

Bereavement by Drugs: *A Personal Reflection*

~By *Philippa Skinner*

Our son Jim died five years ago of a heroin overdose, at the age of 21. It was a total body blow for us. Although he had messed around with cannabis when he was 16 or 17, we believed he had moved on, and we didn't know he was involved with drugs of any kind at the time of his death, let alone a drug like heroin.

There is a whole lot I'd like to tell you about Jim; what he was like, what he enjoyed, and there's so much I could write about the pain of losing him and the years of sorrow that followed. Here, though, I want to discipline myself to think about one particular result of losing him in the way we did; the struggle with feelings of shame, stigma, and subsequent isolation.

One year ago in this magazine, (Winter 2011/Spring 2012 edition), William Feigelman wrote about his research into the specific needs of families bereaved by drugs. He highlighted both the social stigma faced by such families and also the paucity of resources available to them to help them through their grief. As I read his article, I found it rang true to my own experience.

When Jim died, though I was surrounded by much kindness, I was unable to find specific support to help me in my loss. Sadly, at that difficult time, I felt unable to contact groups such as Compassionate Friends UK or Cruse Bereavement, because I had a dread that I would not be met with sympathy and that Jim would be judged. My gut fear was that no one would care about him because he had died of a drug overdose. I was afraid he and his family would be labelled and stereotyped. In my worst imaginings, I could hear voices saying things like, "The world's better off without people like him," or "Well, it was his own choice to take drugs." In other words, I feared judgement of myself and our family and of Jim.

At that time, it was very hard to walk into social gatherings of any kind, as my bereaved mind and soul struggled with the anxiety that behind the kind and concerned faces were hidden harsh and unloving words and thoughts. I loved Jim so much and knew what a lovely young man he was and how much potential he had, and I couldn't bear the thought that on top of the wrenching pain of losing him, other people might be thinking badly about him.

Such tangled and painful emotions caused me to feel very alone in those early months. Who could I speak to about such awful feelings; who could possibly understand? I wanted everyone to know how utterly wrong it was that Jim had died, how special and loved he was, and that he mattered just as much as any other young person who had died of any other cause, natural or accidental.

Battling with such pain and not knowing where to turn, I found myself at the end of two years still deep in grief. It's true that I was getting on with other parts of my life, caring for my

family and pursuing a counselling course, but everything I was doing was coming from this deep pot of grief and desperation, and it was exhausting me. They were truly wearying months.

Eventually, in November, two years after Jim died, I was guided to a charity in the UK called DrugFam, set up not long before by another mum who had also lost her son to heroin. DrugFam was different from many other support groups in that they aimed not only to help families facing the nightmare of looking after loved ones with addiction issues in life, but also in death. Now, at last, I was able to meet and talk with other people who were experiencing many of the same emotions I was facing. We were able to support one another and talk about our children or siblings in a safe place where we knew no one would judge either them or us. There were lots of tears, of course, but now I was not alone. What a relief it was to know that all these terrible, confused feelings were not unique to me.

It became increasingly clear to me that if the stigma of drug death was going to begin to be lifted, people who had endured it needed to speak out and tell others about their loved ones, as a way of challenging commonly held preconceptions about drug users, and to help a wider group to understand.

For this reason, I wrote a book telling Jim's story and my reflection on living with grief and the stigma of loss by drugs. In the UK at least, there was a gap in the market for such a book. I had longed in the earlier days to read about how others in our situation had survived, but had found nothing. So this book became my contribution—a small beginning, but one that has now reached out to many others bereaved in this way, as well as those who have suffered other kinds of loss. It is also, of course, my memorial to Jim; my way of sharing him with others and letting it be known how very proud I am of him.

When I get the opportunity, I speak at meetings about Jim, the wider issue of drugs, and the shame and stigma felt by the families of users, both in life and in death. I've been privileged to address the North Staffordshire Compassionate Friends and experienced genuine warmth and acceptance there, and not the lack of understanding I had originally feared. Above all, I share a mother's love and pride in a wonderful son. I find that many who hear me speak feel released to come and share their own hurts and pains that they have often held secretly for many years. This is a huge privilege for me and a powerful way of continuing Jim's contribution to the world he was part of for too short a time.

With others in DrugFam I am writing a booklet aimed specifically at helping those who have suffered a drug- or alcohol-related loss, to give them some pointers in their pain, so that they might know more of what to expect and where to turn for help as the days and weeks turn to months and years. I also volunteer for the Bereaved Parent Support team at Care for the Family, another UK charity. There, I offer support and friendship to the parents who make contact who have lost loved ones through drugs. These are just small things one by one, but they are added to many other small acts being done in other places by other people I'll probably never meet. Together, we can begin to make a difference and share our message that those who die from drugs are just

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ordinary folk with their own stories, loved by many, and those who are left behind need the same understanding and compassion as any other bereaved person. ❖

Philippa Skinner works as a counsellor, and she and her husband, Graeme, have three other adult children whom they are just as proud of! Philippa's book, See You Soon: A Mother's Story of Drugs, Grief and Hope, is recommended by Compassionate Friends UK and is available in the USA through Amazon, other outlets, and on Kindle. For more information, go to www.seeyousoon.me.uk, www.drugfam.org.uk, and www.careforthefamily.org.uk.

