

IDENTITY CRISIS WITH LOSS OF A CHILD

SSPCC Mom's Group - 3/5/2020

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Thank you for coming. I'm here because my son Zack died by drowning on June 10th 2006, just 8 days after his 22nd birthday. It's been almost 14 years since that day, but it still feels just like yesterday. I'm not the same person I was on June 9th 2006.

This evening we're going to explore the identity crisis that we experience after the death of our child.

To prepare, I spent quite a bit of time researching this topic. Articles came my way that were helpful. I "interviewed" several of you, plus what I found helpful was talking with my son, Steve, about his identity crisis and how his identity has evolved since his brother died. I'll be sharing Steve's story with you in just a few minutes.

This study has been very interesting. It caused me to think about things I hadn't thought of before. It brought clarity for me. It also brought me to tears. I cried more than I have in a long time. But the light bulb went on for me, and I hope it will for you, too.

INTRODUCTION

For most people, their self-identity evolves slowly throughout their life. Usually change is planned which allows us to adjust to the loss that comes with the changes. But when we have a sudden tragic loss, the impact is swift, throwing us into a tailspin which makes us wonder if we're going to survive. How many of you have said, "I don't know who I am any more." Or "I don't think I'll ever be the same."

Our purpose in exploring this topic is not to discover what we need to do to return to who we were before our child died, because that person is gone. It's my hope that in sharing about how we view our identity at different points along the way on our journey of grief, that we'll each pick up some gems of understanding from someone else's story.

What is our identity? These are things that play a part in who we are:

- The way we think of ourselves
 - Successful – or a failure & what people have said to us
- Our outlook
 - Positive thinker, happy, self-motivated,
 - How we define ourselves through our profession or hobbies
- Where we live
 - Hollywood vs Yuba City
 - The big house with beautiful property or a modest house in an aging neighborhood
- What we've accomplished
 - Awards we received, things we've created or built, a successful marriage of 50 years
- The club, church or organizations that we belong to
- Our faith
- Our family
 - Number of children
 - Single parent, raising children as a couple, or a step parent
 - Ages of children, their interests, their activities

FINDINGS

Zack's death became the demarcation line in my life... I remember when things happen before Zack died or after. How many of us spend time thinking about who we were and what we were doing the day BEFORE our child's death?

When our child died, from one day to the next, we found that we were no longer that person we were yesterday. The more invested our identity is in the person or thing that we lose, the deeper the grief and the more complicated the change in our identity.

Often, we can't see the change as it progresses, but if we look back at time markers we'll see how we've changed.

What my son, Steve, shared with me that stood out was this...

- We deal with change on a conscious and unconscious level.
- We only have so much physical and emotional energy after a loss to deal with those changes.
- Our subconscious will prioritize what is important to us.

To illustrate these thoughts, I'm going to share Steve's story.

STEVE'S STORY

Who was Steve?

- He was Zack's older brother (4 years older).
 - Zack lived in his home for five weeks.
 - Zack worked at selling men's shoes at Nordstrom's
- He was a husband (5 years). His wife's name is DeeDee. At that time they had no children.
- He was a High School teacher at Orange Lutheran High School in SoCal.
- He was also the High School Varsity Boys Soccer coach.

The Call

It was June 10th 2006. Steve was sitting at the high school graduation when he received an urgent call from his best friend, Sam. Sam called to tell Steve that he had been up at the river with Zack and he got pulled under by the current, and they hadn't found his body yet. Steve was the first one in our family to receive this horrible news, so he had to call his brother Tim and then his parents. What a hard thing to do!

How did Steve's life change after Zack died?

- He grieved his loss.
 - Zack was living with Steve & DeeDee, and Steve would go into Zack's room and sit for hours. He developed a "My Space" tribute for Zack. But he had to learn how to compartmentalize his grief so that he could function.
 - His family –

When Steve's father-in-law was Steve's age, his brother died. I'm not sure if he counseled DeeDee on how to be an understanding and supportive wife of a grieving husband, but she was everything he needed.

Shortly after Zack died they got pregnant and it helped his outlook. Instead of focusing on the past (his loss), he was able to look forward to the future as he anticipated being a father. My other son, Tim, and his wife Keri also got pregnant a couple months later, so they shared this anticipation.

- Coaching soccer –

At the end of the summer, Steve wasn't sure he could handle coaching the high school soccer team, but he decided to do it as a tribute to his brother. He did such a good job that he led the team to the League Championship & was voted as Coach of the year by the coaches in Orange County.

Coaching was a positive emotional support for Steve, especially since he accomplished a major victory by honoring Zack through his coaching.

