

It's time to talk about suicide

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“We will never get to see our sister and daughter and friend again and we have no choice but to live with that. But out of this tragedy and the countless other tragedies, there has to come a positive.”

Jack Baker (pictured, right, with brother Henri, centre), writes about his little sister Mary (left) who died last year.

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(<http://www.bordermail.com.au/story/170738/ending-the-suicide-silence/?cs=11>)

IT was only after I decided to write this that I remembered something my dad said in the hours after my sister took her own life.

On that Tuesday morning, some 16 months ago, he said, “Our lives have changed forever, nothing will be the same now” ... or words to that effect.

It may seem an obvious thing to say, but there was such clarity even in the midst of unbearable pain.

An hour earlier I had been at work, oblivious to the fact my 15-year-old sister Mary had succumbed to her own unbearable pain.

When the phone rang where I was working, I barely noticed it. A man came over and told me I had to go home straight away, and I thought I must be in trouble with my employment agency.

The first indication something wasn't right came when the man said to me in a concerned voice, “I hope everything is OK”.

I vividly recall the shift in my mind and body as I went from feeling intrigued, to sick and panicked.

“I hope everything is OK” is what you say when something bad has happened, not when you need to sign some forms.

I called Dad on the way to the change rooms and he answered after a couple of rings.

I'm not sure who spoke first but I do know his first words to me were, “Mary is dead”.

I asked, “What happened?” He told me.

I half shouted, half sobbed, “Why didn't you stop her?” As if given half a chance he wouldn't have done just that.

IT'S my belief that Mary had thought about suicide before.

She had endured an eating disorder for nearly three years previously, the after-effect of a debilitating illness from which she never fully recovered.

In hindsight I guess you could say there were warning signs.

Some months before she died she deleted her Facebook account.

I think she said something about it being a waste of time. She always was wise beyond her 15 years.

About the same time she took photos of her beloved horses down off her bedroom wall.

The Sunday before she died Mary played one of her best games of water polo to help her team win a final.

For someone fighting mental demons like she was, the comedown from the high after that game would have been crippling.

Yet for all we as a family knew of her struggles none of us saw the curve ball headed our way.

Not us, not her doctors. During her battle with illness Mary recovered most of her physical strength.

Riding her horse or playing water polo she was a “happy” and “normal” girl.

She never let on what she was going through, not even when pushed.

I tried to talk about it with her on several occasions and each time I was met by a brick wall of silence.

I even bought her a diary so she could write what she was feeling but it was met by the same stubborn refusal.

Not because she would not talk, but because she could not.

Mary’s poetry, which I only read for the first time after she died, was her only means of expressing herself.

And it was probably the biggest cry for help of all.

I haven’t grown up with the stigma of suicide like older generations.

I do know that it isn’t always the case for other people.

I know first-hand from working in a newsroom for the past 13 months that suicide is not only a painfully delicate subject, it's everywhere.

To borrow something I read recently about mental illness, "It has no respect for race, creed or education levels."

If we as a society are to help overcome the silence, we have to start by acknowledging it and talking about it.

No wonder those who suffer from mental illness often suffer in silence.

We have no problem reporting mass killings (presumably the result of mental ill-health) so why should suicide be any different?

I know it would come as a shock to most people to learn how widespread it really is.

But you don't fix problems by sweeping them under the rug.

I can't speak for people who've lost loved ones prematurely to causes other than suicide.

But I know that for my family — "suicide survivors" — it's been a tough 16 months since Mary died.

Every day I wish she was still here.

We might not have been able to save her but that isn't true for others.

I think the next week is a positive and necessary step to bring suicide out into the open.

My dad was right. Our family's life will never be the same again. Nor will it be the same for those who knew Mary.

We will never get to see our sister and daughter and friend again and we have no choice but to live with that.

But out of this tragedy and the countless other tragedies, there has to come a positive.

By talking about suicide and seeing it for what it really is — needless death — we can help shed light on the darkness.

- *Jack Baker is a reporter at The Border Mail.*