was a burden. He was an inconvenience. Jake believed our lives would be easier if he was not in them. He didn't take his own life to leave us in pain; but he thought it would relieve us in the same way it would him. His brain made him believe our lives would be better without him. While this was as far from reality as possible, it was the way he saw it. Suicide is

not a selfish death. It is a death that occurs when the idea that death is the only way to stop pain takes over one's brain.

Mental health conditions are a form of illness. To refuse to acknowledge them as such is to disregard a large portion of the population, all of whom are struggling with their mental health battle. They require treatment, but they cannot be cured. Jake was searching for peace for himself, his mind, and us, whom he thought would be better off without him. His act was not a choice; it was his only option. He needed this sense of peace and could not live the way he had been living. His mind was clouded, and there was no choice to be made: he had to go. As a kid, I couldn't understand. As a sister, I didn't want to. It made no sense that the brother I had loved so dearly had chosen to leave me behind. I had therapy as my outlet, where I was able to learn about my grief, miss my brother, and also process his death.

Suicide is so negatively viewed and discussed in society, which negatively impacts those who lost people to suicide. I can honestly say if it wasn't for the resources I had received, I would not have processed my grief in the way I did. I learned it is important to prioritize therapy and treatment when dealing with trauma and grief from my experience. The Institute of Medicine Committee says in an article titled "Bereavement Experiences after the Death of a Child," "Grief therapies have also been found effective in situations of complicated grief, of which traumatic grief is one example. A failure to address the intertwining of these symptoms of trauma and loss early in their bereavement may compromise the individual's capacity to experience optimal recovery". Therapy gave us an outlet to cry about our loss and the person we loved so dearly, but also gave us a place to remember why we loved him. We were hurting, angry, and sad because our hearts were full of love. Discussion and therapy allowed us to understand and vocalize our

feelings. Grief was strong and present in our mind, but it was not running our lives. Therapy was truly what saved my family.

The death of Jake affected both my life and the lives of my parents. They did everything they could to ensure we stayed together as a family. The day my brother died, they sat down together and had a talk. They acknowledged that from this point forward, their marriage was compromised. According to a 2006 study, 16% of all marriages end in divorce following the death of a child (Edwards). Karen de la Cruz, a nursing professor at BYU specializing in death and grief, states, “Tragedies don’t automatically draw families closer. Whatever the family dynamics are before a death or other stressful event, they’re accentuated when a stressor hits. Dysfunctional families may become more dysfunctional without intervention. Healthier families will likely fare quite well and can even thrive” (Bergin). My family was fortunate enough to have grown up with a rather strong relationship. According to de la Cruz’s research, my family was predicted to strengthen. It helped our case as well that my parents wanted to prioritize me and live a life that wasn’t clouded with grief. So the day after my brother died, my dad forced himself out of bed and took a long walk. We went to breakfast at the local IHOP and we lived our lives the same way we had a week before, but this time, clouded with grief. Together we talked, we opened up, and we shared our grief. We used Jake’s passing to get closer, rather than to lock ourselves away with loneliness.

While working my emotions out in therapy came easier to me, I struggled a lot with communicating my feelings to my parents. I didn't want them to feel upset in any way because of the way I felt. I kept a lot of my emotions from them. This worried my mom. She expressed to me that she was scared I was boxing my emotions away and as I got older, grief would hit me and I would feel the loss of my brother so much more intensely. What I hadn’t told my mom was

that I did feel it. I expressed my emotions by myself. I turned to writing and reading to divert my mind and cried over fictional characters rather than my real life pain. I understand now that this wasn't healthy. But I wanted to make everyone happy. I wanted to be the reason people smiled. I felt I couldn't do that if I was sad. While these are difficult expectations to accomplish, it is important to note I was only 13. While now, 13 feels extremely young, at the time I felt much older. My age is a large factor in how everything played out with my grief and familial relationships. In an article written by Susan Branje, a professor at Utrecht University, she states, "During adolescence, parent-child relationships are thought to become more equal, interdependent, and reciprocal, changes that co-occur with a temporary decrease in the quality of the relationship and an increase in conflict." I viewed myself as more of an equal at this time in my life, whereas my parents still saw me as a little girl. I was still sheltered from a lot of the hardships that happened at this time in my life.

I get asked often if I feel losing my brother has changed me. It's a valid question but there is so much complexity behind it. My answer is the same each time: "I don't know." I don't know if I am different. I was young enough to say with certainty that regardless of my brother's passing I would not be the same person I was then. I can understand certain aspects of my life are because of the loss of my brother. I have developed because of the loss, but no one is the same person they were at age 13. I don't know who I would be if Jake was here right now. I don't know how I would have grown. I don't know how my relationships with my parents would have changed, if I would have been more dependent or less. I don't know the answers, but I do know who I am today. The love from my parents combined with the opportunity to heal is the reason I am in the place I am today. I miss my brother every day, and I would do anything to have him back; however, I am at peace with the fact that he is no longer struggling, and I am happy with



the life I have built for myself. I am eternally grateful for all I have learned about myself, the world, and grief, as well as everyone I have loved, hated, and missed, but the majority of my gratitude will always be directed my parents, who taught me to love and held me through my grief while they were crushed by their own.

So to my parents, thank you for gifting me the opportunity to heal. Thank you for working on yourselves and your personal journeys of grief, for both yourselves and for me. You showed me how to grow, how to change, and how to accept my tragedy, acknowledge it, and to live with the pain, rather than ignore it.

To you, the reader, I hope you walk away with a new understanding of suicide, grief, and healing. I hope you never truly have to understand the pain of grief, but when you inevitably do, I hope you take care of yourself and allow time to heal your wounds. I hope you have grown a sense of sympathy for those who left the world by suicide and maybe even a bit of understanding. I hope my story promotes compassion and empathy and changes the way you view others' pain. I hope you choose to be kind today.

And to Jake, the boy who could have made the world spit with laughter and light with smiles. I hope peace has found you. I hope love has engraved itself in your heart. I hope you still feel everything intensely. I hope you still spend your days playing hockey, video games, and smiling like the world was a playground. I hope you spend your days as the person you were before. I hope you look down at me, as I look up at you, and you smile with pride at the woman your little sister has become. I hope you take pride in yourself. I am who I am because of you, Jake. While your grief walks with me every day, I remember you. I remember your life so much more intensely than I revel in. I am grateful to have known you, to be loved by you, and to miss you.

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