

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW
DANICA
SA HEALTH
2020



Alright, welcome Danica. Is that how you pronounce it? Danica Gates.

Danica.

Where are you from, Danica? Where do you live?

I come from Tumby Bay on the Eyre Peninsula.

What do you do in Tumby Bay?

At the moment, I am a mother of three. I'm also a teacher but not working at the moment.

So, you're here today to talk through and share your experience with your brother, Matthew. What do you remember? What was he like as a person?

Matthew was a very giving person. He would always help other people if they asked him. I just remember him always do other things for other people. Fixing motorbikes for other people or...yeah. Matthew was very intelligent and very musical. I think music was probably his go-to therapy.

Was he a part of any bands in high school or school?

Yeah, Matthew played music all through high school and was in different bands.

Yeah, what did he play?

Guitar and he also sung.

He was a good singer, you were saying your family is quite blessed with the vocal cords.

He was a good singer. He was also a very dedicated member of the SES. He had lots and lots of certificates in the SES. I guess that's just another example of him trying to help people and be a giving person in the community.

Yeah, amazing. So, are you comfortable if we talk about just the lead up to the event and what the lead up to the event was and how you were feeling?

Yeah. So, with Matthew there were several factors that contributed to his suicide. One was that he was severely bullied all through school which started in primary school. And basically, it was just kids that started bullying him and then it just became a habit, and I think people bullied him for no real reason, it was just that everybody else did. The way that the education system is at the moment, not a lot can be done about bullying really. Bullying can go on and on. There's no real reprieve for somebody who is being bullied, especially now with social media too.

You go to school, you put up with bullying. You go home...



...you put up with it on social media or on mobile phones. There's no way to get away from it. And I think, especially if it's written, like if it's in a text message or something, every single time that you read that text message it affects you. It's not like somebody's saying something to you. If somebody says something to you once, it doesn't have the same effect as you reading it over and over and over.

Another thing that had happened with Matthew is that he was doing a building apprenticeship and he – what should happen with a building apprenticeship is if you get laid off, the apprenticeship board is supposed to put you back into an apprenticeship. So, I think he was actually in his fourth year...

He was nearly at the end and then all of a sudden he didn't have an apprenticeship and he couldn't get one. So losing – you know when you've put so much effort into finishing something and you get so close to the end and then all of a sudden you don't have a job anymore. That has a massive impact and especially on a bloke, I think.

Breakdown of relationship is another thing that affected Matthew. A long term relationship had ended and obviously Matthew didn't have the right coping mechanisms, the right coping tools to handle that.

Is that something that Matthew did? Did he ever talk to you or talk to people about what he was going through and communicate what he was feeling?

I think that in society in general, emotion is something that is not really encouraged. A lot of people find it really hard to watch people be emotional and also find it difficult sometimes to even experience their own emotions. And especially it's even harder for men to express that emotion because there's a real stigma with if you show emotion. So no, Matthew, he was very closed. He couldn't easily show emotion but he was a very emotional person.

Several things had happened six to twelve months before Matthew suicided and I think that at the time that he actually suicided it was a lot of those things still affecting him. And a lot of his friends and family didn't want to interfere and didn't want to press him and see how he was because...*Of how he was himself?*

It was largely because the conversation is confronting. If you say to someone, "How are you going?" and they say, "I'm not going so well" it's leading into them possibly talking about the fact that they're feeling suicidal and that's scary. Well, it can be potentially very scary. How do you deal with that?

So, I think there weren't really any signs with Matthew. It was a massive shock, there weren't any really clear signs. The only couple of signs really that I can think of was he did isolate himself more. He was maybe a little bit more agitated than usual. Approximately a week before, he didn't go to an event which he would usually go to. He said he didn't feel like it but apart from that, there weren't really any real signs. But the risk factors were really clear in hindsight if you look at all the things that were happening in his life. He had risk factors like bullying, losing his job, loss of relationship. They're pretty solid losses.

And in hindsight, I think that if we had of really realised that those were risk factors for suicide then we would have been a bit more pushy on asking him how he was going, rather than being respectful of him and just leaving him be.

