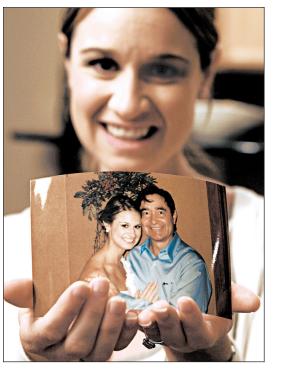




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PHIL VELASQUEZ/TRIBUNE PHOTOS

Becky Olson, top, wears a bracelet that features the signature of her father, Dennis, who also is pictured dancing with her at her wedding. Jessica Hutchison, at left, holds a photo of her with her father, Robert. Lindsay Van Sickle, above, shows a family photo of her with her father, Tom, and husband, Chris. All of the women's fathers committed suicide in 2011.

Daughters left by suicide start blog to convey hope to others

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women launched a blog, OurSideofSuicide.com, on which they share their stories and try to offer others

"We've found so much support and commonality with one another," Olson said. "We want others to know that they are not

alone." Their effort comes at a time when the suicide rates among middle-aged Americans are on the rise. Over the last decade, the rate among people ages 35 to 64 rose by nearly 30 percent. Among men in their 50s, the rate jumped by nearly 50 percent. While the reasons remain unclear, experts suspect the economic recession, along with the responsibilities of caring for aging parents and the increasing availability of prescription painkillers, have produced a perfect storm that has left a generation particularly vul-

Now, as the number of suicides increases, so do the ranks of survivors. Across the nation, they are husbands and wives, daughters and sons, mothers and fathers. People caught amid waves of heartache that, in the aftermath of a suicide, can last for years, if not a lifetime.

"After my dad died, it was such a roller coaster of emotions," Hutchison said. "There's so much support around you in those first couple months, which was very helpful. Then, over time, those supports start going away. People don't really want to talk to you about it anymore."

Except that, month by month and year by year, the women still wanted - still

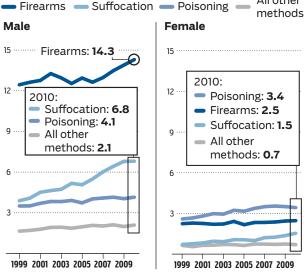
needed — to talk. Olson, 31, a social media consultant, wanted to remember the father who was a circuit court judge in Wisconsin and president of his church council. He called her nearly every day and had always been her "biggest cheerleader." He organized big holiday dinners, celebrated every conceivable occasion — including his children's "halfbirthdays" - and chronicled it all by taking photos that he organized in dozens of family albums.

Hutchison, 30, a counselor, needed to talk about her father, too. He was a retired

Suicide rates on the rise

Suicide rates among middle-aged Americans are on the rise, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. As the number of suicides increases, so does the number of surviving family members who have to deal with the aftermath.

SUICIDE RATES PER 100,000 PEOPLE AGES 35-64 By sex and mechanism



civil engineer and dedicated pushed my family away and free spirit who kept a huge I pushed my friends away. It peace sign on the wall of his was like I was alone on this home office, loved the Rollisland, and it was a very lonely and depressing place ing Stones, practiced yoga and who was, his daughter recalled, "a guy everyone

loved." Van Sickle, 28, a personal trainer, wanted to remember the father who was a consummate salesman, an affable guy with a big smile who made friends wherever he went. He loved Jimmy Buffett and the White Sox. "He was the life of the party, one of those guys who was always loud, always fun. Not one ounce of shyness in him," she said.

All of the men had successful professional careers. During good times, all were outgoing and gregarious. And after battles with anxiety and depression, all had killed themselves with

Eventually, the women found their way to a support group called LOSS (Loving Outreach to Survivors of Suicide), a nondenominational program run by Catholic Charities. There, the women shared their feelings of frustration and sad-

"I was really angry. It wasn't directed toward my dad. It was directed at everyone else," Van Sickle said.

pushed everyone away," Hutchison said. "I pushed my husband away, I

wanted to stay on this Earth to see this child?" Hutchison wondered.

All other

"My rock bottom was when my grief counselor

said she thought I should go

on antidepressants," Olson

recalled. "I thought, 'I have

group and later over dinner,

the women found comfort

in their connections and

conversation. They shared

their fears (If someone

doesn't pick up the phone

immediately, does your

mind jump to suicide?),

their hopes (Do you ever

feel your father's spirit is

with you?), their struggles

to settle their fathers' es-

tates (How do you transfer

They talked about their

fathers' last days, their final

conversations, the notes

they left. They wondered:

Life carried the women

forward. Two of them

changed jobs. Van Sickle

sold her father's home. As

their grief began to recede,

they talked about the future

and their hope to have

anniversary of her father's

death, Hutchison discov-

ered she was pregnant. She

and her friends wept with

joy. But there was also a

renewed sense of loss be-

Shortly before the first

children someday.

Could he have been saved?

the assets of a 401(k)?).

But at their support

to pull it together.'

The aftermath was like that. Grief would sometimes catch them off guard.

cause, they knew, the baby

girl would never know her

"How could he have not

maternal grandfather.

But there were other

moments of comfort and grace. A Rolling Stones song on the radio that made Hutchison think of her father. The wind in the leaves of a tree planted in the memory of Van Sickle's father. The way the sky turned a soft pink during sunrise on the lakefront, where Olson jogged in the morning, thinking about her dad.

Now, two years have passed.

Hutchison wears a necklace with a silver charm, printed with an image of her father's fingerprint.

Van Sickle has a gold cross, which her father bought in Ireland.

Olson wears a silver bracelet, inscribed with words from the end of an old letter, written in her father's scrawl, that say simply: "Love, Dad."

The women have begun offering the lessons they've learned through their blog. Among them: Don't be afraid to talk; you'll be surprised how many other people have been affected by suicide. Try to accept the fact that you may never know why. Know that, although your life will never be the same, that doesn't mean life won't be filled with joy and meaning.

In the restaurant, after the waitress clears away their plates and lays the bill on the table, Hutchison tells her friends about a recent dream. In it, her baby who is due in August crawls across the floor. Her father holds a camera to capture the moment. He looks trim, healthy and happier than she had seen him look in a long time.

"I miss you so much," Hutchison tells her dad. He smiles and says, "I miss you,

In the restaurant, Hutchison's eyes fill with tears. Even though it was just a dream, she says, "it was so good to see him again."

Her two friends know exactly what she means.

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