- Teaching –

He continue teaching but his heart was no longer in it. It got the least amount of Steve's emotional energy and it fell to the bottom of his "important list." Perhaps his subconscious equated teaching with that phone call he got during graduation. Every school year ends with graduation. Subconsciously it's the situation that would bring Steve down, ambush him, and bring with it a wave of grief of epic proportion to take him out year after year.

Teaching was a negative emotional experience for Steve.

Late during the third school year after Zack died, Steve was called in to speak with the Principal. He was told that he was not doing the job they knew he was capable of, and they just couldn't take a chance on him for a fourth year. Steve lost his teaching position, and with it the coaching position.

This was another loss for Steve. But at the third-year mark after Zack's death, he now had the emotional energy to face the challenge of this loss.

Steve said this...Effort needs to be put into how we decide to move forward.

- Steve and his family moved in with DeeDee's parents
- He had to support his family so he got a job and guess what he did? He sold men's shoes at Nordstrom's.
- He applied to the Sheriff's Academy
- He focused on achieving his new career as a Sheriff's Deputy.
- He began exercising.
 - While he ran, he pushed a stroller with his two little daughters in it.
 - He did pushups on the living room floor with his daughters sitting on his back.

What's the point of telling you Steve's story?

- First of all, with only so much emotional energy to deal with our grief, our subconscious will make some decisions for us, deciding for us which things are important and which are not.
- It may be that our subconscious is trying to shield us from those things that will ambush us in our grief, such as graduation day did for Steve.
- When we are able, we will need to put in the work to deal with the changes that come with the loss.
- To keep our child's memory alive, we will find that we're motivated to do some things we've never done before, such as career change, moving, joining a different club or church.

As a Sheriff's Deputy, Steve has made numerous first notifications to inform families of a death in their family. Remember, he was the one who called us first with the news of Zack's death. He was able to do it with compassion. He has been a peer counselor to others in his department. Law enforcement suffers from a lot of PTSD and grief. He is good at it because he has empathy for them. He was honored with the "Hero With Heart" Award after being nominated by several co-workers who witnessed his compassion when he had to do the hard things as a Sheriff's Deputy.

DISCUSSION

How many of you remember what was going on the day before your child died? Can you remember who you were before your traumatic loss?

- You may have been happy, motivated, concerned about something but hopeful it would turn out ok.
 - Then your child died. The next week you found yourself depressed, bewildered, drowning in tears, unable to focus, and immobilized by grief.
 - We looked at the world through different eyes, and we didn't quite know where we fit in.
- **I wonder if the new moms would be willing to share about what they may have been struggling with during the early days after their child died.**
- Would you say that after three to six months, you saw a change in who you were as opposed to that week after your child died?
- **Those of you who are past that first year mark, and under two years, can you look back to the first anniversary and share how you've resolved some of those things you were struggling with during the early days after your child died?**
- **And how about those who have passed the two or three year mark?**
- Has your identity changed dramatically? How?
 - New friends
 - New passion emerging
 - Change in job or career?
 - Moved to new home?

- **Now, how about those who are five or more years down the road.** Looking back, how would you say you are different. How has your perspective changed? How about your outlook? What new things are you involved with? Are there any things you have circled back to that you let go of for a while?

CONCLUSION

- Our identity evolves over time.
- We'll never be the same person we were before our child died. Part of regaining a sense of self after a loss is accepting that your identity is going to be different than it was before.
- We want to remain connected to our child, but the way we are connected changes. We may find that we have to let go of the things that bring us back to sadness, such as Steve letting go of his teaching job so he would no longer be ambushed by graduation day. We can bring our kids with us into our future as we take opportunities to bring meaning to their life.
- Though there will always be a deep sense of grief around the child we've lost, this doesn't mean there won't be other things that bring a sense of purpose, joy and contentment that will slowly become part of your identity.
- Take some time to reflect on your identity now and then. Whether it is talking with a friend, a counselor, writing, art, during some alone time while taking a walk, consider how your identity has shifted. From time-to-time, do an assessment of how you are doing now compared to how you were doing a year ago.
- Make an effort to focus not just on the losses, but also on gains. This may be the new relationships that have formed, positive changes in perspective, new skills or growth that have come.
- Our outlook changes over time.
 - Depression changes to joy
 - Exhaustion subsides & our energy returns
 - Lack of motivation turns into a new passion
 - Tears turn into smiles

I'm going to read two sentences.

1. I don't know who I am any more.
2. I'm not the same person I was before.

Which one do you identify with?

1. I don't know who I am any more.
2. I'm not the same person I was before.