So, let's talk about what happened afterwards and then how the family and the community dealt with



Matthew's passing.

Yeah. Losing Matthew to suicide was a massive shock for every friend, every family member and everyone was affected in a very different way. From the moment that you realise that your loved one has taken their own life everything changes. I think every one of us were forever drastically changed from that very moment. The grief that comes from somebody taking their life is different, in my opinion, to somebody dying from natural causes. I've had friends die at a young age from natural causes and with suicide it's really hard to get closure because you just don't understand how it could happen or why it has happened. So, the grief is deeper and it lasts for longer, I think.

The reaction to Matthew dying by suicide in our small community was quite interesting to experience. They were many – basically, obviously everybody cared and they tried to show their support. But with something like suicide, I think that people don't really know how to support you because it's such a taboo subject that it's hard to talk about. I had close friends that basically stopped talking to me because they didn't really want to talk about the content. Which I understand because prior to my own lived experience, I probably would have felt the same. I wouldn't have wanted to talk about it because it is an uncomfortable topic. Some community members, they wanted to bring the conversation up but in doing so they asked really inappropriate questions that were really traumatising to family and friends of Matthew.

One thing that I found after Matthew passed away was a lot of people don't really understand the depth of the grief and the impact that it's having on family and friends. It's such a deep grief and it's such a complicated grief because there's so much confusion. I mean, there's shock but there's also confusion. And, for me personally, I couldn't really cope with it for a period of time and so people couldn't cope with me and my emotion and me not coping. And some people said to me, "Look, you've got to move on with your life, your brother died a year ago. You've got to get over it," and these sorts of comments, although there was good intention behind it, they don't help. They actually make it worse. They make you feel isolated.

Because you felt like you were doing something wrong or grieving wrong?

Just the expectation that there's a certain way you should grieve and that there's a time period for grief. Within my family and Matthew's friends, everybody grieved completely different. Some people were getting on with things almost immediately because that's how they coped. Whereas other people, like myself, I was really in a rut of grief for a period of time and that had a huge effect on my family and it had a huge effect on my friends, it had a huge effect on my marriage. But everybody grieves differently and everybody should be allowed to grieve differently. So, I think that it's really important in a situation where somebody has passed away or somebody has passed away by suicide that you just give people space. Support them, be there for them to listen but don't tell them how to grieve.

Losing someone to suicide has a huge emotional impact on you and for me as a mum, it definitely affected me. I found it really difficult to get out of bed some days and I've got three young children so obviously I had to. And they dragged me out and they definitely helped me to move on and get on with things but in another sense, my grief definitely – I wasn't being the absolute best mum that I could be. But I was doing the best job that I could do at the time and under the circumstances.

Yeah and how are things now?



I struggled for quite a period of time with Matthew's suicide and I became actually quite obsessive with it and trying to find out how it had happened and why it had happened. And then I was speaking to a friend she was talking to me about maybe you should start learning about suicide prevention to get a positive out of a negative. And I started doing some research, trying to learn about why suicides occur, why people have suicidal ideology (sic). And so, my sister and I ended up starting a suicide prevention network in our community and started learning about ways that we could educate the community. Because when Matthew passed away, I found that there was a real lack of knowledge about how to deal with people who had had an experience with suicide and it's just largely – you know stigma and myth is very much alive in our communities.

I think when you start setting up a suicide prevention network there is some fear because it is such a hard topic. But very much mostly we've had a positive response. And it's slow but we are getting people contacting us if they may have a friend who is suicidal or they've lost someone to suicide. And they simply contact us and it's our job really to direct them to other services.

Having a suicide prevention network is definitely starting conversations. And we've had people coming to us to ask for information. When Matthew passed away we weren't aware of organisations such as StandBy After Suicide. We sort of just had to deal with it ourselves and amongst ourselves talked about the fact that it would be good to have access to other people who have had a similar experience. And it was approximately a year after that I learned about StandBy After Suicide and I actually contacted them and it was really good to be able to talk to somebody who deals with people with lived suicide experiences. And you can contact them any time after, it can be years after, and it is really helpful to talk to them.

