Suicide:  
The Ultimate Rejection

By Sherry Squires

Joanne Glenn can describe the day her son died vividly enough to make you want to shut your eyes, to shut out the pain she has endured.

Today, 16 years later, she can talk without tears, without trembling.

It was January of 1982, a Wednesday — the day Chris, 17, shot himself in the head while she watched, helpless.

She can remember the shock, the horror. Then, she can remember little of the next few days as the pain and guilt took over.

"A suicide is the most difficult kind of death because the person chooses it," Glenn says. "It's the ultimate rejection to the survivors."

More than 100 Idaho teen-agers took their own lives from 1990-96, the most current years for which statistics are available. They left behind mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters to somehow muddle through the numbness, the endless questions, the shame that so often surrounds a suicide.

Coping with it is a process, Glenn says. A lifelong process.

The weeks following Chris' funeral, Glenn recalls being in total disarray. She would start 15 things and never finish any of them.

She knows only one way to describe her feelings.

"It was like waves of ocean washing over me, every moment of the day I saw the horror of it.

"The unspeakable loss was so on my shoulders," she says. "I remember scrubbing the floor one day, concentrating only on that, when I just lost control. I could have washed the floor with my tears."
Grief fills the room up of my absent child,
Lies in his bed, walks up and down with me,
Puts on his pretty looks, repeats his word.

—William Shakespeare
Six months later, the same thing happened while she was driving on the freeway.

"I'm not one to cry easily, but I had no control over it," Glenn says.

After Chris' death, Joanne went to Compassionate Friends, a support group for parents who lose a child. But she soon realized that parents or family members who lose someone to suicide have a flood of very different emotions than those who lose children to accidents or natural causes.

And often, parents are dealing with those emotions alone.

When a suicide happens, brothers and sisters suddenly don't talk to one another. Parents hurt too much to support each other; most marriages don't survive the loss of a child.

Friends they used to count on are no longer around. Family members shy away, maybe because they, too, now feel vulnerable. Or maybe because they don't know what to say.

"There's a stigma," Glenn says. "Whether people say it audibly or not, it's clear people believe there had to be something wrong with your parenting."

She started a support group in 1988 for parents or family members dealing with a suicide. "You can go to a counselor, but there's nothing like talking to someone who's been there," she says. "You need both."

Glenn remembers passing through the various stages of grief that psychologists have identified and thinking she was over her son's death. Then, it would hit her again.

Three years after his death, she first became angry with her son for what he had done. But, as always, more than anything, she missed him.

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