

AUDIO: A daughter lost, the cruellest heartache

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Jack, Annette and Stuart Baker. PICTURE: David Thorpe.

When Annette and Stuart Baker decided to speak out about the loss of their daughter, Mary, to suicide they were hoping to strike a chord with the community.

They had no idea just how big an impact their story would have.

What started as a conversation and rally of support in the Border community has now gained momentum statewide, with 774 ABC Melbourne radio host Jon Faine approaching the couple to explore why such an important topic is shrouded in silence.

Hear the couple's emotional insights in their podcast [here](http://www.abc.net.au/local/audio/2013/06/17/3783313.htm?site=goulburnmurray) (<http://www.abc.net.au/local/audio/2013/06/17/3783313.htm?site=goulburnmurray>), read Annette's blog for ABC Open [here](https://open.abc.net.au/posts/keeping-our-heads-above-water-77sl0oh) (<https://open.abc.net.au/posts/keeping-our-heads-above-water-77sl0oh>) and see the story that launched the campaign below.

How a family comprehends such loss, how friends offer comfort and how professionals approach suicide - the Baker family speaks to reporter Jodie O'Sullivan.

ANNETTE Baker can sleep at night.

That's because Mary is with her every waking moment, in her head and in her heart.

And sometimes, just sometimes, she wishes she did not think so often of her beautiful 15-year-old daughter who took her own life last year.

Many times she anguishes over the “what if” ... what if she could have done more to save her child?

“I feel bad sometimes because I wished I could have helped her more,” Annette says.

“I feel like I've let her down.” For the Bakers — Annette, dad Stuart and brothers Jack and Henri — the toughest days are watching the world move on.

A world without Mary.

“The hardest thing is living without her,” Annette says.

“I think of what Mary would be doing now — getting her licence, riding her horse, all the stages she would be going through.

“But you know people have moved on with their lives when the casseroles stop coming.” Annette readily concedes this is not uncommon after any death.

But suicide brings its own terrible and lonely burden of grief.

“After the chaos of the initial few weeks, after the formalities of the funeral and the usual people have done the obligatory drop-off of food and flowers, that’s where it can end,” Annette says.

“... and the silence begins.”

THE silence descended almost immediately after Mary’s death.

In the days, weeks and months that followed, the shattered family scrambled to find relevant support and answers.

“We struggled with people generalising about death inappropriately and we struggled to find expert grief care specific to suicide,” Annette says.

“At times we were fitted in to whoever happened to be available or (found an appointment) through a friend of a friend.” And, in a relatively small community, it has been difficult to encounter the doctors who had treated Mary during her three-year battle with anorexia.

And a formal conversation about her death has not happened.

“I don’t believe we should have to ask for that to happen,” she says.

Clearly it still rankles.

Then there were the well-intentioned family and friends who blundered their way across a grief they could not hope to comprehend, alternating somewhere between forced cheeriness and embarrassed pity.

Even now, the subject is avoided.

“I think everyone spends their entire time trying to live so it’s counter-intuitive to do the opposite,” Stuart offers by way of explanation.

“We’re taught it’s survival of the fittest and we’re meant to do everything we can to live — to escape, to fight — yet there are people doing the exact opposite, wanting to take their lives.

“It is really hard for people to understand.”

HENRI knows there are places his mother still hasn't been to since Mary died, that she shops further away from home, for instance, to avoid running into people.

And he gets that.

“There is definitely no understanding,” he says.

“I think Jack and I have been a bit more protected but watching Mum and Dad and some of the stupid things people say to them or talk about...”

Since moving to Melbourne to start university this year, Henri, 19, has told just three people about Mary's death.

“It's complicated,” he confesses.

“Yes, I think I am reluctant to tell people because it was suicide.

I think they would struggle with it ... they might treat me differently.”

For Henri “absolutely everything has been difficult” since his beloved sister died.

He soldiered through the rest of Year 12, refusing to “cop out” of his trial and HSC exams.

But it was difficult to catch up with the work missed and even harder to find motivation.

“It was hard to concentrate and no one seemed to understand that,” he says.

“A lot of mornings I would turn up for school and sit in my car for an hour because I just didn't feel it was possible.” His HSC results, not surprisingly, were dismal.

What was surprising was that he failed to obtain the level of special consideration he needed for university.

It was a particularly cruel blow at the end of a harrowing struggle.

Henri is now comfortably ensconced at Deakin University, tackling international studies.

But he says there are often times when he feels isolated and longs for the support network of home.

THAT support network is what has helped Jack, 24, through the 16 months since Mary's death.

“Living at home is not something I saw myself doing after I finished uni,” he says.

“But I don't think I could have stepped back into a normal life.” When Jack is feeling low — Fridays are “bad days” — it is his family he turns to for comfort.

“You help each other out and you lean on each other,” he says.

The camaraderie of sporting clubs, particularly the water polo fraternity, has also provided a welcome refuge.

“I don't necessarily want to talk about Mary's death with them but just being able to be myself and to be treated exactly the same as before has been a comfort,” he says.

Now there are even days when Mary's death is not at the forefront of Jack's mind.

“Early on, I felt guilty on days if I didn't feel worse or if I didn't think about Mary,” he says.

“But I cherish those days now.”

STUART likes to think about Mary.

His solace comes in having her memory “in the right place”.

“To think about her in a really nice way, rather than dwelling on how she died,” he says.

