

Alex was already settled into his dorm at Columbia as I finished helping Chloe move into her room at [boarding school], which she decorated with lots of photos of Rob. Not until I was driving back to Manhattan did the full force of my anxiety slam into me. Oh, my God—a new school year, and Alex and Chloe’s dad, their sidekick and confidant when it came to this kind of thing, was gone. Really gone. As in forever. As in never coming back. All they had was the mom who’d always luxuriated in knowing their other parent would deal with it, and I was scared to death of not being able to fill that huge void for them.

I was a solo parent. Not a single parent as far as I was concerned. Single parent implies that the other parent is around somewhere. Even if the two parents have decided they can’t stand the sight of each other anymore, they can still back each other up, cover for each other, and fill in the blanks for each other when it comes to their cocreated children, so that neither of them has to feel as if they’re having to do it all. Rob and I had choreographed that dance beautifully for the past twenty years, even after we separated, even after our divorce was finalized. Alex’s school events and high school graduation, Chloe’s hockey games, parents’ weekends, whatever the occasion, chances were Rob and I would both happily show up, together or separately; but if one of us couldn’t make it, the other one would move heaven and earth to get there.

So now what, now that it was just me? Yes, my kids were blessed to have grandparents who lived close by, and their uncle, Evan, and Rob’s best friends, aka the “three dads” who’d taken over for him when he checked out. But take parents’ weekend, for example. Kids don’t want stand-ins on parents’ weekend, no matter how much they might love those stand-ins. They don’t want stand-ins to talk to about their teachers and their upcoming history final and the latest computer program idea they’ve come up with. And what about the billion or so requisite school forms, and tuition checks, and emergency contacts, and all those other details? I always took care of those things anyway, but now I didn’t have a choice. It was me or nobody, right? And “nobody” wasn’t an option, nor was disappointing my kids.

I've said it to countless patients and friends who have several children, and I'll say it again—I don't know how they do it. I know what my fill level is. I know when I'm at full capacity, and two children is full capacity for me. If I had three or four, especially as a solo parent, it's a guarantee that I would inadvertently forget to sign at least one of them up for school, or send them off with no transcripts or emergency contacts. And on that particular milestone day, with Alex and Chloe safely settled in at Columbia and Lawrenceville, the perfectionist in me came back to the apartment hyperconscious that the balance Rob and I had established for our family responsibilities when our kids came along was suddenly gone, and, ready or not, I was "working without a net."

I was feeling very alone, very inadequate, and very sad for them that night. I didn't care how old they were, they were my babies, so brave and strong, so young, only seventeen and eighteen when they found themselves having to deal with their father's suicide. I remembered when I was that age. I was a smart, responsible overachiever whose biggest problem was getting a B+ instead of an A on a test. I could no more have handled my father killing himself than I could have blindfolded myself and performed brain surgery. I was right there with my kids every step of the way, and I still couldn't imagine how they were getting through it. I knew Dr. Simring [my therapist] had a lot to do with it. I hoped I was doing enough for them too, and not letting my own grief, guilt, and blame cloud my vision of what they needed and what more I could do.

Dr. Simring had told me about a concept called "complicated grief." Complicated grief happens when people delay getting help after a terrible trauma, which allows the trauma to become so ingrained and intrusive, like a neglected wound, that the grief process doesn't progress as time goes on, and it becomes more difficult to treat. I was getting help, thanks to therapy. I was back at work, at both my careers, not just going through the motions of them but involved and invested. I wasn't a candidate for complicated grief, was I? I had to be as physically and emotionally healthy as possible for Alex and Chloe

now that I was the only parent they had. And a lot of other people, from my patients to my coworkers at ABC to my viewers, were counting on me too.

The one thing I hadn't done was to reach out to other suicide survivors I didn't know, who'd be objective with me, to find out how they got through it, if they'd experienced the same struggles and self-doubts I was having, and if they'd found ways to make peace with all the unanswerable questions suicide leaves in its wake. Maybe new perspectives from other people who'd been there would give me more clarity and strength than I was feeling. Maybe other survivors were the answer to, "What more can I do to heal for my kids?" There was only one way to find out.

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