What can we start doing differently as a society that encourages people to ask different questions or better questions to ask if someone is okay?

So, for me, I really learned with Matthew that he was clearly having some suicidal risk factors; such as loss of relationship, loss of job and being bullied as well. If I had of really realised that those were risk factors for suicide, I would have made more of an effort to talk to him about them. I think a good method to prevent suicide is to keep an eye out for risk factors within your family, within your friends and if the risk factors are there, then talk to them. If the relationship has broken up, check in on them. But then check in on them a month later and then check in on them two months later. And anytime that you feel that they need to be checked in on, check in on them because things can affect people for a long time and it may be six months later that they're still really affected. And you may think that they're fine, but actually no, they're not coping at all.

Losing a loved one is one of life's hardest experiences and losing a loved one to suicide is possibly worse. When somebody has passed away, you've permanently lost a part of you forever and that's not something that you can get over. It's something that is going to stay with you forever. It's not something that you can move on from. The grief that comes with losing anyone that you love, you're going to carry it forever. Finding a way to cope is the only way that you can move on from losing a loved one. My advice to community members if somebody has passed away or somebody has suicided would be to give people time to grieve. To allow them to show emotion if they're upset or if they're angry, just let them feel how they want to feel. It might be



difficult to watch. I know that it can be very difficult even to cope with your own emotions but to be able to move forward, you have to move through the emotion. You can't bypass it. You can't avoid it.

And how do you get them positively out of that groove? And still, not neglecting the grief, but how do we then use that and start channeling the grief and start getting them moving forward in their life?

It was partially my kids but it was also actually allowing myself to really be in the grief. To let myself feel the emotion, as hard as it was. As long as you tell yourself that you're going to get through it. I really allowed myself to feel the emotion and then that's when I started realising that I had to do something with the emotion and that's when I got involved in suicide prevention. But for everybody it's different. If you're really worried about a family member or a friend who is stuck in their grief, you could try having a conversation with them. Just a nice, gentle conversation over a cup of tea to see how they're going. It's possible that they may need to talk to a counsellor or maybe put them into contact with someone from StandBy After Suicide or Beyond Blue or you can even ring Life Line if you need to talk about some of these sorts of things.

I think that communication and conversation is really important and although the conversation can be difficult, once you've had the conversation it can be very healing.

Do you find it gets easier? Once you've had the conversation, a few conversations, do you find it gets easier to then keep talking?

I think the more that you talk about it, the less confronting the topic is. I've been talking about suicide now for three years and there's still times that I find even saying the word suicide, it seems wrong.

To say?

And it's simply because of the stigma and myth as well. We need to encourage people to talk about it because the more we talk about it, the less unusual it feels. So, it's a bit like talking about sex or homosexuality. The more that we talk about it, the less taboo it becomes.

My main message would be that suicide prevention begins at the individual level. If everybody becomes a little bit more educated about risk factors or becomes a little bit more educated about signs of suicide, then the whole community has better tools to be able to keep an eye on one another and be able to help each other. Suicide prevention is everybody's responsibility.

Having the conversation can be very confronting and very hard. And there's a real myth that if you ask somebody if they are thinking of suicide that it's going to push them to suicide. That is a myth. Have a hard conversation. If you don't know how to have the conversation, contact one of the services like Life Line. One training that you can do, which is an hour training and I think everybody should do it, is QPR training. It's an online training. It gives you a little bit of confidence on how to ask someone if they're feeling suicidal. Do it. I think everybody should do it. It's an hour of your time and it could save your friend's life in the future or a family member's life in the future because suicidal ideology can happen to anyone at any time and it doesn't discriminate.



I just want to thank you for being bold and brave and for coming in here and talking to us today, Danica. I think you're a wonderful woman. Why are you laughing? I do. It's one thing to move through grief and to work with things and it's another thing to feel empowered or to talk about a story and talk about your own personal experience.

In 2016, 2,886 people died by suicide. One of them was my brother and it affected his whole family and his whole community. But around Australia, on the very same day, seven other families and seven other communities were affected in the same way. The fallout from suicide is massive.

