

I AM LEFT WITH A LOT OF 'WHAT IF'S' AND 'IF ONLYS'



As we approach World Suicide Prevention Day, Darling speaks to Anita Palmer about the impact on her and her family when, three years ago, her 25-year-old son took his own life

Mark was just a young man when he resolved to end his life on 11 January 2012. As a parent, one doesn't expect to outlive their children and for Anita Palmer, she has been left with a lot of unanswered questions. Here, she talks bravely and candidly to Darling about her anguish and how she will never come to terms with her loss but keeps going for the sake of her family; her daughter, one step-daughter and, more recently, her grandchild.

'Mark had been estranged from us for some time which was heartbreaking – he wasn't homeless – he always had a home here but there were several spells when he wasn't in contact,' she explains and goes on to tell me that he was being supported by the York Road Project (YRP) where he had been in and out of care. 'They concluded he was a vulnerable adult and persuaded him to see a doctor. Through

them, he was accommodated in a flat.' She quietly tells me that in September 2011 he was diagnosed with schizophrenia. 'He contacted us straight away to let us know and came home. He was very compliant with the doctors' recommendations and took his medication when he should.

'I OFTEN RELIVE THE DAY IT HAPPENED'

Between the six months or so of his diagnosis and his death, he spent periods of time in hospital when he had a crisis, at home with us and at his flat, where...' she falters before disclosing to me that this is where he died; where he hung himself. 'There were no warning bells and he had never, to our knowledge, tried to take his life previously.' She reflects on the events leading up to his death. 'I had tried, unsuccessfully, to contact him for a couple of days, as had his friends and those from

YRP. When we realised that no one had seen him or heard from him, the police were called and they broke in to his flat,' she says, clasping her hands tightly together. 'That's when he was found.'

It was her husband who broke the devastating news to her. 'At first, I felt utter disbelief. It was as if I had been stabbed. I screamed. It was awful; the worst day of my life.' Relaying the news to immediate family was something, she explains, she had to do face-to-face. 'We couldn't have told them the news over the phone. At the beginning, I felt so raw and ran on autopilot. We got through the funeral because we had to – it was,' she glances away, 'just horrible.'

Mark left no messages or notes for anyone. She finds it hard to comprehend why he didn't leave an explanation for his actions, 'because he was wonderful with words.' She adds, 'He had been to a party just a few days beforehand and nobody suspected a thing.'



When Mark began treatment for his illness, she reveals she thought he had conquered it. 'I don't blame myself' but I'm left with a lot of "what ifs" and "if onlys," she says regretfully. Looking back on his formative days, she tells me he was a very happy child but he was hyperactive. 'ADHD was not a diagnosis available when he was little but, on reflection, this was a condition he probably would have been labelled with today. He was artistic and creative and went on to complete a fine art degree. He also loved drama and gymnastics,' her eyes light up as she describes him. And her relationship with him? 'We shared the same zany, mad sense of humour and were on the same wavelength – we had a wonderful bond.'

Her and her family are all grieving in their own, different ways. 'My husband is more reticent than I am,' she says thoughtfully. 'I try not to let Mark's death impact on my life, by keeping busy and socialising. I'm a down-to-earth person but I've changed. I find myself crying a lot at songs, at TV

programmes... anything that triggers off a memory. Maybe because I'm a nurse, dealing with death is a little easier but not when it comes to dealing with the loss of your own son. Time doesn't heal. You don't forget – different anniversaries and important dates can catch you off guard. There's a stigma associated with suicide – not all our friends have behaved as we would have hoped, yet others have really stepped up to the plate.'

'LIFE GOES ON'

'As the years go by,' she continues, 'I don't have contact with his friends from school or university – but I wish I did – I'd love to hear their reminiscences of him. He was alive for 25 years and it would be nice to know that people remember him. I've got my memories though. Our house is on a hill and once, when I was mowing the lawn, lost in my own thoughts, he crept up behind me and roared "ta dahl!". He didn't half startle me and there he was, just grinning broadly. I always feel close to him when I'm cutting the grass,' she muses. She points to

a painting of his on the side of their garden shed which is visible from where we are sitting. 'It's a constant reminder of Mark and his talent.'

For almost a year following his death, she received weekly counselling by Cruse Bereavement who put her in touch with Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide (SOBS). 'I'm the only member of my family who visits SOBS – I miss it if I don't go – everyone understands where you are coming from. I can speak openly without the fear of upsetting loved ones and it gives me comfort.'

After such a life-changing event, she resolutely believes that one has to accept you are going to be different. 'Although,' she stresses, 'you need to find your own way of dealing with your grief – you should not be ashamed – help is available and invaluable.' And, she says accepting, 'Life goes on.'

If you have been bereaved by suicide, support is available from Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide; uk-sobs.org.uk. If you would like more information about the YRP, go to yorkroadproject.org.uk