Occasionally a passing conversation with someone, a letter or book sent in the mail provides unexpected comfort.

He rarely thinks about that night.

“I don't go back over it (because) it's the whole story, not just that particular night,” he says.

“I am grieving because she's gone ... but I don't think any of us have contributed to what's happened.

“I am sure some people absolutely feel guilty ... they might analyse every cross word that's ever happened but I don't think that's why suicide occurs.”

JANE Carrington has watched the “bravest of families stagger through the past 16 months”.

A close friend of the Bakers for more than 20 years, she has agonised over how best to support and soothe them while marvelling at the family’s ability to keep putting one foot in front of the other.

“As friends, we hope and sometimes pray that occasionally we can say or do something that provides a moment of comfort,” Jane says.

“But mostly we just watch and worry and wonder.

“And try to avoid saying anything stupid, like ‘How are you?’ “We stop complaining about our children or we stop sharing our problems because we don’t want to be selfish.

“We ponder how much normality is too much or too little.

“But, of course, by doing all this, we only add to our friends’ isolation.” She agrees there is widespread inadequacy to know how to cope with the grief left behind by suicide.

“Initially, the shock silences most of us,” Jane says.

“We are mostly left to ponder ‘why?’ — why someone didn’t want to live in this world; what else could we have done; why their pain was so immense; why they couldn’t find peace ...

“These are hard conversations to have, especially for people who have never been touched by suicide.” And the inability to find the right words, stumbling around common cliches of grief, loss and tragedy isolate those we want to comfort the most.

Jane watched as her dear friends stood alone, bound only by the understanding of each other’s pain.

“The grief isn’t the same — it’s an agony that is unknown to most of us,” she says.

“And we as friends are left to observe the cruellest of heartaches.

“We bake casseroles, send flowers, cards, messages of love and understanding but they all fall immensely short, so we feel inadequate — and we are inadequate.”

Annette says she has a “wonderful network of friends” but few allow the topic of suicide to be raised in conversation.

When it does arise, more often than not she is angered by what appears to be people’s “stupidity”, their total lack of comprehension.

“I could write a book on the stupid comments that have been made to me; ‘I understand’, ‘Take care’, ‘Be kind to yourself’,” she says, shaking her head.

“I feel more comforted when people have stood beside me, swam with me and even phoned me to share their personal or their family’s struggle with a mental illness.

“I think I can say people look at you with absolute pity and our society is not equipped to deal with or to respond to people who are grieving the death of a loved one through suicide.”

THE fear, the stigma, and the pain of a suicide prompted the family’s brave decision to hold a public funeral for Mary in Albury’s QEII Square.

More than 1000 mourners attended, including Albury High School students, members of the Albury Tigers Water Polo Club and Albury-Wodonga Equestrian Centre who formed a guard of honour.

“We wanted to give everyone an opportunity to say goodbye to her properly, without covering it up and hiding it away,” Stuart says.

“In Australia, (suicide) is not understood and most of the time it’s not acknowledged as a suicide but it needs to be spoken about.

“It’s far better to have the story truthfully told than not.”

There were people who approached the family after the funeral to thank them — for being honest about Mary’s death and allowing the community to mourn openly.

“I think we had a better response,” Annette says.

“Otherwise we would have been answering to people forever.” BUT what of the answers the Bakers seek? Annette often asks where it all went wrong.

She believes early intervention could have saved her child.

“Eating disorders are a mental illness; if, as soon as we sought help, there had been an early diagnosis, we might have had a different outcome,” she says.

“We were questioning but parents are not experienced in these things and you are guided, well you are sort of guided.

“And I have had other parents tell me terrible, epic stories of stumbling blindly from one diagnosis to the next with their child, sometimes for many years.

“Sadly these stories are complex and often unresolved.

“And they further highlight to me the fact that this area is lacking in professional, structured support in the area of mental health.

“People are floundering.

“If I knew someone in this situation now I would be able to say, ‘This is what you need to do’.” Stuart is not convinced he could have changed the outcome for his only daughter.

“If we knew then what we know now, maybe ... you never know that one.”

But he is convinced that for those seeking help, for the suicides that are preventable, there must be better pathways to help.

“We have got to get better as a community at intervening,” Stuart says.

Jack’s advice to anyone worried about a friend or loved one is to persist.

“You (may) need to be quite forceful,” he says.

“If you ask them if they want to talk and they say no, you can’t accept that.

“Talking about what you are going through is the only answer and you need to find ways to make that possible.” Information about where to get help is only one piece of the puzzle, Jack says.

“You can’t expect someone who is feeling suicidal to really track down the help they need,” he says.

“They are not necessarily going to go trawling through the Yellow Pages looking up support services in Albury-Wodonga.

“It has to be easier than that; it has to be in your face.

“It is probably easier to find out what time your favourite TV show is on than to find help for something like this.”

JACK doesn't believe Mary could have imagined the grief her death would cause.

“I think that even though she was trying to free herself, she may have thought she was freeing us,” he says.

“Someone once told me people usually try to cut themselves off before they commit suicide.

“I do know Mary would not have been able to give everyone a hug and say ‘I love you’ and then do what she did.” Jack says people need to realise suicide can happen to anyone.

“It only takes one moment in a day where you feel completely helpless, where you feel like you don't want to live anymore,” he says.

“And in that one moment you can be gone.”